

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Branding of Police Organizations to Attract Current  
And Future Generations**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Branding of police organizations as a way to attract current and future generations is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of increasing difficulty in recruiting and retention. The make-up of the work force at any given time is primarily three generations. Today's work force is composed of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, and each generation has its own identity.

The position of the researcher is that law enforcement agencies must have a good marketing plan that revolves around the brand of the organization because current practices are not resulting in the filling of vacancies with the best and brightest officers. Research into the characteristics of each generation revealed that existing strategies for recruiting and retention needed to be updated. Information on Generation Y is still being gathered from studies by researchers; however, a review of journals, periodicals, and books written in the last three years was conducted. The general consensus is that agencies will have to utilize technology to their advantage if they want to recruit the next generation of police officers. They will have to abandon traditional means in order to be a recognizable brand for future officers.

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## INTRODUCTION

The image that the public has of a law enforcement agency and its officers is continually shaped by the environment in which they function. This public perception or image is the brand for that agency. The brand can reflect a positive or negative image. This image is shaped by a variety of factors, such as personal experience, the media, and by other individuals.

Any company that sells a product will spend time and money marketing it to the consumer. If done correctly, it will lead to enough sales to make the product profitable. Law enforcement organizations do not manufacture or sell anything. They provide a service for the community. Most law enforcement agencies do not do a good job marketing themselves (Orrick, 2008). Instead, they allow the public perception to be dictated by what is viewed on the five o'clock news or on one of the many television programs that personify a glamorized version contrary to reality. Law enforcement agencies must incorporate an aggressive marketing plan in order to attract and retain current and future generations of officers. The key to a good marketing plan is a successful brand.

In the past, law enforcement agencies relied on their mission and stability of employment to attract new employees. It was not uncommon for agencies to rely on the pitch line that police work is exciting, that there was an expectation of job security, and a retirement plan. This marketing model was still the norm for most agencies in the 1990s. The amount of material addressing recruiting and marketing in the typical college textbook, like Randy LaGrange's *Policing American Society*, written in 1993, was barely a page. There was little information on the concept of marketing or branding.

References in pop culture to the idea of generations having specific characteristics were nothing new, but police administrators did not change their strategy for recruiting and tended to go with what was working. The research by academics was just starting to look into generational differences and how it was impacting the profession of law enforcement. Applicants sought out law enforcement agencies as a career. Agencies utilized the printed media as their main tool for recruitment. The widespread use of the Internet did not start occurring until the late 1990s. Most agencies were slow to update their marketing plans, if they even had one. There was no reason to update, because applicants were plentiful. Agencies took the approach that candidates would recruit them.

Eventually, agencies started to pay attention to the fact that there were differences in the characteristics of individuals of a specific generation. At any given time, the workforce is composed mainly of individuals from three different generations. Each generation has its own identity. This identity is made up of behavior, beliefs, and characteristics. This identity is shaped by political happenings, economic conditions, and historical events (McCafferty, 2003). The specific dates for each generation can vary on each end. The identity may also overlap for some members of the group. Someone who was born in the transition years may have characteristics of both generations. The cut off does not follow the typical calendar year or decade. The teenage years tend to be the time when children begin to form their identity that defines them later in adulthood (McCafferty, 2003).

The generation that is now at the helm of most police agencies is those born between the years 1943 through 1960. That makes these Americans approximately 50

to 68 years old, and they are reaching retirement age. This cohort of likeminded individuals has been referred to as “Baby Boomers.” They are the children of the Veteran or Greatest Generation, who survived the Great Depression and won World War II. The Baby Boomers were in their teens during the 1960s and 1970s. These decades were filled with unrest and discontent in most parts of the world. They experienced the draft and the Vietnam War. Teenage Boomers saw the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. They were active participants in the protest movement for civil rights. They developed a change-the-world philosophy (McCafferty, 2003).

