

## How To Design Programs for Millennials

By Aleah Vinick and Rachel Abbott

**M**illennials are famously underrepresented in museum and historic site attendance and membership, and because of this, many museum professionals are working to better meet the needs of this audience. This is certainly the case at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) where recent experiences with program development and audience evaluation have led to a set of institutional recommendations, as well as program development guidelines.

Peter Meyers, courtesy of MNHS



### Who Are Millennials?

Millennials are people born between 1981 and 2000. In this document, we also call them “young adults.”

## Why Should Museums Care about Millennials?

To say that millennials are a hot topic doesn't do justice to the flood of market research and think pieces focused on them in recent years. Millennials make up approximately 25 percent of the U.S. population and have an estimated consumer purchasing power of \$10 trillion. The first generation of digital natives and the most racially diverse group in American history (one in four millennials is a person of color), they challenge cultural institutions to create programming that is engaging and relevant. It is important to consider millennials in museum programming not only because they are the largest generation of our time, but also because they are driving buying and philanthropic behaviors across generations.<sup>1</sup>

## What Do We Know about Millennials?

Although it's difficult to generalize about such a large and varied group, data suggest some shared behaviors and characteristics.

**Millennials Are Technologically Exceptional.** They rely on technology for socializing, giving, and purchasing. As early as 2010, 75 percent of millennials identified as active users of social networking sites, creating buzz by posting videos, tweeting, and sharing links. Millennials also use social media to become well-informed consumers, tracking and advocating for their favorite events, causes, and brands. Although they tend to donate in smaller amounts than older generations, they can be consistent with their contributions when they understand and care about the organizations they are supporting. In fact, researchers note that the success of crowdfunding applications such as Kickstarter and GiveMN is due largely to their popularity with millennials.<sup>2</sup>

**Millennials Are Social Adventurers.** They prioritize experience and interaction over things: more than three in four would choose to spend money on a desirable experience or event over buying something.



Brady Willette, courtesy of MNHS

The Minnesota Historical Society partners with numerous community groups for its various outreach events. For the monthly *St. Paul Welcome Hat* event, MNHS partners with the group *St. Paul Hello*. Aimed at newcomers to Minnesota, the event fosters inclusion by showcasing community resources and offering each guest a warm, faux-fur lined hat.

Among millennials, 77 percent say some of their best memories are from attending an event or live experience. Given their familiarity with social media platforms to document and share these experiences, it is not surprising that many millennials report that FOMO (the fear of missing out) influences their social behaviors.<sup>3</sup>

## Minnesota Historical Society Millennial Programs

The Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) has had some success reaching millennials through public programs. *RetroRama* was a large (up to 1,200 people) annual event that ran from 2007 to 2014 and featured cocktails, an original fashion show inspired by MNHS collections, and other experiences to create a lighthearted, see-and-be-seen atmosphere. *RetroRama* consistently attracted a nontraditional audience: more than half were nonmembers, and 40-50 percent of attendees were age thirty-nine or under.

Another program, *History of Hip*, uses a familiar bar as the setting for an informal lecture series that explores the historic origins of trending cultural phenomena, from tattoos to video games to mid-century

Don't confuse millennials' interest in socializing with shallowness.

design. Speakers are external partners who often bring their own fan base with them, creating an intersection of audiences that increases the reach of both the speaker and MNHS, and fosters new connections. The program generally sells out, and organizational costs are minimal. MNHS covers its hard costs, and about 40-50 percent of attendees are millennials.

In 2011, MNHS's Alexander Ramsey House developed *History Happy Hour* as an informal lecture series with drinks and snacks, held after work on the last Thursday of the month. The program includes a balance of structure and autonomy, allowing time for socializing with fellow guests and with the speaker. *History Happy Hour* generally sells out in advance and gets excellent marks on exit surveys. However, since April 2012, 62 percent of program survey respondents have been over age forty. Despite the number of older attendees, program coordinators consider these series a success at serving millennials and at developing millennial awareness of MNHS.<sup>4</sup>

Most ticketed MNHS programs (including *History Happy Hour* and *History of Hip*) draw a much bigger segment of MNHS's older member demographic than millennials. Though it's difficult to know for sure why the programs haven't garnered even higher millennial attendance, anecdotally, program manag-

ers hear complaints about lack of advertising and high ticket prices. Delving deeper, it seems clear that people who have already made the commitment to become members of MNHS are more prepared to devote an evening to an MNHS program and pay an additional fee to participate.

