Exceptional Customer Service Across Generations:

How to Harness the Power of Generational Dynamics to Drive Your Transit Organization Forward

RTAP
Rural Transit Assistance Program

For the first time in American history, four different generations—*Gen Ys, Gen X-ers, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation*—are working side-by-side in the workplace affecting everything from recruiting, motivating, and managing, to how organizations are serving customers. Chances are generational dynamics are at work within your rural transit operation.
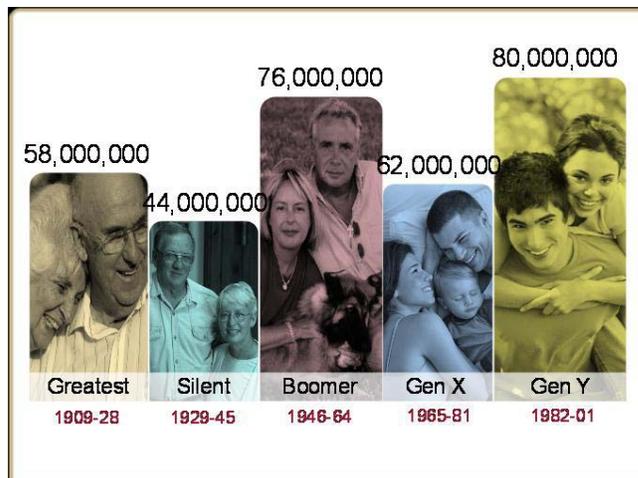
This technical brief and related webinar, which is available on National RTAP's website (www.NationalRTAP.org), provides an initial introduction to each generation in a manner that explains their different values, ways of getting things done, and different ways of treating customers; and offers practical skills on how everyone within a transit industry can harness the power of generational dynamics to build stronger relationships with their colleagues and customers.

> This technical brief is the third of a five-part National RTAP webinar series. Part One of the series laid out specific action steps—10 Imperatives—for transit operators and the entire transit industry and also set forth major trends that shape an exciting future for transit across America. Part Two focused on how to identify and meet customer needs. This technical brief explores major trend #3, Generational Dynamics, in more depth—specifically, understanding the impact a multigenerational workforce has on a transit system's internal operations and external customer relationships and using this knowledge to drive transit agencies forward.

Why Generations Matter to Transit Agencies – One of the Keys to Customer-centricity:

The central theme of National RTAP's five-part webinar series is focused on how the transit industry can thrive in the future by becoming more customer-centric—*how to get closer to customers to better serve their mobility needs and how do so in a manner that turns them into an apostle for your transit system.*

One of these keys to getting closer to the customer is to build a comprehensive customer service system—the topic of National RTAP Webinar #2: *"Customer Service in Transit: How to Identify and Meet Customer Needs."* As discussed in that webinar, customer service isn't the domain of one department, but rather part of the fabric

| Greatest	Silent	Boomer	Gen X	Gen Y
58,000,000	44,000,000	76,000,000	62,000,000	80,000,000
1909-28	1929-45	1946-64	1965-81	1982-01

of the entire organization. It starts at the top and permeates through the entire operation, from employee orientation, performance expectations and rewards to new service design. This is where generational differences can come into play. They can impact recruiting, building teams, dealing with changes, motivating and engaging fellow workers, and treating customers in the fashion they expect.

Understanding Generational Dynamics:

Generational dynamics centers on why each generation is so different—*what makes each generation tick?*