The generation which followed the Baby Boomers, and now occupies mid-level positions in police agencies, was born generally between 1965 and 1979. This generation has become known as “X.” The term first appeared in 1960 in a book written in England that referred to a group which displayed a view of nonconformity to social norms and customs. Generation X is much smaller in size than either its predecessor or the generation that follows, which is commonly referred to as “Y,” or Millennials and are now entering the labor market. “X” is a sandwich generation that is locked between two very large and influential groups (McCafferty, 2003).

Generation Xers were teens in the 1980s and 1990s. With the end of the Vietnam War and the change toward a more racial/gender neutral society, the focus became more domestic (Erickson, 2008). The traditional model of a single income family, where the primary occupation for women was to stay at home to raise their children, went largely by the wayside. Women entered the workforce in significant

numbers; some 60% chose to work outside the home. This trend was the result of the achievements of the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

As teenagers, Xers witnessed adult unemployment rise as companies downsized or restructured. This revamped the traditional work plan of working for one company for 30 years and retiring with a good pension. Baby Boomers had depended on and devoted their lives to the company. They lived to work long hours at the expense of family time. This was probably the single most widely shared experience of Generation X. It is not hard to predict what the outcome was. The need for self-reliance and the ability to take care of one's self is deeply embedded in the views of the majority of this generation (Erickson, 2008).

Generation Xers' teenage years occurred during a time in which drugs, gangs, kidnappings, and suicide became everyday occurrences. These influences were not as prevalent in earlier generations (McCafferty, 2003). It was during this time frame where crimes against children became an epidemic. This violence transitioned to television into police-themed shows. This created a new unrealistic view of law enforcement. The police were expected to discover and solve a variety of crimes from murder to assault using the latest crime scene technology in the time span of an hour long show. Civil rights were viewed as suggestions as long as the ends justified the means. This Hollywood rendition of policing created an unrealistic reality of law enforcement which would have a ripple effect into not only the justice system, but also in the recruitment of future peace officers.

The generation now entering the work force has been labeled "Y." They were born between 1980 to probably around 2004. Also referred to as the "Millennials," the

cut off for this generation is still debatable. Their teen years occurred during the late 1990s to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Unlike their Generation X counterparts, they are ambitious, confident, and optimistic. They have never experienced a bad economy or national threat for an extended period of time. Their parents overcompensated being ignored as children, and made sure that Ys were nurtured and pampered. Throughout their lives, they have been told that they could achieve anything they wanted as long as they put their minds to it (Orrick, 2008). Growing up, every child on the team played in the game, and everyone was a winner. Y'ers were rewarded and praised at every turn. Generation Yers are team oriented, cooperative, and are more likely to have strong peer bonds (McCafferty, 2003).

The majority of the workforce is primarily comprised of three generations. The Baby Boomers, X, and Y make the core of the workforce. Each generation has its own unique work ethic, perspectives on work, and unique way of viewing the world (Zemke, Raines, & Filipezak, 2000). Agencies should consider these characteristics when developing a marketing plan to recruit the best future employees. The marketing plan should revolve around a brand that is attractive to candidates no matter what their age.

## **POSITION**

Law enforcement agencies need to change their mind set and develop a marketing approach for attracting and retaining future generations of officers in order to avoid chronic vacancies. Law enforcement agencies as a whole have not taken into account the unique characteristics of each generation now in the workforce. The advances in technology and the changes in group dynamics have not been fully



understood by agency leaders. They need to tailor their recruiting processes in order to achieve the best results.

The private sector has become more aggressive in recruiting current generations. The public sector has been slow to react and change as a whole. This has directly affected the quality of the average applicant. Agencies will either have to lower their standards or re-think how they bring new employees into their organizations.

A department can increase the appeal of its brand by updating it. The concept of branding is foreign to most law enforcement agencies. A brand is the public face of a marketable product, service, or person. Branding can be traced back to the start of the Industrial Revolution. The emergence of the department store changed the way people shopped. People were given a much wider range of goods and services from which to choose. Companies had to find a way to get the consumer to continue to buy a particular product. The use of branding was an attempt to affect buyer loyalty. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, brands play to every generation, social class, and culture (Davis, 2005).

