

Addressing A Market Transition: How One Organization is Transforming to Meet the Needs of Gen Z

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While culture continually evolves, every 20 years or so it shifts enough that a new generation is declared to have “come of age.” Today, we are seeing the first of what has been dubbed Generation Z (Gen Z) children begin to enter college. Dates vary slightly from one theory to another as to when one generation ends and another begins. However, Gen Z is typically viewed as anyone born between 1995 – 2015. Gen Z is most characterized as having grown up in a highly connected, technological world. For this reason, some have dubbed them “i-Gen” (Twenge, 2017).

Gen Z Characteristics

Their characteristics have been shaped by their parents and the technological world around them. Numerous articles and books have been written about the characteristics of Gen Z. However, when it comes to addressing how Generation Z functions in a university setting, there are several characteristics that set Gen Z apart from previous generations. Each of these characteristics have implications for fraternities and sororities and how they can adapt to best serve and support them.

Digital Natives

For their entire lives, Gen Z has lived in the time of the smartphone and broadband connectivity. This means they are extremely comfortable with online modes of communication. Many say they are more comfortable online than face-to-face. A recent study highlights that texting or iMessaging is the best way to communicate with this generation and “face-to-face” to them means a video call just as easily as it does in-person (Seemiller and Grace, 2016). Their comfort with digital environments makes them more comfortable with multi-tasking, but also tends to shorten their attention spans (Beall, 2017; Patel, 2017; Seemiller and Grace, 2016). This impacts how they communicate and interact with others, and the means by which they obtain and disseminate information.

Security

Gen Z has grown up in a world that, to them, feels insecure. Between climate change, the war on terror, and the growing polarity in U.S. politics, stability and security are things Gen Z highly values (Gversion.com, 2018; Twenge, 2017). This has led to greater focus on physical safety than past generations as well as anxiety around what could

happen. In turn, Gen Z appears to have a lower tolerance for hazing and other activities that jeopardize their health and safety. While this is an early observation at this point, our organization has observed an uptick in self-reported safety concerns allowing pre-emptive action to remediate.

Entrepreneurial

Gen Z also witnessed their parents struggle through the great financial crisis during their tween and teen years. This has led to them to feeling insecure about their future and consequently becoming more entrepreneurial (Beall, 2017; Gversion.com, 2018; Patel, 2017). Somewhat counterintuitively, while Gen Z prefers to work alone, they prefer to do so in groups. Imagine a group of Gen Z students sitting in a chapter room all focused on the GroupMe chat on their phone, which is a typical challenge that leadership faces in guiding Gen Z students.

Maturity

Gen Z appears to be less experienced when they get to college than past generations. This seems to have been driven by fewer life experiences but has huge implications for the life skills they can call upon when they get to college and how prepared they are for fraternity or sorority life. In her book, Dr. Twenge has numerous examples of how Gen Z is experiencing things later in their life than past generations (Twenge, 2017). This includes such activities as getting a driver's license or going out on a first date. Another example of these phenomena is they appear to be less apt to confront a peer if it might jeopardize their anonymity or the other person's rights. Even in reporting concerns with safety they often prefer to remain anonymous. Gen Z also enjoys much greater parental involvement and interest than in the past, and they will often integrate their parents into their decision-making process.

Adaptation Strategies

All of these highlighted characteristics have implications on how fraternities and sororities need to adapt to Gen Z. Over the last few years, Phi Kappa Psi has substantially changed how it operates to adapt to a changing student population. This began by refocusing on our founding values of service, leadership, and scholarship.

Understanding these characteristics, we have taken several actions to adapt our environment to better serve and support this current generation of members. For instance:

Strategy One – Approach to Digital

Being aware of Gen Z's propensity to focus on screens, we encourage a no-phone policy at chapter meetings and group events to drive greater face-to-face interactions. We adopted a social media policy to address concerns related to doxing and to initiate guidelines for productive, supportive, and positive social media interactions by and between our members. We have overhauled our social media communications and media strategies to focus on the delivery of important organizational material to our members. Leadership also began to ensure we have mobile number contacts for all chapter officers, allowing us to text them important updates. We've set standards for our members' social media efforts, so all our members can enjoy the benefits of social media while mitigating higher-risk behaviors. In addition, we've set standards around how we expect our members to take on greater campus involvement and leadership roles, and we measure this nationwide and use this to drive competition amongst our chapters tapping into Gen Z's inherent competitive spirit.

Strategy Two – Desire for Security

Gen Z has a high awareness for security. Given this reality, it was a good time for us to work with our local housing corporations to re-evaluate chapter houses. Specifically, we looked for ways to improve the living spaces as well as enhance environments for greater academic success. We have adopted policies around the removal of hard alcohol or drugs in our houses, as well as methods for chapters to better manage events to improve the security of our members and their guests. We also launched a fraternity-led health and wellness program called ELEVATE which includes in-person education, general and mental-health awareness campaigns, campus resource guides for every campus where we have a chapter, and two full-time staff members specifically focused on this area. Also, there is now an expectation that every chapter have a Health & Wellness Chair in their chapter leadership structure.

Strategy Three – Entrepreneurial Drive

Knowing Gen Z members tend to be worried about their career prospects, two years ago we launched a new program to specifically help junior and senior members develop critical job skills. The Professional Development Conference (PDC) is in its third year of existence, and the results are members getting employed at higher rates than non-attendees and with higher average starting salaries. The program focuses on helping members interview, network, and develop compelling LinkedIn pages and resumes. It also incorporates a robust alumni networking structure which better aligns our Gen Z members with alumni working in their specific fields of interest. Needless to say, we

have found success in helping our undergraduate men compete for the careers they desire.

Strategy Four – Maturity and Life Skills

The fourth pillar of our approach is to help our Gen Z members continue to be accepting of others, while also helping others be better. To this end, we have instituted tracking of over 40 metrics at both the chapter and individual level to encourage accountability. We also implemented programs to help develop life skills such as interpersonal relationships and ethical decision-making. This can involve training on how to have a crucial conversation with a peer regarding a matter, such as meeting chapter standards. It is important for our members to know a positive form of brotherhood is to hold each other accountable to the chapter's expectations through conflict. We provide them with valuable life experiences through our service immersion trips where they join members from across the country to address poverty in a major metropolitan city. It breeds a greater awareness of the world around them and provides an opportunity to give back, which Gen Z values. Finally, we have launched an effort to begin integrating their parents into the process from the time they are deciding to join our organization through the time they graduate. Starting in the fall of 2019, we will be sending letters to parents when their son joins, and then periodically throughout the school year to keep the parents informed as to national goings-on as well as opportunities for scholarships and programs their son can take advantage of. Keeping parents in the loop allows them to stay informed as to what their son is experiencing as well as smooths conversations in more challenging times.

Strategy Five – Alumni Support

The final pillar of our approach is ensuring adequate training and education of our alumni leaders, especially those who serve in the roles of advising our Gen Z members. Because chapter advisors are often one or more generations removed from those they advise, it is important for them to understand the mindset of those they are advising. The key is to balance what the advisors bring in terms of life-experience and maturity with understanding the world in which our Gen Z members operate – which is quite different from when the advisors were in school.

We are three years into this transformation. As we see the results of our efforts, we will iterate and enhance as we look ahead to the changing needs of our future generations.

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