

# How salespeople deal with intergenerational relationship selling

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The Millennial generation (born after 1981) of salespeople is projected to become the apparent heir to replace top-end Baby Boomers expected to retire at an alarming rate over the next five years. This problem poses a significant challenge in that buyer-seller relationships will need to form between members of different generations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Through a grounded theory style approach, the paper explores this intergenerational selling relationship development problem.

**Findings** – In addition to confirming that Millennial salespeople feel challenged by differences stemming from their age-group, several strategies were identified for Millennial salespeople to overcome these challenges and effectively build relationships with their (older) customers.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is qualitative and based on a limited convenience sample, but reveals the need to further pursue study in this area.

**Practical implications** – Managers can help younger salespeople develop strategies for managing older buyers. These strategies are establishing similarities, building credibility, showing dependability, demonstrating professionalism, and showing youthful enthusiasm.

**Originality/value** – The paper helps resolve the issue of whether understanding generational differences is important. Statistics show that increasingly younger salespeople will call on older buyers. The paper establishes that this is consistent with discrimination, SIT theory, rather than earlier work on similarities.

**Keywords** Sales, Sales management, Stereotyping, Age discrimination, Baby boomer generation

**Paper type** Research paper

**An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.**

## 1. Introduction

Labor numbers reveal an interesting imbalance on the horizon in the relationships between professional salespeople and purchasing agents/buyers. These factors include:

- the aging of the workforce;
- the number of available new entrants into the workforce; and
- the tendency towards early retirement (Buehrer, 2001).

The trend is exacerbated in the sales industry where the number of business-to-business salespeople is expected to grow 9-25 percent through 2016, faster than other sectors (US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). On the flip side, jobs for purchasing agents, buyers and purchasing managers are expected to grow slower than the average at essentially no growth and with some sectors shrinking by 9 percent (US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). In addition, the demographic makeup of buyers shows that only 16.2 percent of all buyers are older than 56, and nearly 70 percent are between 35-55 (Institute of

Supply Management, 2006), and the career often takes a college degree and five plus years of experience and training. This demonstrates that, in all likelihood, the percentage of millennials will not be increasing as dramatically on the purchasing side as it will be on the sales side.

America is facing a dramatic shift in its demographic makeup. In July 2005, the US Census Bureau estimated the population at 296.4 million (US Census Bureau/US Summary, 2000). Although this figure reflects a 15 percent gain, the population is growing more slowly than at any time in our nation's history. The Baby Boomer generation (those born from 1946-1964), estimated at 78.2 million, is the largest generation in our nation's history. Top-end Baby Boomers are turning 61 years of age and are racing towards retirement at a rate of 7,918 per day (Administration on Aging/Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In addition, the estimated 53 million members of the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 2002 (Bartlett, 2005), which constitutes the bulk of the potential replacement labor, is not large enough and may not be skilled enough to fill the needs of the twenty-first century workforce. These demographic data are causing human resource professionals to wonder what the workforce will look like as the century progresses.

Nowhere have these trends had a bigger impact than in the field of professional sales. There are 1.9 million business-to-business salespeople in the US and growing (US Department

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of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). According to one *Fortune* 100 firm, 50 percent of its sales force will either retire or will be eligible to retire within the next five years (Smith, 2006). This impacts firms in different ways. For some, younger salespeople are viewed as a more updated, preferable, and cost effective group to succeed retirees. Others have expressed concerns that the loss of experienced salespeople will take a toll on bottom line results (English, 2006). This is a dichotomy that many firms will soon face.