Thanks to the longevity revolution (the average life expectancy is now at 78 years old), there are five generations alive at the same time. For the most part, each generation spans 20 years and they are defined by historical bookend events. In the case of the Silent Generation, the defining events are the crash of 1929 and World War II.
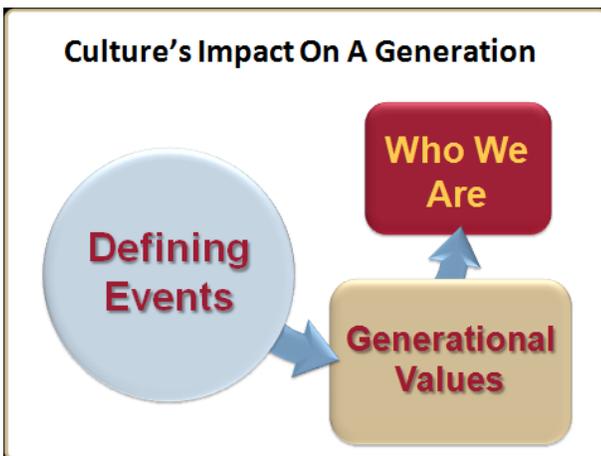
Members of the same generation, by definition, have shared many of the same formative experiences during their most impressionable or formative "wonder years" – *ages 8 to 18* – that set them apart from other generations. Did they live through times of war or times of peace? Did they come of age in an era of prosperity and rising expectations, or in a period of economic turmoil and broken dreams? Were their families large or small? Were the heads of most households a mom and a dad, or did some include a mom and her boyfriend, a mom alone…or two moms?

Did the dominant media in a generation's childhood consist of radios and books, newspapers and television, or cable TV and the Internet? Did their cultural icons include Lawrence Welk, the Rolling Stones or the Dave Matthews Band?

Shared cultural experiences have a powerful impact on what shapes the shared values of each generation and lead to what we call generational archetypes. The following presents a snapshot on each generation's historical influences, generational icons and generational attitudes and values.

The Silent Generation:

35 million
Born 1929 to 1945
Formative years: Mid-1930s to 1950
Age in 2010: 65 to 81

The Silent Generation was shaped by the hardship of the Great Depression; they shared sacrifice of total war during World War II and the struggle against international communism. Most members of this generation were too young to fight in the front lines of WWII, but they

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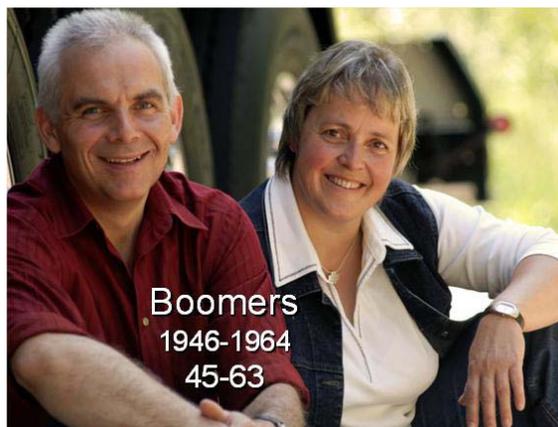
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recycled scrap and collected gas rations on the home front—and many of them served in Korea. The Silent Generation absorbed the wartime virtues of patriotism, self-sacrifice and a communitarian spirit. They also were indoctrinated in a command-and-control style of management that made them respectful of hierarchy and authority.

Historical influences	Generational icons	Attitudes
Radio	Franklin D. Roosevelt	**Outlook**: practical
Jazz, big band	Dwight Eisenhower	**Work ethic**: dedicated
Great Depression, New Deal	Joe DiMaggio	**View toward authority**: respectful
World War II	Joe Lewis	**View of leadership**: hierarchy
Korean War	Albert Einstein	**Relationships**: self sacrifice
Big government	Duke Ellington	**Work/life balance**: "Work-life *what*?"
Big corporations	Elvis	**View of money:** A penny saved is a penny earned
Big unions	Ella Fitzgerald	
Military-industrial complex	John Wayne	
Man in the Gray Flannel Suit	Bob Hope	
H bomb	Jimmy Stewart	
Red scare	Bette Davis	
	Betty Crocker	
	George Patton	
	Douglas MacArthur	

Baby Boomers:

76 million
Born 1946 to 1964
Formative years: early 1950s to 1974
Age in 2010: 46 to 64

The booming post-World War II economy fostered the notion that all things were possible, and a majority of Boomers grew up in affluence with a vision of unlimited opportunity. Broadcast television forged a nationally shared cultural experience; the powerful new medium shocked the nation by bringing race riots and the Vietnam War into the family room. Dr. Spock introduced a new approach to child rearing that put the needs of the child first. The resulting drive for self-fulfillment, combined with the sexual revolution, led to a divorce epidemic. Yet Boomers, driven to compete with 78 million peers in the workplace, were not entirely self indulgent: they came to define themselves by their work.