On any given day, there are thousands of police departments that need to fill vacancies. This creates the need for a good brand. The key for departments is to try to be a good brand that the best possible candidates will seek. Good brands do three significant things for consumers: They save time, they project the right image, and they provide an identity (D'Alessandro, 2001). Consumers shop brands in order to save time and fill the need to survey the rest of the competition. If a department can project the image that it is a good brand, then potential candidates will buy into the notion that the best brand equals the best product. One example of this is the market share for Tylenol over the generic acetaminophen. The active ingredients are the same for both the

name brand and the generic. However, Children's Tylenol outsells all of its generic competitors combined (D'Alessandro, 2001).

Generation Yers, for example, tend to be an idealistic generation that will stay clear of an employer or brand with a checkered past. A company that is viewed as not being socially or environmentally friendly will have a harder time recruiting employees from this generational group (Alsop, 2008). A department whose brand luster has faded or is tarnished by a scandal may have more of a challenge in recruiting as well. The Los Angeles Police Department is made up of many professional and talented officers. The actions of a few during the Rodney King excessive force incident did impact their brand in a negative way. Brands are important. Agencies should work to develop an employment brand, so candidates will consider them an employer of choice (Orrick, 2008). An organization should promote an image that will aid in recruiting. A good brand can also distinguish a department from other competing agencies.

A good brand will also provide an identity for the organization. Applicants will, in an instant, be able to recognize that the department being represented by the brand is a great place to work. The brand offers trust and convenience in an increasingly complicated world (D'Alessandro, 2001).

The traditional methods of recruiting potential officers are no longer effective. The use of demographics by marketers to brand a product previously worked well because it was possible to define large portions of the population. This is no longer the case, as society has become more global, multicultural, and exposed via the media to seemingly endless choices (Davis, 2005). The characteristics between the Boomers, who are leaving the work force in great numbers, and the Millennials, who are just

starting to enter the workforce, are identifiably different. Technology should be embraced and used to the advantage of the organization. Generations X and Y gravitate to the Internet for job searches. Entire websites are dedicated to advertising jobs both in the private and public sectors. A perfect example of this was a recent job fair that was held online by FedEx. Potential candidates could text or email hiring managers in real time. The feedback from the candidates was positive, but the view from the recruiters was not. John Leech, a company spokesperson, stated that the Boomer recruiters would have preferred to set up a table with the company signature purple table cloth and hand out pens while shaking hands (Alsop, 2008). This example illustrates the attitude taken by many police departments towards recruitment. Since most police agencies are headed by Boomers, they sometimes fail to see the need to change or embrace new technology. The lack of effectiveness of the traditional process was illustrated by the FedEx example. Departments that do not have their own web page or at least a link from their cities are working with outdated marketing plans. Since the generational characteristics have changed, so to should the methods used to attract new employees.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

The impact of the current recession has started to make a serious impact on police department budgets. Cities are scrambling to deal with the loss of tax revenue. These budget shortfalls are being addressed by cutting services. In an environment where cities and even states are on the verge of bankruptcy, it is hard to justify the added expense of branding for the recruitment of new employees. A brand takes money not only to create, but to maintain as well. A department would have to eliminate

expenses in other areas to fund a marketing plan that may not have a return on the investment.

Even if money was available for marketing and it was successful in bringing in new applicants, the department would have to live up to the brand. In the retail world, failure to do so is considered false advertising. Solutions to budgetary shortfalls are not always popular, nor void of political gain at the expense of the organization. This impacts retention of employees. Members of Generation X as a group are not as loyal as the Baby Boomers, and they are expected to change jobs seven times on average in their careers (Orrick, 2008). This compounds the problem of retention. Trust in the organization's brand is important because, without it, employees become disillusioned and find work elsewhere.