These numbers paint a picture characterized by significant changes for many firms. No longer will they be able to hire their salesforce from the ranks of the very experienced in sales. No longer will they field a salesforce characterized by veterans and long standing relationships. As these new, young salespeople enter the picture, they will need to be able to develop relationships with the more experienced, older purchasing agents and executive level decision makers. The question then is will they be able to? How should this best be accomplished?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate this relationship development in the sales context by considering what we term intergenerational relationship selling by Millennial salespeople. We define intergenerational relationship selling as a Millennial salesperson's attempt to establish a relationship with a buyer from another generation. This is a topic that has yet to be explored specifically in the sales literature. However, two different bodies of literature that have been explored shed some light on the topic. There appears to be a conflict between the literature on similarity and that on stereotypes in selling. According to Lichtenthal and Tellefsen (2001), "studies that focused on observable characteristics found weaker relationships between similarity and sales performance than did those studies that focused on internal characteristics." However, the stereotype literature has clearly documented that stereotyping can and does occur by buyers based on observable characteristics like gender and appearance (e.g. Bellizzi and Hasty, 2000; Borna *et al.*, 2005). In considering these seemingly conflicting views on whether generational differences should have an impact on selling, we feel it even more important to consider this interesting and important topic – specifically with the goal of uncovering and extending existing theory that might better inform the phenomenon. Given this, the general purpose of this paper is to identify some of the issues and strategies for Intergenerational Relationship Selling (hereafter referred to as IGRS). A more specific objective is to examine this through the lens of expectancy and social identity theory. Together, these paradigms were chosen because they deal with the inherent social/relationship problems stemming from dissatisfaction with the inequities between groups and their fit as we explored the phenomenon. To do this, we first look at what is known about the most relevant of "generations" in the workforce for the coming years. To further explore the area and help in the development of recommended strategies, we used a grounded theory style method in which we interviewed 24 Millennial salespeople to better understand IGRS relative to its pervasiveness, types of incidents, key issues, and how salespeople deal with it. Based on these interviews, we discuss our findings and suggest propositions for further research on the topic.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Challenges of the Millennial salesperson

If you ask a Millennial salesperson whether there will be challenges building relationships and selling to buyers that are of older generations, you will likely hear comments as follows:

[...] Some customers will automatically throw up a red flag. You know they are thinking how old are you, 22 or 23? You don't have enough experience to know what you are doing ...

[...] it is a challenge and is intimidating ... me being a 23 year old to go in and sell to someone who's been in the industry for 30 years ...

I've sold to customers twice my age before; one person in particular actually told me I was young and dumb.

Welcome to the world of the Millennial salesperson. These 20-something year old salespeople face the hurdles of overcoming the judgment and skepticism of their older customers who are, for the most part, from prior generations. Based on their age, the Millennial salesperson seems to be subjected to a level of scrutiny and discrimination from buyers that create an added layer of frustrating obstacles to an already challenging trade. Due to inexperience; their competence, credibility, dependability, and overall ability to support customer needs are questioned. Such treatment would lead one to believe that major differences between these young salespeople and buyers from older generations exist. Demographic studies comparing professional work values and attitudes between three of the most recent generations reveal that this is indeed the case. But are these differences a significant barrier to building relationships where relationship building has become the dominant model for personal selling?

Compared to their Gen-X and Baby Boomer counterparts, Millennials differ relative to their values, beliefs, and place in history. Born after 1981 (Howe and Strauss, 2000), the Millennial generation is more hopeful of the future, ambitious, and goal oriented. They are more likely to lead by collaboration, and seek loyalty in relationships (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003). They view work as a way to make an impact on the world and as an opportunity to be creative with other committed people rather than viewing work as means to get results (Furlanetto *et al.*, 2004). They get motivation from workplace benefits (e.g. flexible hours, performance related bonuses, career development programs, etc) more so than any other age group (*Strategic HR Review*, 2006). Job changing is considered commonplace (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003) and personal cell phones, pagers, and Blackberries are acceptable means of communication. They likely identify with significant historical events such as the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine, and 9/11 compared to previous generations who identify with Civil Rights, Watergate, and the Vietnam War.

Given generational differences, it is not surprising that the Millennial salesperson faces challenges and clash-points when dealing with a buyer from the two previous generations. To compound the issue, research on the topic of generational differences in the workplace reveals that management does a poor job tailoring training and work preparation to the unique needs of each generation (Nolan, 2009). This begs the question: can productive buyer-seller relationships be forged between these diverse groups? Likewise, why does relationship building pose such a challenge? To try to better understand the roots of these challenges and to assist in developing our

research propositions, we turn to the literatures on expectancy theory, discrimination, stereotyping, and social identity theory. In essence, IGRS represents in-group/out-group stereotyping based on age cues. This serves as source of dissatisfaction (to the seller) because of the inequities perceived in the interaction with buyers. These literatures provide the basis on which to better understand the phenomena.

