

# VARY YOUR MESSAGE TO FIT FOUR DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

Experts who study the mindsets of various age brackets find clear differences in their values and motivations. Golf instruction should take heed.

By Ian James, RetailTribe CEO

**O**n days when your 10-and-under junior golfers are a handful, just think about Anna Liotta's overstressed parents. Liotta, a marketing consultant who wrote "Unlocking Generational Codes," grew up as one of 19 children, in a household that spanned six generations. She got quite a head start in her study of generational marketing. Today her consulting work with major corporations stresses the idea that people born in different eras really do view the world differently—and express themselves distinctly from one another.

Reading Liotta's new book would be a wise move for any Proponent Group member. It's designed to help you prepare and frame your marketing messages—even at times your programming—so that it truly strikes a chord and gets results with the 70-year-old you're targeting, or the 50-year-old or 30-year-old, and so forth.

Using the ideas and tools provided by Liotta, I recently did some work on behalf of Proponent Group member Steve Whidden, whose Whidden Golf Academy serves greater Tampa Bay. At his previous club, Steve encountered some pretty tough business challenges with a predominantly older membership. "They're not interested in improving," was Whidden's summation of that group. "They've got their handicaps, and all they want to do is play in their same group at the same time each week."

A RetailTribe online survey supported Steve's assessment. Of golfers born before 1950, less than 1 percent said they were likely to schedule a lesson in the coming 12 months. That's about as dead-set-against-it as a market segment will ever be. But as I looked at Anna Liotta's description of these old-guard types, their anti-instruction bias seemed

psychographically on-point. Americans born between 1927 and 1945 are known in Liotta's book as "Traditionals." They're also referred to at times as the "Silent Generation." The prime influences on this generation? Certainly, the Great Depression and the Second World War, for starters. Theirs has been a generation of service and duty, which is reflected in their values and motivating forces. For the Traditionals, life is about loyalty, commitment and hard work, with not much expectation of enjoyment.

The golf club membership model was made for this generation. They aspired to join a club they would remain loyal to for life. And, as Steve Whidden found out, many of them are also faithful to their set routine as golfers, continuing to play week after week, despite the fact that their games are bad and getting worse. They don't seem to have the motivation to press for change, even as their four hours on-course continues to produce misery. At least they're honoring their commitment to their group.

From a marketing perspective we need to acknowledge that Traditionals are diminishing in numbers. It's a harsh challenge to try and sell coaching programs to them, to the point that one would be tempted to ignore them and skip on. I would question that, however. While it's true that the effort-to-profit ratio may look unattractive, at many clubs this group still has its hands on the reins of management. That means you need to make some effort, if not to drag them into coaching, then to at least get their influence on the side of your business and coaching initiatives.



The golf industry hasn't worried much about imminent loss of the Traditionalists (through advancing age) because the **Baby Boomers** (those born between 1946 and '64) have been poised to swell memberships and tee sheets. Our demographic expectation was that the fairways would be filled with Boomers, as this large and relatively wealthy group reached retirement.

The trouble is, they haven't retired. Not in the expected numbers, anyway. This generation seems determined to continue to work, be it part-time or even full-time. Thus they don't have liberty to play golf three times a week and on weekends. Even if they did, decisions about how to spend free time changed as their careers moved along.

The husband's golf-first mentality has been traded in for decision-making patterns that honor the wishes of his wife. It's a factor club managers have been aware of. If they want their Boomer males to renew memberships, spend more time at the club and play a lot of golf, managers should be encouraging their golf instructors to urge wives to get and/or stay involved. That means truly guiding them up the pathway to better golf so they can enjoy the time they devote to it. And yes, 'enjoyment' is a factor. This generation wants their leisure time to be pleasurable.

Boomers also expect to be forever young. Sixty is the new 40 for them. These golfers don't accept a loss of yards as part of the aging process. Instead they want all possible help in retaining their youth and vigor. In a spot survey at one golf club, it was found that almost every golfer between 45 and 55 believed it was *possible that they could currently play the best golf of their lives!*

One other note about Boomers involves geographical mobility. Many migrated with their jobs during long, successful careers. That has put some pressure on the membership model. Why pay a joining fee when you're not sure where you're going to settle down? Previously, job

mobility prompted the question of future location. Now it's: "Where are the grandchildren going to live?"