A frozen or reduced budget means that measures such as raises, benefits, and training can be eliminated or reduced. A laundry list of negatives is not useful for recruiting new employees. This creates a challenge that administrators must overcome.

Although the current economic and unemployment outlook for the next two years is not very positive, departments will still need to replace the Baby Boomers leaving the workforce. Higher unemployment will force new job seekers to seek out recruiters. New positions may not be filled, but each department has a minimum staffing level. Political leaders will be hard pressed to cut budgets enough to impact public safety to the point that services can no longer be supported. Delaying hiring could create large budget impacts in the future years when growth does resume and staffing levels are not sufficient enough to meet the calls for service. It is also not all about the money. What it is about is recognizing that departments will have to market themselves to attract the

best employees. A department with a strong brand will be able to attract new officers who recognize it as an employer of choice (Orrick, 2008). Departments with a strong brand could save their money for recruitment to cover other budgetary shortfalls.

A component of this brand will have to include new ideas that do not impact the budget. One of those ideas is to use technology, such as recruiting through websites. The International Association of the Chiefs of Police has partnered with the Bureau of Justice Assistance within the Department of Justice to create a new web-based recruiting site. Discoverpolicing.org is a central platform for recruiting nationwide. This no-cost option is part of an initiative to increase awareness for law enforcement careers, and to take recruiting into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Kohlhepp & Phillips, 2009).

Another idea to attract and retain new members is to understand traits of Generations X and Y who are coming to an agency for the first time. Practices like mentoring, career development and education, and implementing strong orientation programs may be of little or no cost (Orrick, 2008). Allowing employees to flex their schedules can be an instrument for recruiting and boosting job satisfaction and productivity (Golden, 2001). The use of compensatory time can have very little impact on the budget while being a perceived benefit for Generations X and Y who favor time off for personal time.

## **CONCLUSION**

At any given time in history, there are typically three to four generations in the workforce. Due to influences from society, family, and the environment, they develop certain traits that are shared across the group. The teenage years appear to be the time in which the group personality is established. There are exceptions to the rule,

though, and research has not been able to establish firm birth dates. The current generations in the work force are the Baby Boomers, who are individuals born from around 1946 to 1964, Generation Xers, who were born from 1965 to 1979, and Generation Yers, who were born from 1980 through the early 2000's (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

The issue of recruiting and retaining employees has become a major issue for law enforcement agencies. This issue will continue to be problematic unless agencies become less ridged and more adaptable in how they market their brands. Agencies can no longer sit back and wait for applicants to walk through their doors. They must recognize that each generation has an identity.

Successfully marketing their brands will allow agencies to recruit the best qualified people no matter what their generation labels maybe. A marketing plan should key in on certain characteristics of a generation. When targeting someone from Generation Y, a plan should focus on his or her desire to volunteer and give back to the community. Organizations that are actively involved in their communities and are known for this will have a more appealing brand. When marketing to someone from Generation X, a department must highlight how challenging and exciting police work can be. The opportunities to grow and advance are key factors that are selling points. The generation who has been leading many departments is starting to retire. Boomers still have much to offer and can be great mentors for Generation X and Y. As mentors, they can provide a wealth of organizational knowledge that will otherwise be lost when they retire. Those Boomers who retire from larger departments often re-enter the job

market as chiefs for smaller agencies, in part due to the economy or the desire to be in the executive role.

Adopting the marketing principle of branding will allow an agency to recruit the best possible candidates. Technology is changing at a much faster pace today than it was 20 years ago. In the past, this allowed for the assimilation of new generations into the work force. The result was that the organization did not have to change in regards to how they recruited new employees. However, agencies now have a decision to make: they can sit back and continue to use existing strategies that are not working for filling vacancies, or they can learn the demographics about the individuals that they wish to recruit. Police agencies that do not successfully develop, maintain, and market a brand will continue to fight for what is left over.

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