## 2.2 Expectancy and disconfirmation

There is a body of organizational research that examines how expectancy disconfirmation impacts satisfaction with outcomes. Over the past three decades, Oliver's (1980) cognitive model of satisfaction decisions (antecedents and consequences) has triggered studies relevant to selling and the relationship between buyer and seller (see Oliver, 1981; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988; Oliver *et al.*, 1994; Oliver and Swan, 1989; Swan and Oliver, 1991 to mention a few). In summary, this body of research explains how individuals hold or calculate some aspirations (or expectations) of a particular outcome prior to an event. Upon experiencing the event, a subjective comparison of the actual outcome is made relative to that which was expected. If the actual outcome falls short of expectations, an individual experiences negative disconfirmation and such feelings have been linked to negative effects on satisfaction, resulting in dissatisfaction (Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Tse and Wilton, 1988).

The theory is relevant to our study of how sellers and buyers from different generations inter-relate. For example, salespeople form outcome perceptions based on the equities/inequities that they view between themselves and their buyers. An important factor that Oliver and Swan (1989) found to influence these perceptions is fairness. Fairness implies that individuals feel that they are deserving of treatment that is right or just and dissatisfaction occurs when outcomes fall short of what is perceived as fair. For example, a salesperson may feel, to some degree, that it is only fair that buyers judge them on their outcomes and not prejudge them on their attributes (Steward *et al.*, 2009).

Other factors such as the content of communications (e.g. the matter in which a message is delivered) and individual attributes (e.g. age, physical appearance, gender, race) have been studied and found relevant to how a buyer perceives a seller (Oliver, 1993). Results of these studies suggest that satisfaction/dissatisfaction from confirmed/disconfirmed expectations impact overall positive/negative affect which, in turn, directs subsequent behavior. Thus buyers may hold certain expectations about a seller's experience/ability based on age and when a much younger seller approaches them, their expectations are negatively disconfirmed, resulting in a negative perception of the much younger seller. Intergenerational differences between a seller and buyer pose a source of individual level attributes that can become the basis for pre-judgment decisions potentially with adverse effects on the sales relationship. This notion ties into the topics of discrimination and stereotyping in sales.

## 2.3 Discrimination and stereotyping in the salesforce

Intergenerational issues in sales have roots in the sales discrimination and stereotype literature. This literature is relevant to our research seeing that Babin *et al.* (1995) found that stereotypes in general influence buyer emotions and subsequently thoughts leading to a purchase decision (Offen,

2005; Russ and McNeilly, 1988). Furthermore, Comer *et al.* (1998) suggest that salesperson stereotypes present a host of selling obstacles, one of which is customer resistance. Stereotyping salespeople can take on many forms, however, much of the stereotype and discrimination literature over the past decade has been devoted to how others (managers, buyers, etc) form attitudes toward sellers based on their gender, race, physical attractiveness, and appearance (Beachboard, 2008; Feagin, 1991; Forman *et al.*, 1997; Garstka *et al.*, 2005; Hampton and Heywood, 1993).

Based on sales research (e.g. Comer and Jolson, 1991; Lane, 2000; Lane and Crane, 2002; Piercy *et al.*, 2003; Lucas, 1996; McElroy and DeCarlo, 1999; Reingen and Kernan, 1993), it is realistic to think that stereotypical and discriminatory buyer behavior may stem from judging a salesperson by his/her age. The tendency for salespeople's abilities to be judged based on their age and experience is a natural, yet unfair assumption often made (Mansfield, 2008). There is some empirical evidence to suggest that discrimination is frequently perceived by a younger salesperson when selling to a buyer from an older generation. According to Mallin, Pullins and Buehrer (2010), 65 percent of a millennial salesperson sample reported feeling some degree of age-based discrimination when selling to older buyers. This was compared with 27 percent of these younger salespeople who reported feelings of discrimination when selling to buyers in their same age group. The authors speculate that this statistically significant comparison might be explained by the fact that younger sellers may psychologically be unprepared to encounter these feelings. Thus, they may experience disconfirmed expectations (i.e. they thought their age would not matter). Dissatisfaction stemming from this experience was postulated to have a negative impact on salesperson job specific self-esteem and result in compensatory sales behaviors and strategies (e.g. working harder to establish credibility, dependability, and demonstrate higher levels of customer service and follow up).