Historical influences	Generational icons	Attitudes
Broadcast television	Captain Kangaroo	**Outlook**: optimistic
Rhythm and blues, rock and roll	Kingston Trio	**Work ethic**: driven
Suburban sprawl	Beaver Cleaver	**View toward authority**: challenging
Mass consumption	John F. Kennedy	**View of leadership**: pay your dues
Dr. Spock	Lyndon B. Johnson	**Relationships**: personal gratification
Interstate highways	Richard Nixon	**Work/life balance**: Work defines success in life
Space race	Martin Luther King	**View of money:** Spend more, pay never
Civil rights	Rosa Parks	
Race riots	Beatles	
Vietnam	Rolling Stones	
The pill	Gloria Steinem	
Oil embargo	Archie Bunker	
Watergate	Walter Cronkite	
Earth Day	Muhammed Ali	
	Paul Newman	
	Robert Redford	
	John Belushi	

Generation X (Gen X-ers):

62 million
Born 1965-1982
Formative years: early 1970s to 1990
Age in 2010: 28 to 45

In the 1970s, America's established institutions were looking threadbare. America's global economic primacy eroded, and the employer-employee compact of trust and loyalty collapsed. The country was demoralized by Vietnam and Watergate. Stagflation created a spirit of malaise. Even when the economy rebounded in the 1980s, Gen X-ers saw their parents' jobs and careers "restructured" away.

It was also an era of social breakdown: soaring divorce rates leading to latch-key kids, rising crime and unwed births reflecting inner city decay. But the personal computer heralded the emergence of the New Economy, while the fall of the "evil empire" opened up world markets to globalization. Gen X-ers grew up to be self-reliant, self-sufficient and skeptical. They don't trust in the permanence of things. In the workplace, they are independent and don't respond well to micro-management.

Historical influences	Generational icons	Attitudes
CNN and MTV Disco and grunge Latch-key kids Challenger explosion Iranian hostage crisis Corporate raiders Restructuring "Greed is Good" Personal computers Fall of the Berlin Wall Columbine massacre	Jimmy Carter Ronald Reagan Bill Gates Steve Jobs Ayatollah Khomeini Ted Bundy Clarence Thomas Beavis & Butthead Dilbert Kurt Cobain Madonna Michael Jordan Oprah Captain Kirk	**Outlook:** skeptical **Work ethic:** free agent **View toward authority:** unimpressed **View of leadership:** competence **Relationships:** reluctant to commit **Work/life balance:** Work to live **View of money:** I can always make more

Generation Ys (Millennials):

80 million
Born: 1983-2001
Formative years: 1990-2001
Age in 2010: 9-27

Raised by doting parents and awarded praise and trophies just for showing up to team soccer games, the Gen Ys suffer from no lack of self-esteem. Yet, other than the oldest Gen Ys who are on assignment in the Middle East or others who are looking for jobs in the Great Recession, most Gen Ys have faced no real hardship. Enjoying a prolonged adolescence—adult Gen Ys are famous for living at home—they remain untested. Still, the generation shows promise.
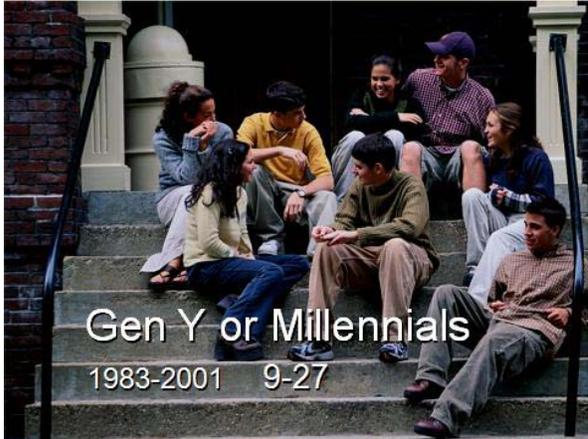
Technologically savvy, Gen Ys are hyper-connected through cells phones, instant messaging and texting. The Internet is second nature to these digital natives. Furthermore, as social libertarians in their outlook, they are comfortable with diversity in race, culture and sexual orientation. Early signs suggest they may engender a renaissance in civic participation and the rebuilding of social capital.