### In Summary

Programs at MNHS that have done well with millennials have a few things in common: they are social, flexible, and occur after work hours on weeknights. Programs at MNHS that draw the largest proportion of millennials still don't draw a majority of millennials. The majority is a traditional MNHS member audience, and we consider a program that draws half or more nonmember attendees a successful first step to attracting a new audience.



Sean Smuda, courtesy of MNHS

The Minnesota Historical Society's *RetroRama* fashion show offered designs inspired by the society's collection; the event also featured photo opportunities, shopping, refreshments, and access to its exhibits.

These case studies also bring up questions about how we define these programs.

- Is any program a millennial program if a certain number of millennials attend?
- Is a millennial program unsuccessful if nonmillennials are interested too?
- If these programs are attracting a broader audience than the millennial demographic, are we actually programming for a psychographic rather than a demographic?

## Demographic or Psychographic?

A study by the Pew Research Center shows increased online traffic and cell phone use among seniors age sixty-five and older. Today, one in three online seniors uses social networking sites, and seven in ten seniors own a cell phone. As older generations adopt the technological behaviors of their children and grandchildren, their values and expectations about shopping, giving, and cultural experiences might also begin to change. Are millennials influencing other generations, or are so-called millennial traits simply a sign of an increase in a social-adventure-seeking psychographic?<sup>5</sup>

## Millennial Research at the Minnesota Historical Society

In 2015, MNHS staff undertook an evaluation project to better understand the organization's millennial users. Research included intercept surveys at MNHS events, focus groups exploring the cultural behaviors of millennials in the Twin Cities, and a cross-departmental Team Based Inquiry process to develop recommendations for better serving this audience. In many cases, the research confirmed common conclusions about this age group and lessons learned through MNHS's programming experience.

- Millennials look for and expect good value.
- Millennials want programs to be social and flexible.
- Social media and word of mouth are important promotional tools that in many cases are thought of interchangeably.

- Millennials invest in institutions they care about, where it's clear what their money buys, both for the cause and for them.

Based on this feedback, MNHS staff revised their survey for millennial programs to include questions that relate to the social experience and the value of programs. At the Minnesota History Center, MNHS staff are also developing a regularly scheduled ticketed series for young adults and improving offerings on Tuesday nights, when admission to the museum is free. Staff members are also exploring the possibility of establishing a millennial steering committee that would help establish new strategies for promotion, membership, and development campaigns.

This millennial research, as well as MNHS staff experience managing programs that serve (or are designed to serve) millennials, provides the basis for the following program development guidelines.

## Guidelines for Designing Millennial Programs

### Content

- Ground the program in content, not just experience. Don't confuse millennials' interest in socializing with shallowness. This is an audience that cares about learning new things and being engaged. Our intercept survey showed that the top reasons for attending events were "interest in topic" and "interest in a unique experience."
- Look to social media and trusted advisors to find topics that might resonate. Think about current events and how your mission might intersect with them. Think about this audience's characteristics: a passion for social experiences, adventure, and self-expression. For example, a program on the history of tattoos was one of the organization's most successful events in terms of millennial attendance.



Guests applaud the speaker at *History Happy Hour*, an informal lecture series in the historic setting of the Alexander Ramsey House.

Peter Meyers, courtesy of MNHS



Sean Smuda, courtesy of MNHS

Vintage clothing vendors sell their wares at *RetroRama* events, another example of partnering with other organizations to attract new visitors.

### *Design*

- Create a social experience. Millennials value opportunities to share, express opinions, and visit with friends. Find ways to actively engage guests, and provide time for informal questions and conversations. Most will be attending with a friend or partner, or as part of a group. Provide hashtags so your guests can share photos and comments on social media, which will also help spread the word about your event.
- Use a flexible format. Millennials like to “party hop” and attend multiple social functions in one evening. Programs with a firm start and end time can dissuade younger people from attending. As one of our focus group attendees observed, “I’m more likely to go if it’s a shorter program within a more flexible schedule.”
- Play up the uniqueness. Create a sense of urgency by providing an unusual experience (after dark! sneak peek! behind the scenes!) that may only be available for a limited time or for a limited number of participants. Tap the potential of FOMO, or the fear of missing out.

