How Millennials Perceive Local Government…

and why it matters to your city

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These are just a few of the stereotypes that many are ascribing to so-called “millennials” – Americans born between 1980 and 2000. While this date range is not absolute and it varies by a few years depending on the source, for purposes of this article and our research, we are talking about adults aged 35 or younger.

Here is what Pew Research Center had to say about them in March of last year:

...they are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry – and optimistic about the future.

While the above certainly describes many of the trends social scientists are seeing for millennials, it is vital to understand that these are just trends – trends that describe many of the growing characteristics of this fascinating group of young adults – but they do not describe all of them, and as Pew notes above, it describes a “relatively” large and growing percentage of them.

Numerous reports like those coming from Pew and others are only a Google search away and one can easily locate them and learn about some of the larger societal trends.

But, the Florida League of Cities wanted a closer look than those scholastic articles could offer.

They wanted to know how these trends impact local government and how they, as public servants, can best serve this growing part of our citizenry. To that end, the League engaged VancoreJones Communications to conduct focus groups consisting of active voting Florida millennials from a cross section of urban and suburban communities.

**WHAT WE FOUND**

First, it is important to note that the respondents we spoke to were – quite surprisingly and somewhat reassuringly – almost exactly as the literature described. A large majority did not belong to a political party (while 73 percent of Florida’s overall electorate does) and only a few regularly attended a denominational religious service. While some considered themselves part of a formal organization, almost none of them had actually attended an in-person meeting in the past few months. And, consistent with what much research is showing, while they don’t universally distrust or dislike many of the institutions created by their predecessors, they just don’t see the need for them.

We also found that every one of them – every single one – not only had multiple email addresses, but also actively participated in at least three social media platforms, used them every day, and they each had a smartphone. They viewed social media as a series of tools to communicate with their friends, to learn about current events, as well as worldwide news, to express their opinions on a wide variety of matters, and to share whatever needed sharing at the exact moment it needing sharing.

To these millennials, social media is not just communication tool, but to a large extent, it defines who they are. And, unlike many other groups we have surveyed, their lack of physical joiner-ship was not rooted in any strong negativity or outspoken “anti” sentiments. Their reluctance to “join” was founded on the notion that actually “attending meetings” was simply not a necessary part of expressing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with something or effectuating change. In short, they do not need to join in the physical ways that generations before them did.

Why not?

It was very clear that the tools of their generation – social media and associated technologies – enabled them to adequately express their opinion and/or impact change. They received information about world events and local happenings through Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Kik and a host of other platforms, and they readily and easily shared what they liked with those in their various networks.

This begs a question. If they can sift and share in real time . . . if they can express support or opposition to a large number of people in a flash . . . if they can join a group or post a negative comment while waiting for dinner, then why take a whole evening to participate in an in-person meeting?

The answer speaks for itself.
The Millennial View of Government

So how did they view government?

For starters, they do not like the bickering and fighting they see in Congress, and the whole process generally annoys them. They shied away from the partisanship of government and simply want things to work. They generally lean to the left on most social issues and consider themselves relative conservative on fiscal issues, but party or political ideology does not define them. In fact – and similar to most under 35 year olds of virtually every generation in modern U.S. history – they were more focused on building a career, starting a family, paying off debt and basically becoming full-fledged adults (the same as their predecessors.)

But, they still differ from the generations that precede them in many other ways.

First, as a generation that came of age or grew up with the Internet at their fingertips, they do not rely on government or other primary sources (what older generations perceive as traditional sources) for the information they need about the world around them. They get all the information they need through a vast array of social media platforms and the thousands of results generated in a simple Google search. They rely on third and fourth parties to sift, sort, aggregate and distribute the news they need and select these sources based on their personal preferences.

As a result, they were generally well informed about the world around them but ascribed very little of anything directly to the result of a working government.

When it comes to local government, they view services, such as police and fire or road construction or flood management – as natural and expected. The conversation came to a screeching halt when they were asked to describe what services their local government provided for them. Conversely, when they were asked to discuss things they enjoyed in their local community, they become quite verbose (and man, do they love their parks!).

This was a vital finding: they liked their respective communities, but these active-voting (prescreened by the voter file) millennials, did not attribute the services of their surroundings to something a government did for them.

Urban respondents, in particular, liked the features of living in their community and recognized the services they received, but they didn’t attribute those features to the local government that provided them.

What They Want in Government

What do millennials expect from their local government? In short, not much.

They are not partisans and they don’t want government rallying for their cause or taking up a social issue. They generally want less government when it comes to social issues or individual freedoms, but want the fundamental elements of government to work. They enjoy local parks, yearn for better mass transit, and generally feel safe in their homes. But, by-and-large, these were individualistic citizens who did not have a great deal of reliance on government services, were not overly concerned about taxes, and wanted a generally peaceable existence with minimal interference.

“What if you think of your typical municipality creating content it’s iffy, because you’re not talking about an ad agency getting behind the creative. You know . . . it’s an intern maybe putting something together in a Word document or in Paint.” -Lori

What Can Local Government Do to Better Their Communication to Millennials and Other Residents?

- Evaluate current communication strategy policies.
- Do more than just check the box on social media.
- Reconcept your internal communication in a way that genuinely and seriously takes control of your message.
- Truly engage your community with relevant and targeted messaging.
HOW THEY LEARN ABOUT GOVERNMENT

Perhaps the most vital finding coming from these groups is that they get virtually all of what they know about local government and local government services through someone other than the local government itself.

They received news about events, services, actions, service outages, road closures, changes in local policy and anything else from a wide variety of sources aggregated through social media platforms including, but by no means limited to, local news media. But, not one person said they receive reliable or timely information about local occurrences from a government-related source.

As an interesting aside, we asked if they would follow their city or county via social media and they all said no. When we queried deeper and explained many of the functions of local government and the kinds of information it would share, they all said they would follow it. They also said they did not want government to try and be too “cool” but to be informative and relevant.

While these focus groups are by no means conclusive, and there are certainly exceptions, it is vital to note that for every one of these participants, some other platform is filtering virtually all communications they receive about government services.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

It is critical to understand that social media is not just a box you check. It should become a method, manner and means by which your community must increasingly and effectively communicate. Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets are not passing fads. They are not something to be relegated to a “twenty-something down in the communications department.” Social media is not just here to stay, it is a vital part of the future and a critical part of communicating to this growing part of your population. If the modern American city is to move forward with the largest population group to come along in our lifetime (yes, they are larger in numbers than the Baby Boomers), then local governments must not only speak their language, but learn to communicate with them when, where and how they communicate.

And for those who think this group is “just a bunch of kids,” consider that in five short years (it’s obvious, I know, but it simply must be said) these millennials will be the “40 and under” age group. The age of millennials as your next group of leaders is right around the corner.

Is your city ready?

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