

# Are Generational Differences the Enemy of Client Satisfaction?

## Part 3: Mind the Gap

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Witnessing an interaction between two attorneys of different generations in the workplace is likely commonplace. The elder’s directive is met with a series of inquiries stemming from the younger’s inherent desire to understand the “big picture”. There may be a sense of frustration on both sides, with the Boomer expecting hierarchical command to dictate and the Gen X or Millennial yearning for meaningful connection and collaboration.

Now, imagine this same interaction in which the balance of power is inverted. What if, instead of a colleague from a younger generation it is a client from a younger generation? This interaction can rapidly devolve into a case of poor client service. The questions from the client who is looking for deeper insight are seen by outside counsel as a test of expertise or possibly even a sign of mistrust. In turn, the lawyer’s response may be to say “don’t worry, I’ve got this,” an effort to exude confidence which may inadvertently send a message to the client that leaves them feeling left out and powerless. (Not the way most attorneys strive to leave their clients feeling...)

This is exactly the scenario Jessa Baker and I set out to explore in this series, including [Part 1](#) which provided a primer on generational differences in law firms and [Part 2](#), Engaging “Next Gen” Leaders, which investigated the talent strategies in place to bridge the generational divide. As introduced in the first post, the generational gap between buyers of legal services and the attorneys who provide them is widening. A greater number of buyers and decision-makers hail from Gen X than do law firm leaders ([see our earlier post for details](#)). With the growing influence of Millennials in the workplace (set to reach 75% by 2025), this gap will only increase.

In the midst of this transition a number of savvy law firms are reinventing the way they interact and engage with clients. These firms recognize their clients’ changing preferences and are tapping into the shifting priorities of their own “Next Gen” leaders. A quick glimpse into the core generational differences will help to provide a foundation for this discussion:

Baby Boomers	Gen X and Y (Millennials)
Hierarchy	Flat/team models
Organizational loyalty	Independence
Live to work	Work to live
Compensation = feedback	Communication = feedback

Underlying all of these differences is a dramatic transformation in how we communicate with one another. Here is what some law firms are doing to bridge the gap:

### 1. Replacing traditional meet-and-greets with family-oriented events

One lawyer explains he has stopped using tickets to sporting events as invitational and instead offers them to clients who have children or spouses interested in attending. Other firms tailor events specifically to include family or even host child-centric festivities such as carnivals or visits with Santa. While non-traditional, these

opportunities to help clients balance the demands of work and life speak volumes with the up-and-coming generations.

## 2. **Technology-enabled, real-time access to information**

Gen X and Millennials have an on-demand expectation and a passion for continuous learning. Providing access to timely, relevant snippets of information is a high-impact way to engage and educate clients while delivering added value. Taking it one step further, firms like Foley & Lardner and Robins Kaplan provide clients with tools and data to keep them apprised of the progress of their matters – including budget – on a near real-time basis. This level of transparency plays directly to the younger generations' collaborative natures (while not insignificantly also aligning with client demands for cost effective legal services).

## 3. **Joint support with clients for charitable and community endeavors**

Newer generations, particularly Millennials, are personally invested in a communal approach to good deeds and making the world a better place. Though many Boomers also share in the charitable spirit, the way in which the generations prefer to go about giving back to their communities differs. Millennials often prefer to donate time rather than money, to connect personally through outreach and community involvement and to participate in efforts to improve the environment. A number of firms tap into this passion by standing alongside clients in support of various charities, whether by setting out together on a mission to feed the homeless or through broader fundraising initiatives in collaboration with a key client or group of clients. The key difference in these scenarios v. the "buy a table" approach common in many firms is that these community events are active, participatory and communal. Picture putting hammer to nail alongside your client and her team to help build a new home in an impoverished neighborhood. The support is team-based and collaborative (keying into some of the most basic facets of the younger generations).

## 4. **Team-based approaches to serving (and selling) clients**

A nod to my colleague, Bruce Alltop, for tackling this topic in his recent post "[Law Firm Business Development: A Team Servicing Approach.](#)" Team-based approaches to servicing clients tap into Gen X and Millennials fundamental preferences for working collaboratively. Done right and done well, client teams centered on deepening the understanding and value delivered to the client can drive growth in relationships. Perhaps more importantly, client teams tailored to service younger generations have the potential to invigorate client engagement – getting the clients as involved in the outcome and nurturing of the relationship as the law firm itself.

## 5. **Collaborative discussions of strategy and the future**

Relatedly, inviting new generations of clients to participate in discussions about the future and how it impacts both their company and yours is perhaps the Shangri-La of generational engagement. Strategic discussions make Gen X and Millennial clients feel involved, link them to a broader purpose, embrace their entrepreneurial propensities and give weight to their opinions and feedback.

Are you or your firm changing the way you service clients to help create seamless communications and relationships across generations? Please share your ideas with us.

My colleague, Jessa Baker will continue to probe the drivers of Gen X and Millennial engagement in future posts. Stay tuned!