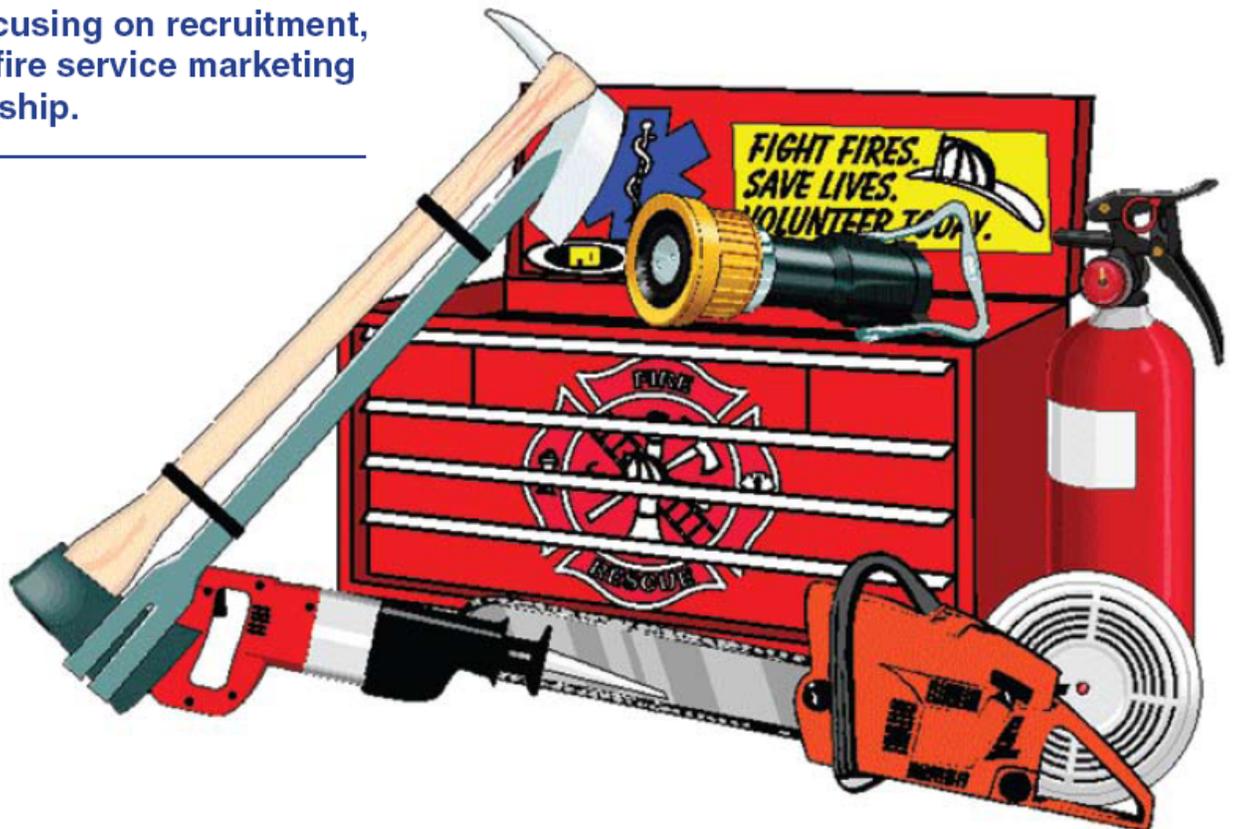


RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT:

From the X-Box to the Box Alarm

This article is one in a series of toolkits focusing on recruitment, retention, fire service marketing and leadership.



As I travel around the country talking with other firefighters, a commonly recurring theme of our chat is the future of the volunteer fire service.

The conversation always comes around to the topic of today's firefighters and the next generation of firefighters. Some "more experienced" firefighters (notice I didn't use the term older) share that they don't understand the "kids" coming into the fire service today.

The veterans don't think today's recruits share the same values as those who are currently leading us. And they certainly don't have the same appreciation for the traditions and discipline of the fire service. Community service is not in their blood as it is in ours. Or at least that's their complaint.

The first question I ask is: Whose fault is that? Have we failed as parents, role models and mentors?

My second question is a more important challenge: Who better? Who better to re-instill the values of the fire service that have made it and America great? Who better to bring back the principles our communities need?

I then ask you: If not us, who?

The fire service was built on the values of pride, honor, loyalty, trustworthiness, integrity and community service. Last time I checked, that's exactly why the American public trusts nobody, no other profession more than they trust firefighters – nobody.

When I talk about the target audience for new recruits, I typically break it down like this:

1. 14-18 years olds: Explorers and Junior Firefighters – the future of the volunteer fire service. Figure out how to win and keep them and you will keep them forever.
2. 18-25 year olds: Let's face it; the bull work of what we do is a young person's job. This demographic has always been and will always be the backbone of the fire service.
3. 25-40 Years old: The lost years. Think about what traditionally happens during this period in a person's life: marriage, careers, families, home ownership, etc. However, if we can snag them early enough, we just might be able to keep them clinging on as contributing members during this personal and professional growth phase.
4. 40+: This demo includes settled homeowners; their kids are growing to an age of independence; focused on giving back; perhaps even looking for an outlet – or just an excuse to get out of the house.

