

Bridging

BY JOHN FILIPPELLI

For kitchen and bath professionals seeking a way to boost sales, the difference in age between themselves and their clients may truly make all the difference.

In fact, understanding these generational nuances – especially in today's economic climate – will not only offer greater insight into their purchasing behaviors, but just may ensure that your firm lives to a ripe, old age.

These are the sentiments of Robert W. Wendover, managing director for the Aurora, CO-based Center for Generational Studies, who hosted the seminar "Hey Dude! Managing Age Diversity in Today's Workplace," at this year's K/BIS in Las Vegas, NV.

"There are obvious differences from one age group to another – such as where they come from, their prevailing beliefs and their outlook on life – and that is where a lot of the communication disconnects and misunderstandings come from, such

as [the perceptions about] work ethics and skills," he explains. "First, if it is an older client, we need to make sure what their goals are, to see if they are going to stay in the house for a long time or if they just need a quick fix. For a younger client, we have to qualify them and make sure they are educated [about the process] to determine if they will be able to work with a firm of our level."

Todd Wiley, NKBA member, and designer for Grand Rapids, MI-based Dimensions Kitchens & Baths, offers his approach:

"The key is finding something that is important to them. Try to keep a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the industry – and in the world – through



more than a Baby Boomer. So, an older Baby Boomer may perceive them as being rude, but it has nothing to do with being rude; it is more a philosophy that 'life's too short, so why would I spend 30 minutes getting to know this salesperson?'"

Of course, the caveat to this is to not make assumptions about a client's preferences, Rowley adds.

"[Some people] might wonder whether a young person has enough money, but I don't make any assumptions. I just make sure that they qualify for our services," he says. "You do that by talking to them and making sure that they are in a position physically and financially to go forward with the project."

Multi-generational households can also impact a dealer's sales approach, Wendover notes, but he adds that this may not be the case in the future.

"We're not going to see the same 'Sandwich Generation' in 20 years that we are seeing now,

because the lifespan of the average Baby Boomer is going to be longer than the war generation. My generation is not going to retire the way my parents did."

Catherine Armstrong-Moore, CKD and vice president for Stuart, FL-based Stylecraft Fine Cabinetry, suggests this tactic: "The idea is to find out who has the purchasing power. If the senior has the purchasing power, the junior might be able to influence them, [and] I have seen it happen both ways."

But, there is one similarity that these affluent age groups all possess, according to Barbara Geller, president of The Place for Kitchens in Boca Raton, FL.

"It's just like boys with their

*Leveraging age diversity
– of clients and staff – can
be useful for dealers looking
to boost sales.*

as [the perceptions about] work ethics and skills," he explains.

Barry Rowley, CKD, and owner of Carmel Kitchens & Baths, based in Carmel, CA, adds that this is an issue his firm considers daily.

"There are really two ele-

television or some media. That will help create a personal connection."

Wendover chimes in: "[For instance,] Gen Xers are willing to ask questions. They are willing to get in a salesperson's face much

the Gap

toys – they like the newest and shiniest appliances,” she offers.

Wendover adds that the best way for dealers to connect with their clients is to become them.

“[For instance], stand in your showroom and think like a 30-year-old, then ask yourself, ‘What do they see?’” he advises.

BEST BEHAVIOR

Although Wendover cites Gen X as the major new buyer in the kitchen and bath sector, he also believes that it is prudent for dealers to better understand each generation's intricacies. But, what should dealers expect from each generation, and how can they use that information to their advantage?

He explains: “The Millennials (Gen Y) are following the Baby Boomer spending pattern – which I personally find troubling.” To that end, he cites that people are increasingly buying houses with no money down and 4%, interest-only loans.

He continues: “Xers are more careful. If they were to do that, they would have a back-up plan in case someone loses their job or there was a disaster. If they are going to renovate a kitchen or a bath that costs \$12,000, then they already have the money in the bank to pay for it, rather than putting it on plastic.”

Heather Goode, CKD, and owner of Santa Cruz, CA-based Santa Cruz Kitchen & Bath, Inc., agrees: “Most Gen Xers visit at least three other places, go online, watch HGTV and ask three friends [before visiting us]. So, they are usually informed – but just enough to be dangerous. This makes them a little tough to deal with and forces us to stay on top of new products and applications.”

“So, if [say, Gen Xers] are look-

Generational Themes of Consumers

Generation Y

- Technology has all the answers.
- They will demonstrate respect only after being treated with respect.
- They earn money for the purpose of immediate consumption.
- Clear and consistent expectations are essential.

Generation X

- Save, save, save.
- Clear and consistent expectations are essential.
- Work to live, rather than live to work.
- A sense of contribution while having fun will keep Gen Xers productive.

