



'When I say jump...'

My nephew turned 15 in July. He's one of the neatest people I know. But as he inches closer to the legal driving age, I find it increasingly difficult to stay relevant in his life. A few years ago he was content shooting darts, watching TV or looking for "trols" in the woods. Now I have to work (sometimes pretty hard) to stay connected.

If you're like the rest of that chunk of corporate America that pulls a sizeable portion of its employees from Generation Y, you have an idea as to what I'm talking about. Perhaps a better way of referring to my nephew and the 40 million kids his age that make up this group is Generation *Why*, a term coined by "Gen Why" expert Eric Chester, who spoke to attendees at last month's National Convenience Store Advisory Group conference (see pp. 30-44).

"When you tell them to jump, they don't say, 'How high?'" Chester says. "They ask, 'Why?'"

It's a different world now, and this is a different generation—different than the baby boomers, different than those hapless slackers in Generation X (of which I'm a proud member). Gen Whys never had to get up to change channels on the TV. Gen Whys never had to play Solitaire with real cards. Most Whys never knew life without the Internet.

The truth is that Gen Whys are not any better or worse than generations that preceded them, according to Chester. They're just different.

Chester told NCSAG attendees he recently saw a Gen Why with so many body piercings, he "looked like he fell down the stairs carrying a tackle box!" To many of us, pierced and tattooed Gen Whys look weird and act strangely. These kids grew up watching reality TV and listening to the likes of Eminem and Marilyn Manson—not exactly the mild-mannered, sit-in-the-corner-and-behave types. Gen Whys want to be noticed—good or bad, but definitely not indifferent.

Being non-Gen-Whys makes it hard for us to understand Gen Whys' behavior. But in the "now" culture we live in, where kids share next to no quality time with their parents, the culture (i.e., TV, the Web, peers, etc.) establishes the rules. As a result, jobs offering little change, where associates are asked to follow instructions "because I said so" are avoided like the plague. Hourly jobs in our industry might fall into this category.

"Some [Gen Whys] look at you like they're dead from the neck up if you ask them to do something," one retailer with stores in the Southwest told me after Chester's NCSAG presentation. "But we're probably guilty of not giving these kids some credit. Maybe they do just need a challenge."

Getting 'engaged'

Chester says Gen Whys prefer physical injury to boredom. He compares them, in some ways, to dogs wearing shock collars—they're willing to "take the pain" (i.e. face punishment) if there's a reward on the other side of the fence they perceive as being more interesting. Unlike previous generations, these kids thrive on change. And that is both a blessing and a curse.

Our industry is also changing—with technology, with the products we sell, with the way customers and competitors perceive us. Gen Whys, if properly motivated, can be some of the most adaptable and efficient employees in the company. But first, you must "engage" them.

Chester points to Pal's Sudden Service, a Tennessee-based fast feeder with one of the industry's lowest turnover rates. He also says it's 50% more profitable than any other QSR chain.

Why? Pal's has engaged its employees by enabling them to forge strong ties with their peers; peer-to-peer employee reviews are commonplace. Pal's also excels at training and empowers employees to make decisions—starting with something as simple as giving them the power to offer french fries to less-than-satisfied customers.

As for me and my 15-year-old nephew, I'm committed to remaining "the cool uncle" (not that my brothers-in-law are uncool). I'm committed to remaining "engaged." In today's world, you've got to think along those same lines. There's a "Help Wanted" sign in every window, so kids need a reason to come to work for you—and stay there.

As frightening as the prospect sounds, Chester says employers must "mix things up" with Gen Whys and offer the flexibility they seek in order to attract and keep them on the payroll.

It's critical that you make the effort, because Gen Whys are not just prospective employees but current and future customers, too—they pumped about \$252 billion into our economy last year.