Historical influences	Generational icons	Attitudes
Internet	George Bush (senior	**Outlook:** confident
Globalization	and junior)	**Work ethic:** goals
Climate change	Bill Clinton	**View toward authority:** uncertain
Internet	Barack Obama	**View of leadership:** egalitarian
Cell phones	Larry Page and Sergey	**Relationships:** inclusive
Instant messaging	Brin	**Work/life balance:** integrated
Silicon Valley	David Petraeus	**View of money:** Mom? Dad? Can I
9/11	Leonardo DiCaprio	borrow $20?
War in Iraq	In Sync	
Virginia Tech massacre	Britney Spears	
Reality TV	Mark McGuire	
YouTube	Serena Williams	
FaceBook	Michael Phelps	

With this understanding of generational dynamics, let's now examine how these forces are at work inside a multigenerational workforce (*how your colleagues view one other*) and outside (*how your colleagues view customers*).

Internal Generational Dynamics at Work in Transit Agencies:

1. **Work-life Balance**: Boomers created the idea of the 60-hour work week. They live to work. Consequently, Boomers view work as part of their lives. A call at night or working overtime to get a project finished is not a big deal. Younger generations work to live. They view work as something you have to do to fund life. Consequently, work is compartmentalized into what you have to do from 9–5. Period. At 5 p.m., work stops. Expectations of working late are not part of their DNA.

2. **Technology:** Gen Ys grew up tethered to technology. They are the digital natives. Consequently, they prefer work where they can simultaneously have online "IM conversations" with several people at once while text messaging someone else on their cellphone as they listen to music with their iPod headphones. Many Boomers and Silent Generation co-workers have a hard time with this work practice—but they shouldn't. Brain scientists have discovered that Gen Ys' brains are wired differently from their lifetime exposure to technology. This younger generation literally needs the technology buzz to get work done.

3. **Individual Versus Teamwork:** The traditional American workplace has depended on teamwork and team meetings. Generational perspective is casting a new light on this dynamic. Gen X-ers grew up taking care of themselves. They prefer to work independently—*to just get the job done!* Boomers, on the other hand, expect and need to have meetings. They value the sense of team and team accomplishment.

Individual versus teamwork orientation are extremely important considerations. Gen X-ers' and Boomers' job satisfaction ratings are directly correlated to their feeling of not being micro-managed and teamwork contribution, respectively.

4. **Performance Reviews:** Silent Generation and Baby Boomers grew up in organizations where one-time annual performance reviews were the norm, and that's what they still expect. Rewards are the same. They are based on the performance over the past review period. Younger generations have a completely different expectation. They look for immediate reward. For Gen Ys, groomed on constant praise from parents, they need immediate and constant feedback (weighted heavily towards positive comments). Gen X-ers look for immediate appreciation in terms of immediate benefits—cash bonus.

External Generational Dynamics at Work in Transit Agencies:

1. **Stereotyping Customers:** Generational research among Boomers and Silent Generation age cohorts suggests that they feel 10 to 15 years younger than their age. Boomers, in fact, feel middle age starts at 48 and ends at 73. The younger generations have a different view. They see middle age starting at 36 and believe people are "over the hill" at 57! Older co-workers (Boomers and Silent Generation) believe someone isn't "over the hill" until they are literally under the hill.

   The net of all of this perceived age shifting is that older people see themselves much younger than they are and younger people see older people as being much older than they actually are. When you apply this to customer service, how does a 20-year-old customer service representative relate to a 57-year-old customer? Do they treat them like they are *over the hill*?