Baby Boomers

- Willing to go into debt, betting on future income.
- Team- and process-oriented, sometimes to the detriment of results.
- A general sense of optimism regardless of what happens.
- Strive for convenience and personal satisfaction.

Matures

- Patience. They are willing to wait for the delayed reward.
- Thriftiness.
- Honor and integrity are critical parts of their being.
- Respectful of authority, even if it sometimes frustrates them.

ing for faucets, they will have gone to Kohler.com and Delta.com and many other competitors, and will have compared,” Wendover notes.

“Gen X and Gen Y also have certain things that are important to them. For instance, they might put form in front of function, while the Baby Boomers and seniors definitely put function before form,” adds Wiley.

But, there is more to the story, Wendover warns. “If you take a 55-year-old salesperson who’s been selling for 30 years [and pair him/her with a customer of a younger generation], you suddenly have crossed purposes, because the salesperson is trained to ask what you are looking for, and these customers don’t want to be asked 20 questions. They just want to know

▲ Understanding the philosophical differences among generations can go a long way toward closing the sale.

if you have an item and the cost.”

In his article “The Psychographics of the Emerging Consumer,” in the July, 2005 edition of the *Western Reporter*, Wendover offers this description of Gen X purchasing tactics: “Xers have found that breaking a salesperson’s rhythm is sometimes an effective strategy for obtaining the information, insights, or even pricing they desire. After all, sales is a game to be won, isn’t it?”

Therefore, he says, offer Gen Xers information that is direct, accessible and devoid of hyperbole.

Goode sees patterns in the Baby

Boomers’ approach, as well.

“They are more relationship- and referral-based. They are also, generally, more trusting and more adept at dealing with issues that come up during the process. They expect top-notch service and professionalism – and are willing to pay for it,” she describes.

Rowley agrees: “I think the older generation is used to paying for services, and they are used to hiring professionals, such as designers and landscape architects. They understand the process, and I think the younger generation – even if they have the money – need to be educated as to what they are paying for.”

“The Boomers want to be the first one on the block to have a Hummer, while Gen Xers don’t really do that – they tend to be more pragmatic,” Wendover notes.

Armstrong-Moore continues: “In terms of the senior client, I think they need more guidance as to what goes best together.”

Wiley concludes, with an optimistic outlook: “If you can get a customer talking about their lives, then a comfort level is achieved, and it makes the business end of the relationship almost assumed.”

USE THE FORCE

According to Wendover, one of the best ways to make this connection is to arm your firm with as diverse a staff as possible.

“I advise dealers and retailers that they need to have a multi-generational sales force,” he says.

“How a 50-something relates to a 30-something is different because they have different life experiences,” he says, adding: “By comparison, if you have a salesperson who is 30 years old, he/she can relate to that customer on the same level.”

“If that age group [Gen X]

SELLING STRATEGIES

has the budget, I would probably hand them to one of my junior designers because he/she would be on the same level with them, more than I would," says Armstrong-Moore.