Speaking of the grandchildren, let's look at how you should design messages for the younger generations.

### Gen-X: Reluctant to Trust, Quick to Measure

The pressure Baby Boomers have exerted on the model is nothing compared to the impact of **Gen-X**. This is a generation that expects, not desires, to get a 'return' on any investment—be it money, time or commitment. And, by the way, they pay for everything monthly.

The women and the men are alike in their patterns. Females are captains of industry, juggling job, family, household and friends, and they expect their partner to play a full role in that relationship. All of that adds to the time pressure.

When Gen-X women and men do decide to think about coaching, you can figure they will review websites, search for testimony, and know clearly the result they're after. This group understands there's a process (the lesson or clinic) but they want to trust that they're *going to get the result*. They are very calculating.

There is, though, a place where this generation loses its head—with their children. Whatever it takes, they want their child to have it. The best education. The safest environment. The happiest childhood. If there's a team, they want to know how to get their kid involved.

The success of PGA Junior League golf shows us what's possible with this group and their children. And by the way, the parents come to practice. That's a double-up opportunity. Practice for the children, introduction to golf for the parents.

### Millennials: Don't Give Up—Connect!

The **Millennials**, born somewhere between 1982 and 2004. This is now the largest segment of the U.S.

## Generations and Golf: Summary

<p>Traditionalists Born 1927 - 1945</p>	<p>Often the management and leadership of golf facilities. One-on-one coaching and / or individual practice will not be a high priority. Want coaching that supports their social groups. Eg Breakfast Groups out on the course.</p>
<p>Baby Boomers Born 1946 - 1964</p>	<p>Not retiring. Forever young, wanting to stay alert and healthy. Want 60 to be the new 40, and their performance to reflect that. Want anything that helps them stay supple, strong, and able to hit the ball far and high. Increasing need to have partners participate and play to a competent level.</p>
<p>Gen-X Born 1965 - 1979</p>	<p>Return on Investment (of time, money and commitment) with very large priority on children and their development. Children and Youth group coaching, PGA Junior League, elite coaching for juniors. Family events appeal. Both genders make these potential 'power couples' with strong affinity to results-based programs.</p>
<p>Millennials Born 1980 - 1999</p>	<p>The connected generation. Digital natives. No technology, no solution. Love options and variety, especially if it involves launch monitors, simulators, video. Very happy in inclusive groups. Enjoyment and encouragement is more important than actual result. Want to be connected to their coach 24/7.</p>

workforce, so don't dismiss them as children. This is the "connected generation," the true "digital natives"—they think a landline is a boundary drawn on a map.

When you set about serving this particular tribe, do it with the mantra of "no technology = no solution." Translation: Whether or not you can do the job without technology, they don't believe you can. Also, if you're going to be their golf coach, they'll expect you to "connect" with them. They want to be in your WhatsApp group. Even if it's 10 o'clock at night, they want you to be available to receive a video they've taken and offer your encouragement in response. If they go on your social network, they'll be looking for their own names, up there in lights.

Booking by telephone? No chance. They want to plug into your calendar and make their own booking, pay immediately, and after the lesson access the video and your notes, share lesson photos with friends, even invite friends along to the next session.

They aren't looking for 50 minutes on the practice tee every session. They want a different approach week to week. Don't waste their time with the dusty customs known as "rules." Four-hole, five-person scrambles,

accompanied by the coach giving advice? They're in. Nine holes on a simulator with friends as the coach offers pointers between shots? They're in. This is a group you can have a lot of fun with.

### Different 'Hangouts' for Different Generations

The point is that each of these groups is different. They have diverse expectations and motivations and they will present you with diverse challenges and opportunities. Each generation expects you to reach them in their hang-out of choice. It's not face-to-face, or email, or Facebook, or Twitter, or Instagram, or WhatsApp, or SnapChat. It's all of them.

Golf is a great game, with lots of opportunity for all ages, because it's a game that can be played by every generation together. But that means that as marketers and instructors we need to be very good at communicating with each and every generation. Just as with the golf swing, there's no one-size-fits-all.

The best news for you is that everyone's listening and wants to hear from you. **PG**

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