Discrimination represents an important issue for many practicing sales managers and trainers. Given the fact that age is an easily identifiable cue, and that generational differences exist, it is likely that discriminatory biases between generations also exist. How does the Millennial salesperson overcome this bias and develop strategies to deal with it? Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986) is a useful paradigm to understand how salespeople perceive themselves relative to buyer preferences and develop strategies to overcome such biases.

## Social identity theory

Social identity theory (SIT) involves self-categorizing, which entails a process where individuals within the same category emphasize similarities and individuals in dissimilar categories emphasize differences (Dwyer *et al.*, 1998). Self-categorization is commonly based on age (Messick and Mackie, 1989) and causes members of a category to form stereotypes toward the members of another. Typically, such stereotypical behavior results in in-group favoritism, inter-group discrimination and conflict, and preference for the in-group over the out-group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Richard and Grimes, 1996; Riordan and McFarlane Shore, 1997; Tsui *et al.*, 1992). By nature of their age and generational differences, the Millennial salesperson would represent a

member of the out-group while more mature-aged buyers would belong to the in-group. Inter-group discrimination and conflict here would be any selling obstacle that the salesperson faces due to his/her age group (i.e. generation).

SIT posits that belonging to a group creates a psychological state that confers social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and SIT's main assumption is that a disadvantaged group status exists (e.g. Millennial salespeople relative to Gen-X/Boomer buyers) that results in an unsatisfactory or negative social identity. Typically, in the buyer-seller domain, the buyer has the upper hand in that they are in the advantageous position of either accepting or rejecting the sale/seller (Weitz *et al.*, 2004). Based on this notion, the Millennial salesperson becomes the disadvantaged group and this can be confirmed based on the selling challenges they face due to their age. Examples of this are illustrated by the following sentiments of some Millennial salespeople:

[...] Eight out of ten calls, a customer will ask me "how old are you?" They feel I may not know my trade based on my age ...

When I first started selling for (company), I found this situation hard, because people had a hard time trusting what I was saying ...

[...] it seems that there is a key value difference that makes communication difficult at times ...

According to SIT, to compensate for dissatisfaction with their psychologically disadvantaged status, members of the out-group (e.g. Millennial salespeople relative to Gen-X/Boomer buyers) will try to improve their social identity through "identity management strategies" (van Knippenberg, 1989). Blanz *et al.* (1997) refers to such strategies as "social creativity".

Social creativity involves an individual group member's attempt to alter an unfavorable comparison (e.g. get the Gen-X/Boomer buyer to re-evaluate the Millennial salesperson relative to stereotypes). In an attempt to change an unfavorable comparison (buyers comparing Millennial salespeople to more mature salespeople), we would expect that Millennial salespeople deploy some specific social creativity identity management strategies. Such strategies might center on demonstrating levels of knowledge, credibility, dependability, professionalism, and so forth that exceeds what is expected of the buyer.

The buyer-seller relationship literature also supports this notion and suggests that one way to alter buyer perceptions of the salesperson is to demonstrate behavior that causes the buyer to re-evaluate the relationship (Babin *et al.*, 1995). In doing so, greater overall satisfaction with the relationship is likely to result from increased levels of trust and commitment that is generated (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Such consequences are magnified by common attributes between buyer and seller and tend to deteriorate based on differences. The implication of this for the Millennial salesperson is that they must first identify commonalities with their buyer and then exploit them, especially in a situation where a buyer expects the younger salesperson to be different.

While expectancy and social identity theory seems to offer some explanation as to how millennials view and cope with age-based discrimination, we wanted to develop a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon and thus employed a grounded theory style approach to study it. We interviewed professional field sales people about perceived occurrences of IGRS.

### 3. Method

We employed a grounded theory style research project to generate practice-based theory (and test possible appropriateness of extant theory) to this particular issue. We believed that this would provide good insight into how things happen so we started with our area of interest and worked out toward theory and theory development. We began with the idea of using interviews to collect tacit knowledge gained from reflexive accounts of actual occurrences. Using this style of research allowed us to analyze and reflect on the data while exploring it (Daymon and Holloway, 2002).

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that systematically explores data for theory development. It operates almost in reverse from traditional research in that researchers begin by collecting data, coding and categorizing to develop concepts, leading to theory creation/identification (Allan, 2003). Data are collected primarily through depth interviews and subjects are drawn based on their ability to provide insight to the phenomenon of interest. This method has been used in the sales area (e.g. Lee and Cadogan, 2009; Malshe and Sohi, 2009a; Malshe and Sohi, 2009b) and has been promoted for use for research questions like the one we explore (Geiger and Turley, 2003).

