Millennials - “Generation O”!

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On November 9, 2008, the *New York Times* published “Generation O Gets Its Hopes Up,” an article by Damien Cave that gave yet another sobriquet to the oft-renamed Millennial Generation. The “O” to which Mr. Cave refers is, of course, the new President of the United States, Barack Obama, but he could just as easily be calling them “Generation Optimistic” as “Generation Obama.” Cave suggests that the generation may now forever be known as Generation O; I think time will tell with that, but I certainly agree that Obama has captured the hopes and dreams of many up-and-coming youth in a huge way, and represents a vision of the future to a generation who look to government overall, and – in many cases – Barack specifically, to make positive change in the world.

It is estimated that somewhere between 21 and 24 million voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2008 Presidential election—this is up at least 2 million, and possibly as much as almost 4.5 million from four years prior. According to some exit polls, nearly 70% of these young voters went for Obama. This is due, in large part, to the fact that Obama “gets” the Millennials, and they know it. Take Facebook, for example: in a November 17, 2008 *Online Media Daily* article, Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta discuss the huge role that Facebook and other social networking sites played in this groundbreaking electoral season: “[t]his election was the first time that all candidates – presidential and congressional – attempted to connect directly with American voters via online social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. It has even been called the ‘Facebook election.’ It is no coincidence that one of Obama’s key strategists was 24-year-old Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder. It was Hughes who masterminded the Obama campaign’s highly effective Web blitzkrieg—everything from social networking sites to podcasting and mobile messaging.”

According to the authors, Obama was savvy enough not to limit himself to the better-known networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. It has even been called the ‘Facebook election.’ It is no coincidence that one of Obama’s key strategists was 24-year-old Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder. It was Hughes who masterminded the Obama campaign’s highly effective Web blitzkrieg—everything from social networking sites to podcasting and mobile messaging.”

In short, this is a politically active generation, and a lot of their activity does take place online. The October 2006 Harvard Institute of Politics (IOP) survey of 18-24 year olds reported that 48% said they had signed an online petition, 31% had written an email or letter advocating a political position, 29% had contributed to a political discussion or blog advocating a political position, 21% had attended a political rally, 18% had donated money to a political campaign or cause, and 14% had volunteered on a political campaign for a candidate or issue. Additionally, 60% said they followed news about national politics closely.

2. Ibid.
it is necessarily inefficient and wasteful.”

According to the Harvard University 15th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service, “when young Obama voters were asked to describe as thoughtfully as possible the reason that they are supporting the Illinois Senator, 30% mentioned, ‘can make a change’ and 14% said ‘fresh new voice and perspective’ – for a total of 44% citing change-related themes.” Obviously, it is not just about the numbers; it is really about the message that has garnered this kind of support, including financial support. As early as February 17, 2007, Peter Levine, deputy director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, a nonpartisan research center at the University of Maryland, was quoted in an article by Jose Antonio Vargas for the Washington Post discussing Obama’s appeal to today’s younger voters, saying, “Obama’s message is attractive to a certain type of young person. He’s saying: ‘You have a role to play. This is about you. About your role.’ There’s a real hunger for that kind of message.” This has great appeal for a generation that has been raised with such strong messaging about their value and worth to the world around them. The verbatim comments from the young adults surveyed in the Harvard Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service best exemplify this feeling amongst Millennial voters:

“He speaks to my generation in a way that no other candidate has and actually addresses the concerns that are specific to us. He represents change and hope in a political climate that is falling apart in a way that speaks to even the most cynical and bitter citizen.”
– 18-year-old white male at Oregon State.

“He supports progress toward a better global reputation and foreign relations. He supports a healthcare system that is on the side of the people, not the corporations. He represents a change in the direction of the nation, toward greater equality for men, women, and minorities.”
– 20-year-old white female enrolled at Georgia Tech.

“He is a dynamic candidate who understands the struggles faced by the poor, middle class, and generally disadvantaged. He is ready to set the nation on a different path than it is heading.”

This faith in government and optimistic hopes for a new path will be especially important if, as seems likely, we continue with the current economic downturn. Remember, Millennials can be typified by their belief that it is up to them to improve the world from the mess that was made by their predecessors. Obama’s inclusionary and consensus-oriented approach has great appeal to a generation that is so used to teaming and groupwork. They are well-documented as trusting of teams and systems – at least until their expectations are not met, at which point there may be hell to pay – and Obama, from the outset, at least appears to embody the optimism that typifies this younger generation. They seem to believe that Obama’s government is one that will value transparency, much like that of Facebook and other social networking sites. I find this faith quite amusing given that he is a Gen X-er himself, a generation that is often held in contempt by our Millennial successors due to their view that Generation X is just a bunch of jaded complainers. Personally, as an X-er myself, I take umbrage with this, but one cannot deny the force of optimism that personify the Millennials.

So, “Generation O”...these optimists are not just Obama supporters; after all, more than 30% are believed to have voted for another candidate for President, so they are not all connected by a common political candidate or ideology. But they may be connected by a common desire to make the world a better place. Even amongst business students, who are often stereotyped as only being concerned with the “almighty dollar,” there is a revolution happening. In his November 24,
2008 article “The Millennials Invade the B-Schools” appearing in Business Week Magazine, Geoff Gloeckler reports, “[s]ure, MBAs are still attracted to investment banks and accounting firms, but students from the Millennial Generation are increasingly interested in jobs where they feel they can make a positive difference—whether that’s building solar panels, running a food bank, or making microfinance loans in Africa.” Gloeckler goes on to state, “[e]lectives in such areas as sustainability and renewable energy are appearing in more course catalogs. And at Harvard, the Social Enterprise Club has replaced the finance and management clubs as most popular on campus. Carl Kester, finance professor and deputy dean of academic affairs, says that while idealism wasn’t altogether absent in the past, it has picked up steam. ‘It’s become very prominent since the Millennial Generation arrived at our doorstep,’ he says.”

Business schools are not the only ones who are reacting. Plenty of companies are overhauling their employee recruitment materials to bring attention to their community service and environmental initiatives, all in an effort to attract the interest of prospective Millennial employees. The message here: if you want to recruit a Millennial to come to work at your organization, be prepared to answer some tough questions about what your company stands for, and how prospective employees can find meaning in their work and feel good about the company’s mission and the way in which it conducts its business.

This is the way of “Generation O.”

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9. Ibid.
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