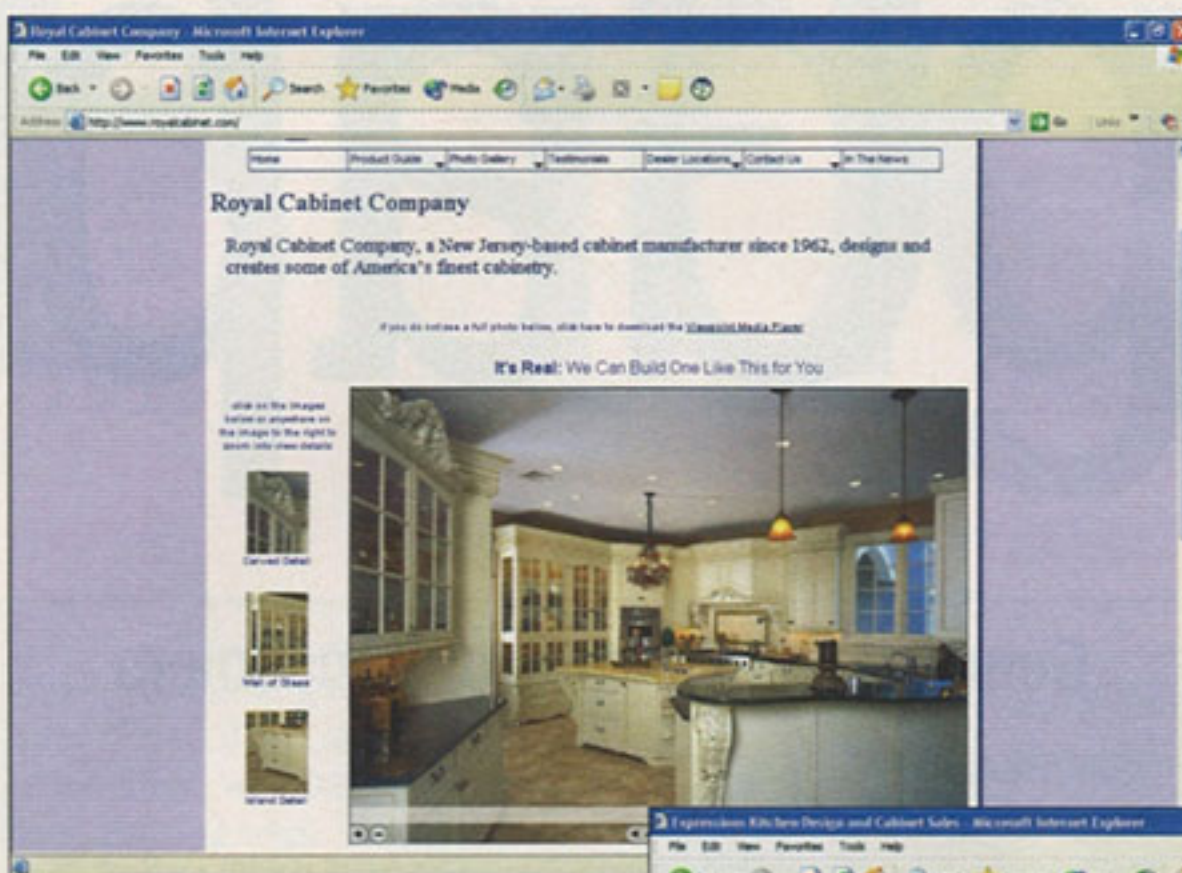
She continues: "He/she also has similar [insight into] what they have, so there is an immediate understanding there – and I think that has relevance."

Rowley agrees, noting that his current staff was also built on the premise of reaching clients of different ages.

"It became apparent to me that we needed younger people in here to appeal to that segment of the market, as well as to generate new ideas and new energy," he offers. "I soon noticed that we were getting younger clientele, which I probably wouldn't have gotten. Maybe I would have dismissed them, or maybe I wouldn't have made the connection needed at this price point."

He continues: "Now we have clients in their 30s, which we didn't have for years!"

For Wendover, results such as Rowley's are no surprise. "In my experience, a lot of family businesses and smaller businesses don't have the same [issues as larger firms], which means that younger people coming in can have more of an impact, because there are fewer



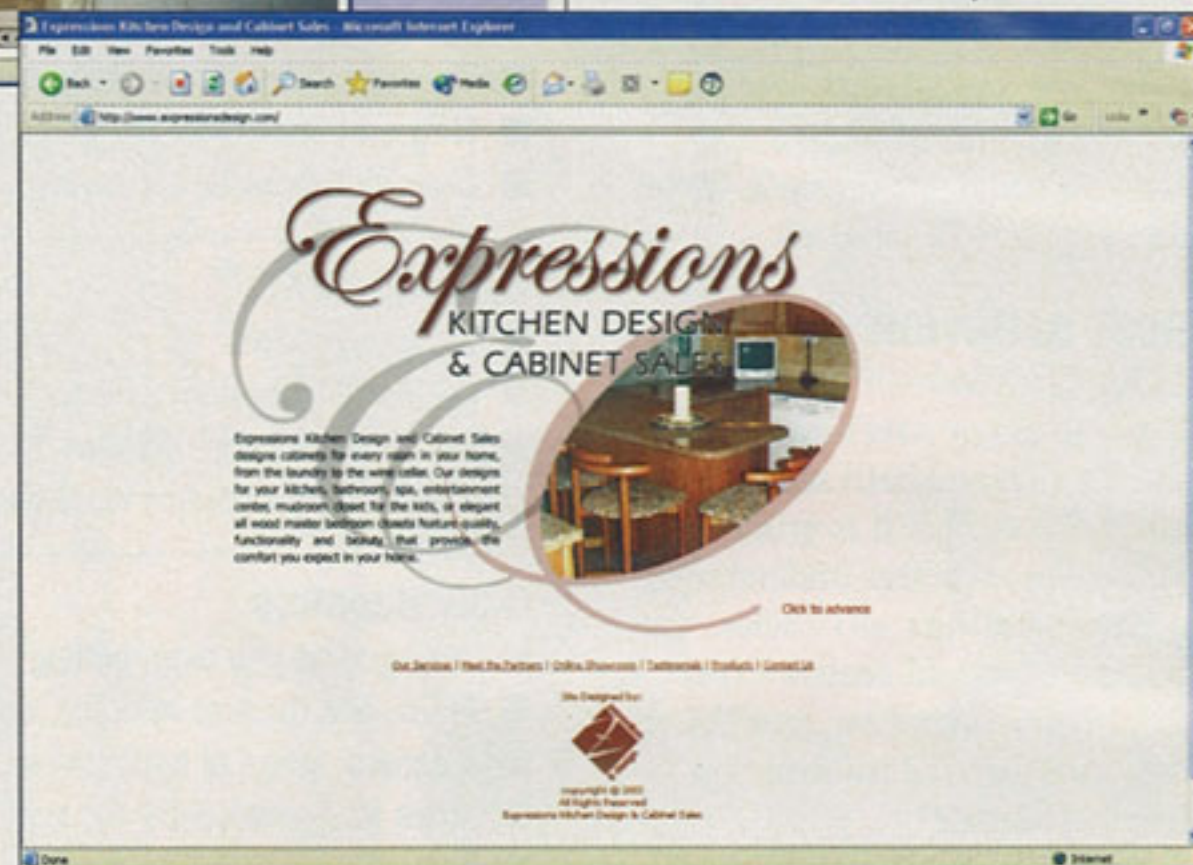
people overall," he says.