#### 3.1 Sample

A referral method was used to identify millennial-aged salespeople working in B2B environments that would be willing to talk to researchers. Referrals came from current business student and faculty networks. The sample was only a theoretical sample in a limited sense. Not all prospects were identified at the same time up front and there was an attempt to add variety as it occurred throughout the process, like deliberately adding an African American interviewee and seeking out whether the incidence occurred in both inside and outside sales. However it would be unfair to categorize this as an exact application of theoretical sampling given the convenience sample nature of the interviewees utilized.

Prospects were contacted either by phone or live interviewers. Some of the interviews were conducted by one of the researchers while some were conducted by trained student assistants. The advantage of using student assistants is that they were among the millennial generation and much closer in all aspects of life to the salespeople in the sample. We felt that this allowed for more honest data collection if the respondents had the trust of a peer (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Of 32 contacts, 24 agreed to participate for a response rate of 75 percent. Subjects were asked to state their name, age, gender, race, industry, and to describe their job function (e.g. inside sales, outside sales, etc). The Table I describes the demographic make-up of the sample. All interviews were recorded with the subject's permission.

#### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

Interviews were semi-structured. Subjects were provided a definition of intergenerational relationship selling (i.e. building a relationship in order to sell to a buyer from a different generation) and asked a series of open-ended questions. A copy of the interview guide is included as the paper's Appendix. We began with a basic set of questions, to which a few more were ultimately added. Our initial premise was to explore the types of incidence of IGRS, although over time we found that the strategies to overcome were more

Table I Demographics of salesperson sample

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Position	Industry	Region
Dave	M	23	C	Outside sales	Business services	SE
Adam	M	23	C	Outside sales	Television adv.	NW
Cathy	F	23	C	Outside sales	Museum sponsorship	SE
Nicole	F	23	C	Outside sales	Transport./logistics	MW
Ryan	M	24	C	Outside sales	Industrial products	SE
Stacey	F	23	C	Outside sales	Office supplies	MW
Josh	M	23	C	Outside sales	Industrial products	NE
Ryan	M	23	C	Outside sales	Financial services	MW
Creighton	M	23	C	Outside sales	Financial services	MW
Mike	M	23	AA	Outside sales	Industrial supplies	E
Brian	M	23	C	Outside sales	Gas and welding	MW
Adam	M	24	C	Account spec.	Building materials	MW
Sean	M	23	C	Outside sales	Building materials	NW
Dan	M	24	C	Inside sales	Construction materials	SE
Andrea	F	24	C	Outside sales	Industrial products	SE
Ryan	M	23	C	Inside sales	Lift trucks	MW
Allan	M	23	C	Outside sales	Medical devices	MW
Anthony	M	25	C	Outside sales	Transport/logistics	MW
Dan	M	26	C	Outside sales	Financial services	MW
Tony	M	25	C	Inside sales	Industrial products	MW
Julie	F	26	C	Outside sales	Pharmaceuticals	MW
Dustin	M	23	C	Outside sales	Telecommunications	MW
Rick	M	26	C	Outside sales	Industrial products	MW
Elliot	M	25	C	Outside sales	Industrial products	MW

Notes: Gender codes: M = Male, F = Female; Race codes: C = Caucasian, AA = African American

interesting and subsequently included them. As data collection progressed, we also began to ask about strategies we were finding toward the end of interview process.

We used both inductive and deductive analysis iteratively, developing codes and combining responses into categories as we went. Two researchers developed the initial coding scheme jointly through discussion. We changed from an exploration of types of incidents of IGRS as the data began to reveal more about this than any distinction in typology. Once the initial analysis was complete, we asked a third researcher to categorize a series of quotes according to the themes identified, and he was able to do so with 100 percent accuracy. We also re-contacted two of the subjects to discuss the propositions, and they confirmed that they made sense. Later in reanalysis, ex post facto, expectancy theory was also employed for understanding. As neither of these theories is explicitly about IGRS, we viewed this as a theoretical extension to this particular context.