Depending on what or who you read, it's estimated that the current generation, Generation Y, is at this moment between 14 and 27 years old.



Call them Gen Y; Millennials; WebGens; NextGens; Generation Whine; Baby Busters; Nexters; Echo Boomers or whatever you like.

Understand them or not, like them or not – they are the future of the fire service. The reality is that there is no other generation from a parallel universe about to swoop down and save the volunteer fire service. They are it. Get over it.

According to Dr. Renee Downey-Hart's matrix of generation gaps, never before have four generations been in the workplace at the same time. From traditionalists born after the turn of the century, to Baby Boomers and Generation X, and now Gen Y – these four generations create both challenges and opportunities for organizations looking to recruit and retain them.

Dr. Downey-Hart's presentation emphasizes the importance of building "bench strength" as many Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, and even some Gen Xers are about to step out of the workplace.

Some could argue that their pending retirements are an opportunity for them to get involved in volunteering. Realistically though, they're probably not going to be the interior firefighters we need to adequately staff our apparatus. That's not to say that there isn't plenty for them to do on and behind the scene.

Thus, we need to embrace Gen Yers as our future. To understand them we need to get to know them better. To know them, we need to surround ourselves with them.

Here's what I understand of them from my limited research with people a lot smarter than I am (which doesn't take much.)

They are often characterized as a self-entitled bunch of slackers who don't want to pay their dues – not exactly the model we've promoted in the fire service for the last couple of hundred years.

I refer to them as the I-Generation or the Jackass Generation. "I" is for Individual because they often ask "What's in it for me." But they're also independent thinkers who have been taught to collaborate and work in teams (Hey, maybe we could learn something from these punks.)

I use the term Jackass Generation only because of the TV show they watch with the title of the same name. Their risk-taker mentality is proliferated by modern media. We just need to figure out how to harness their youthful energy and teach them the living benefits of calculated risk management – and the "death benefits" associated with miscalculating those risks.

They are also an untapped powerhouse of potential. They are future oriented, tech savvy, multi-tasking young adults who are ready to contribute NOW! Their apparent restlessness is tempered with their ability to remain optimistic in difficult times, a trait that could come in handy given our current financial climate.

They are the most socially engaged generation since the 1960s. Don't think so? Did you happen to pay attention to how President Obama got elected?

What troubles those of us who used to be card-carrying members of the 18-25 year old demographic (my card expired) is that they don't engage with society the way we do. We do it face-to-face, by calling on the phone or by "popping in" on each other.

They engage themselves on-line. They can tap out a message on their cell phones faster than you can change the station with your TV remote.

Looking for the fountain of youth for your fire department? Try Google, Yahoo, Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. That's where you'll find today's recruits. They know more about what their friends are doing than two cops on an overnight stake-out. They are always in touch. Always communicating. Just not the way we're accustomed to or comfortable with. Nonetheless, if they're not coming to us, we need to go to where they are to get their attention.

I'm reading a book titled "Managing Generation Y" by Dr. Carolyn A. Martin and Bruce Tulgan. The book was written eight years ago but its observations still ring true today. They refer to Gen Yers as the most education focused generation in history, leading a new wave of volunteerism.

Does anyone else smell opportunity? They embrace socio-economic, environmental and community problems. Our challenge is to help them understand why ours is a cause worth taking up.

So how do we get them away from the X-Box long enough to respond to the box alarm? Lucky for us, Dr. Downey-Hart states that they highly value meaningful development opportunities and they're full of fresh insight on how best to reach their peers. This might be tough to swallow, but they have the answers. Ask them how to best recruit each other and their friends.

Dr. Downey-Hart tells us the good news is that they trust people over 30 and welcome the chance to partner with older, more experienced colleagues and bosses (mentors) and intergenerational teamwork carries particular promise in tough times. Combining the tech savvy and fresh insight of Generation Y with the experience and perspective of the older generations can be especially fruitful.

They are ripe for the picking. Behind their "I don't appear to care" attitude, they are actually starved for strong leadership, mentors and role models. A recent study by Deloitte Consultants suggests that we redesign our rewards systems to encourage the rapid development of Gen Y talent and at the same time create new incentives for seasoned veterans to act as mentors to these young adults.

I've said before that the survival and success of the volunteer fire service depends on our ability to create *more* opportunities – for *more* people – to volunteer *less* time.

Gen Yers have lots of time on their hands if we offer them the right opportunities to quench their thirst for satisfying training and teamwork. What we don't have is a lot of time for us to figure out what makes them tick.

We know what the challenge is. The only remaining question is: What are you going to do about it?

For a comprehensive offering of R&R resources, visit my blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com. Click or call if you're looking for ideas or want to volunteer your own. I'd love to hear your experiences.

Let me know how I can help.

Until next time... "Stay safe. Train often."

Tiger Schmittendorf is chairman of FASNY's Recruitment and Retention Committee and serves the County of Erie Department of Emergency Services (Buffalo NY) as Deputy Fire Coordinator. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department's membership and helped net 525+ new volunteers countywide. He is a Nationally Certified Fire Instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Visit his blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com.

Tiger Schmittendorf will join Ret. Phoenix Chief Alan Brunacini and J. Gordon Routely in a fire service roundtable discussion at the FASNY Convention in Niagara Falls, NY on Thursday-August 20, 2009.