2. **Acknowledging/Listening to Customers:** For Gen Ys, technology has changed the way people of this generation relate to one another. They are so comfortable with technology-based contact that they spend less time talking directly one-on-one with each other. Face to face contact isn't practiced as much, relative to older generations. For a transit agency's customer service program, this can manifest in the amount of eye contact Gen Ys have and how fast they talk to customers. Conversely, older generations look for personal signals that they are being heard and understood, such as eye contact and direct verbal cues. These almost opposing communication styles can present problems across customer service contact points.

3. **Answering Customer Questions:** Younger generations have grown up at a time where information, in general, and answers to questions, in particular, are just a click away. So, they have come to expect immediate answers even when humans are involved. Consequently, younger customers get frustrated immediately if customer service representatives or drivers don't have answers to their questions or don't immediately point them to another information source.

New Rules for Generationally Savvy Transit Agencies:

With a keen appreciation of the power of generational dynamics, transit agencies now can embrace the new rules of becoming an *ageless* and more productive operation. These rules fall across both internal and external perspectives. They include:

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Internal Rules:

1. **Teach Generational Dynamics:** Many people believe the correct way, and the only way, is their way. Teach generational dynamics to broaden everyone's perspective. Hold an organization-wide meeting on this topic. Make it fun—do this over a pizza lunch. Have different generations share thoughts on how they see other generations. Then share this paper and the related *PowerPoint* deck and webinar recording with your colleagues. Discuss each of the respective tables above—historical influences, generational icons and behaviors. Collectively, make a list of how generational dynamics may be affecting your transit agency's internal workflow, views of customer, and most importantly how you currently serve customers—your *customer service*.

2. **Use Generational Sensibilities When Recruiting Workers:** The key to recruiting across generations is the use of words and images in your job listings and recruitment ads. Gen Ys want to know about continuous learning and that they can make a difference in the organization. Gen X-ers want to know that they will not be micro-managed. Both Gen Ys and Gen X-ers are looking for flexibility. Boomers want to know they will be on teams and can work with co-workers to advance the organization.

3. **Include Generational Perspectives to Increase Worker Retention – Lower Turnover:** In today's multi-generational workforce, "one size does not fit all" when it comes to performance incentives and rewards. Create a performance rewards system that works for all generations. For Gen Ys, constant, almost daily feedback—"*job well done*" —is expected. They are used to it from their helicopter parents. For Gen X-ers, it's all about immediate reward for finishing a project. Cash or a free half-day off works best. The key here for Gen X-ers is that the rewards and recognition are given at the time when it is earned. For Boomers, it's about public recognition—"*we couldn't have done this without your contribution*." A special parking place, picture in the newsletter, or special recognition in staff meetings go a long way to retaining Boomers.

4. **Engage Everyone in the Process of Becoming an Ageless Organization**: Proactively engage everyone in the process of applying generational sensibilities across the entire operation of your transit agency. As many Gen Ys crave attention and special treatment and learning experiences, match them up with a Boomer mentor. This will work well for Boomers, as our research findings across industries suggest that many Boomers feel somewhat marginalized by their companies. Position this mentoring task for what it is—critical to the long-term success of the team and agency. This will appeal to Boomers' values (entitlement, control, transformational change). It will also set up an order system to transfer Boomers' knowledge and experience to younger generations as Boomers head into retirement (the first Boomers turn 65 starting on January 1, 2011).

5. **Keep Learning:** Great organizations make continuous improvement part of their culture. The generational insights presented in this paper are just a very few of those that have been identified and reported by well-informed authors. Tap into the growing body of knowledge on generational dynamics in the workforce. Start by Googling "*multi-generational workforce"* or go to an online bookstore and search for books on "*multi-generational workforce."* You'll be surprised at the sheer number of inexpensive resources available.

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6. **Create Generational-inspired Customer Icons**: The easiest way to build an appreciation of generational sensibilities across any organization's customer service program is to create generational icons for each generation. This is most commonly done by creating four large posters of the typical customer, one for each generation, and putting key words on each poster that bring the generational icon to life. These posters are displayed in a prominent area within your agency to teach and remind everyone that your customer base is made up of these different generational segments.