### *Partners*

- Work with external partners for both content and promotion; association with others is powerful.

While millennials do seek out new experiences, they want endorsement from an entity they trust, be it a college radio station or a local brewery. One focus group participant put it this way: “Something recognizable...puts a familiar name next to the unfamiliar thing.”

### *Timing*

- Happy hour is your sweet spot. Plan events between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. on a weekday. Guests can attend on the way home from work, but it is also not too late to prevent them from doing something else afterward.
- Because happy hour is a popular time for older audiences, too, build in flexibility for (younger) last minute ticket buyers, who may decide on short notice to attend.

### *Price*

- Offer programming that provides clear value for the money you charge. Millennials are optimistic about their financial futures and stand to build wealth through their careers, but they also came of age during a financial crisis. Thus, they are strategic about their expendable income. As a focus group participant put it, “I can do the \$15 lecture, or I can do events where I can also get food, drinks, and have friends for \$15.”

## Case Studies

**A**s our research and experience have shown, programming for millennials is often more effective when partners and advisors play an essential role in program design. Two recent programs illustrate different, but equally successful, approaches to these partnerships.

### *Saint Paul Welcome Hat*

**F**unded with a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, this initiative delivers a series of information-fair-style events to show off Saint Paul's many amenities to new residents. In addition to (not embarrassing) ice-breaker activities, fun swag, and food samples from area restaurants, each guest is presented with a warm faux-fur hat and Minnesota pro-tips (flash cards on local lingo and customs). The programs are a partnership between the Minnesota History Center and Saint Paul Hello, a group dedicated to making Saint Paul a friendlier place. The first two events have generated between 150 and 200 guests each. The partnership with Saint Paul Hello has encouraged program staff to work toward making the history center even more inclusive of newcomers. Saint Paul Hello volunteer ambassadors in branded green tee-shirts, oversized wayfinding signs, local food, and live music create a welcoming vibe that's been well received by guests.

Although survey results aren't in for the second event, the first event's results show that the program hit its goals in terms of audience demographics: 60 percent of guests were between ages eighteen and thirty-nine, and 76 percent

were attending their first event by the Minnesota Historical Society. Guests' observations were generally positive and appreciative: "I have never felt SO welcome in any Metropolitan Area. When I lived in California, it was more of a 'there's enough people here already' mentality towards new residents."

### *The Spooky Side of Suburbia Happy Hour*

**T**o develop a millennial-friendly event themed to the Minnesota History Center's new "Suburbia" exhibit, we engaged the Minnesota History Center's 2015 fellows, an intern group that conducts in-depth research and implements other longer-term summer projects with the museum. We settled on a free happy hour event, riffing on pop culture's fascination with creepy, weird aspects of suburban life. The fellows had input on all aspects of the event, including the DJ, collections tours, photo opportunities, makeup demos, film clips, and pop-up "food court." Attendee numbers were impressive: more than four hundred guests attended, and photos on Instagram (using the hashtag #SpookySuburbs) show young, excited participants. Additionally, history center staff collected new contacts with a younger following to tap for future programming.



At its *Spooky Side of Suburbia* happy hour, MNHS offered photo opportunities and a hashtag (#SpookySuburbs), so that guests could share their experiences with friends via social media.

### Promotion

- Use word of mouth. Note that “word of mouth” can definitely include email and social media. Millennials look at trusted friends’ activities to determine whether “their people” are interested in attending a particular program.
- Promote events by collaborating with trusted external partners.
- Use the program itself as a promotional tool and your guests as promotional partners by creating opportunities to share images and comments during and after the program. Designate hashtags so that guests can share what they’re up to, and plan a few places for photo opportunities. Also, remember to include consistent language about membership on all printed materials.

### Don’t underestimate the power of vibes

- Prep your staff and volunteers to be welcoming. A guest at an MNHS “millennial program” told the program manager about her discomfort around a volunteer who seemed unfriendly; for nontraditional audiences, it is vital that the energy at the program be warm and inviting.

### Get advice

- Seek input on your ideas. An advisory group made up of millennial members, visitors, and/or supporters can be a great way to get external perspective on all of the above.