"A multi-generational sales force is helpful. I am amazed by how many people don't know where their customers come from or what their customers' attitudes are [and how to respond accordingly]," he observes.

STAYING CONNECTED

Another way for dealers to connect with clients and prospects of all ages is to ensure that their own and their manufacturers' Web sites are better connected with one another, Wendover notes.

"This will require dealers to go to their manufacturers and demand that [they create] accessible and



easy-to-navigate Web sites, which will turn business back to them."

Armstrong-Moore agrees, not-

According to Robert W. Wendover, managing director for the Aurora, CO-based Center for Generational Studies, dealers and manufacturers should not only create Web sites that are accessible and easy-to-navigate, but also ones that easily link to each other.

Accessible Products Offer Upsell Opportunities, Dealers Report

Once reserved for seniors, accessible products and layouts are creating greater upsell opportunities, say dealers interviewed by KBDN.

"If you are a designer, you should always be doing Universal Design. It is an automatic upsell opportunity for me – regardless of the client's age," says Catherine Armstrong-Moore, CKD, and vice president for Stylecraft Fine Cabinetry in Stuart, FL.

Todd Wiley, designer for Grand Rapids, MI-based Dimensions Kitchens & Baths, adds: "Since we are designing custom kitchens and bathrooms, we can bring up topics that the clients haven't necessarily thought of, like accessibility or planning for the long-term in their home. That is not to say you should make it a wheelchair-

accessible kitchen design, but [pose the question] that, should something happen, would this home still be functional for them?"

Heather Goode, CKD and owner of Santa Cruz, CA-based Santa Cruz Kitchen & Bath, Inc., offers: "For kitchen projects, I will suggest contrasting cabinets and countertop colors for visual clarity, counter-level microwaves and wall ovens as opposed to standard lower ovens."

Wiley continues: "We will also direct them toward appliances, based on how functional they can be for Universal Design, such as putting in a wall oven at a comfortable height as opposed to installing a range with a low oven. For example, a cooktop could potentially have the base

cabinet taken out and an apron put across it, in case a wheelchair is ever required."

"With my older clients, I try to get them to not go for the range, because their oven is on the floor [and they will have to bend over]. I'll even tell my younger clients that they are going to get older and [should consider it]," adds Barbara Geller, owner of Boca Raton, FL-based The Place for Kitchens.

She concludes: "For the younger clients with kids, or for older clients, [professional ranges] throw so much heat out of the front of the doors. I would much rather have them choose a professional gas cooktop and gear it up with a wall oven. That is one thing that I recommend to my clients, regardless of their age."

ing that a well-designed Web site will generate traffic from all ages.

"Younger clients and older clients are going to my Web site. I have a lot of educated and affluent seniors [in my market in Stuart, FL]," she says.

Rowley agrees: "People are shopping for products on the Internet a lot, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are a young person. We have clients in their 50s and 60s who [use] the Internet [for purchases]."

But, Gen Xers are the main consumers who research online, due in large part to the accessibility of information and their resourcefulness, Wendover notes.

He continues by issuing a challenge set forth in his *Western Reporter* article: "Ask young customers to critique your current marketing and promotional efforts. There might be a lot to learn."

Armstrong-Moore sums it up this way: "Regardless of age, you should be able to connect [with your clients]. If you can't do that, you are going to lose out." KBDN