7. **Examine Customer Contact Points Using a Generational Lens:** One of the components to a comprehensive customer service program is periodically conducting a touch point audit (refer to National RTAP webinar #2: *"Customer Service in Transit: How to Identify and Meet Customer Needs").* When mapping out the different ways your customers interface with your system—from calling in for information to riding the bus—keep a generational perspective in mind. Just ask yourself how would a Gen Y see this or how would a member of the Silent Generation experience this bus ride?

8. **Improve and Develop Transit Services Using a Generational Focus:** The future of transit is about getting closer to the customer. This matters most where the rubber meets the road—the kinds of mobility products and services you provide. Look for ways to bring in the "voice of the customer" when designing new services. Make sure generational voices are represented. Ask yourself, "are we meeting the needs of every generation?"

9. **Train Drivers and Customer Service Representatives to Appreciate Generational Dynamics:** Incorporate generational perspectives into your ongoing training programs. Introduce drivers to your new generational icon posters. Share customer satisfaction research, sorted by generational perspectives, to reinforce your generational orientation.

10. **Assess and Understand Customer Satisfaction by Generation:** Monitor your agency's performance by generation. In your customer satisfaction surveys, stop asking age ranges on questionnaires and start asking "what year were you born?" Then group respondents into generation segments based on their birth years. Viewing your customer satisfaction data through this lens will give you a whole new perspective on your riders and the powerful insights that come with a generational lens.

Summary

Why are generational dynamics so important to transit? Two reasons: they provide an easy way for everyone to understand fellow co-workers and harness the power of their multi-generational workforce—to make it more productive in providing transit services; second, a keen appreciation of generational dynamics can help build a more empathetic, customer service-oriented culture for transit systems—helping everyone in your agency see and appreciate customers.

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As you apply generational dynamics and the 10 new rules to your transit agency, use the chart below as an easy way to bring it all together.

Generational Dynamics

	Silent	Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y
Outlook	Practical	Optimistic	Skeptical	Confident
Work Ethic	Dedicated	Driven	Free Agent	Goals
View of Authority	Respectful	Challenge	Unimpressed	Uncertain
View of Leadership	Hierarchy	Pay your dues	Competence	Egalitarian
Relationships	Self-sacrifice	Personal gratification	Reluctant to commit	Inclusive
Work/Life Balance	"Don't get it"	Work defines success in life	Work to live	Integrated

Share this with everyone in your agency and together make transit part of the fabric of your community—
improving your customers' mobility, making your customers' lives better!

About John W. Martin

John W. Martin is President and CEO of the Southeastern Institute of Research, Inc. (www.sirresearch.com), a 45-year-old marketing research firm headquartered in Richmond, VA. SIR has conducted over 13,000 studies for *Fortune 1000* companies, governmental agencies and non-profit organizations. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnography and survey research, SIR helps organizations identify their unique selling propositions, formulate communication strategies, explore new products and services, and measure the overall effectiveness of marketing programs.

In addition to heading up SIR, John is the co-founder and CEO of The Boomer Project (www.boomerproject.com), a national research-based marketing "think tank" that tracks generational trends and provides strategic consultation on how to effectively communicate with each generation—Gen Ys, Gen X, Baby Boomers and Silent Generation. Boomer Project insights have been featured in the *Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Toronto Star, BusinessWeek, Barron's, NBC Nightly News, CBS News, MSNBC and NPR's Morning Edition*. John co-authored the award-winning business book, *Boomer Consumer: Ten New Rules for Marketing to America's Largest, Wealthiest and Most Influential Group*, published in 2007 and subsequently named a Top 10 Business Book by Corbis, a Bill Gates Company.

The content in this paper and National RTAP's related webinar series are not official Federal Transit Administration or National RTAP policy, but rather reflect the views of Mr. Martin, informed by hundreds of marketing studies his firm has conducted for transit and transportation agencies.

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