### Conclusion

While these guidelines are based on audience research and some program management experience, they are certainly not exhaustive or fully tested. The future of millennial programming at the Minnesota Historical Society is still uncertain, and we will continue to learn about this audience as we move forward. Trial and error is an important part of any efforts at audience engagement, and building relationships with young adults can be an endeavor that creates rewards for decades to come.

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### Resources

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## Engaging Beyond the Program

Developing the millennial audience is just like developing any nontraditional museum audience: programs can't do it alone. Public programs can be an important entry point for millennials at museums and historic sites, but cannot sustain engagement without supportive marketing, membership, and development strategies. Successful models at other museums illustrate the necessary components of a long-term relationship with the audience. They include strong, targeted marketing (including a consistent voice on social media); flexible or temporary membership options; and short-term, cause-focused development campaigns.<sup>6</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Many studies note millennials' buying power. See, for example, Micah Solomon, "2015 is the Year of the Millennial: Five Traits These 80 Million Consumers Share," *Forbes* (blog), December 29, 2014, [www.forbes.com/sites/michaolson/2014/12/29/5-traits-that-define-the-80-million-millennial-customers-coming-your-way/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/michaolson/2014/12/29/5-traits-that-define-the-80-million-millennial-customers-coming-your-way/).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Taylor and Scott Keeter, eds. "Millennials: Confident, Connected, Open to Change," *Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends* (blog), February 2010, [www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf), chapter 3; Norty Cohen, "Is Your Strategy Showing? Truth, Justice, and the American Way," *2015 Moosylvania Millennial Report* (website), <http://moosylvania.com/millennials/>; Cara Newton, "Millennials: The Giving Generation?" *USA Today: College* (blog), December 11, 2013, [www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/12/11/millennials-most-giving/3962781/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/12/11/millennials-most-giving/3962781/); and S. Slade Sundar, "Six Millennial Fundraising Lessons from Kickstarter," *SladeSundar.com* (blog), [www.sladesundar.com/6-millennial-fundraising-lessons-from-kickstarter/](http://www.sladesundar.com/6-millennial-fundraising-lessons-from-kickstarter/). The above referenced *USA Today* article discusses the impact of crowdfunding, while S. Slade Sundar offers an interesting analysis of why it's effective. According to one survey, 52 percent of millennials were interested in monthly contributions to causes they care about. Derrick Feldman, "2013 Millennial Impact Report," *Millennial Impact* (website), <http://casefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/MillennialImpactReport-2013.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "Millennials: Fueling the Experience Economy," *Eventbrite* (website), 2014, [http://eventbrite-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/marketing/Millennials\\_Research/Gen\\_PR\\_Final.pdf](http://eventbrite-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/marketing/Millennials_Research/Gen_PR_Final.pdf); and Blake Morgan, "NOwnership, No Problem: Why Millennials Value Experiences over Owning Things," *Forbes* (blog), June 1, 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2015/06/01/nownershipnoproblem-nowners-millennials-value-experiences-over-ownership/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2015/06/01/nownershipnoproblem-nowners-millennials-value-experiences-over-ownership/). Morgan uses research findings to argue that millennials value access over ownership. Shared cars and the success of Airbnb bear out this conviction.

<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the *History Happy Hour* audience, see Rachel Abbott, "Success with a Twist: The Unexpected Benefit of 'Risky' Programming," *AASLH: Views from the Porch* (blog), July 22, 2014, <http://blogs.aaslh.org/success-with-a-twist-the-unexpected-benefit-of-risky-programming/>.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Smith, "Older Adults and Technology Use," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science, and Tech* (blog), April 3, 2014, [www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/](http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/).

<sup>6</sup> Though his conclusions are supported by similar efforts at museums including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, William Cary's engagement strategies at the Portland Art Museum lay out a clear route to cross-institutional engagement efforts with millennials. William Cary, "Millennials and Museums: Strategies for Short-Term Engagement and Long-Term Success," November 21, 2014, [www.slideshare.net/WilliamCary/millennials-and-museums-strategies-for-shortterm-engagement-and-longterm-success](http://www.slideshare.net/WilliamCary/millennials-and-museums-strategies-for-shortterm-engagement-and-longterm-success).