#### 4. Findings

Our research indicates that Millennial salespeople seem to be frustrated and dissatisfied with their inability to relate to older generations on an interpersonal level. Despite this challenge, they feel confident that they can sell across generations. Using the interviews and SIT, we can isolate five distinct social creativity identity management strategies that Millennial salespeople use to overcome their seemingly disadvantaged out-group status. These strategies include the following dimensions of adaptive selling: establishing similarities,

credibility, and dependability; demonstrating professionalism, and using their youth to their advantage.

##### 4.1 Emergent themes

A common theme across subjects was that Millennial salespeople go into a sales encounter with the expectation that they will successfully relate to their buyer only to emerge disappointed. In reality, most found it hard to relate to older generations on an interpersonal level. For these salespeople, expectations of a more positive outcome were negatively disconfirmed – resulting in dissatisfaction. Most of the subjects we talked to were able to provide us examples of this – where selling to a customer from a different generation (i.e. IGRS) resulted in difficulty. Based on the answers we received, it became evident that our sample found it challenging relating to these buyers. The following are excerpts from the responses:

[...] We had zero in common. When he (the customer) talked of politics or business issues, I had no idea what he was talking about. I felt I was not up to date on the issues that he was most interested in. Small talk was an all time low. The hardest parts were the “remember whens” – because you don’t remember when ...

[...] 99 percent of my customers are older than me. Knowing how to converse with them is troublesome to me. They don’t get my jokes, and I have to be careful and not come off too hip ...

[...] It seems to me that (older) customers tend to be set in their ways. They are more difficult to deal with because they tend not to listen to new ideas and are hard to convince. They tend to get irritated easy when pushed too hard ...

On a couple of occasions, customers would tell me that they have a daughter my age. In one particular case a customer acted like I didn’t know what I was talking about. He even asked me if he should be working directly with my boss ...

I remember that I was with my regional sales manager and a customer. The customer seemed to talk directly to my manager (who was older) and tended to ignore me ...

[...] the customer had been using the same product for 5-10 years ... they were reluctant to consider another product especially from a young person ... it was as if they were thinking "here comes that young guy trying to sell something" ... it is very difficult to form a relationship that way ...

From these examples, it is obvious that the concept of IGRS is a viable one and does, potentially, represent a stumbling block in relationship building between buyer and seller. One obvious cause, as suggested by our examples here, is the absence of trust that the buyer places in the Millennial salesperson. Trust is a critical element in the formation of productive buyer-seller relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and develops as a result of past experience and confidence that subsequent obligations will be fulfilled (Blau, 1964; Mallin, O'Donnell and Hu (2010); Swan *et al.*, 1985). Because of youth and lack of sales tenure, the Millennial salesperson is viewed (by the buyer) as unproven seeing that s/he has not had the benefit of time to demonstrate his/her reliability and that s/he can be trusted. Based on our findings and from what is known from the buyer-seller relationship literature, we believe that Millennial salespeople face an aged based form of discrimination; we term this the intergenerational selling effect. We also believe the intergenerational selling effect creates a disadvantage for the Millennial salesperson in attempting to build relationships with buyers of older generations.

Although, Millennial salespeople feel challenged relative to their ability to forge relationships, a theme that very clearly emerged from the interviews was that Millennial salespeople were not intimidated and felt prepared and confident in handling such obstacles. Overwhelmingly, our sample indicated that their employer had not formally trained them in IGRS (all but two confirmed this). Furthermore, more than two thirds indicated that they felt there should be some aspect of IGRS incorporated into their company's sales training program. However, in spite of this lack of training, most (all but five) still felt that they were prepared to meet the challenges that IGRS posed. In fact, the theme was so strongly exemplified that we think it represents a finding of potential interest. The following excerpts reflect an overall confidence level of our sample:

I feel equipped to sell to these customers. I do this by being ready to handle any issue they have ... as soon as they book something, I get them their confirmation, change anything they need changed, and honor my commitments. Basically, it's about taking care of the customer's needs in a very timely manner.

[...] challenging yourself helps to overcome this (age) barrier ... carry yourself in a manner to show that you can talk to anyone at any level of the organization ...

I handle this like I would with any other client. I introduce myself, conduct a face-to-face meeting to learn about the client's history and interests outside of work, and I make myself valuable/credible by sharing my knowledge.

I can switch my selling style. With older customers, they have had many different experiences than I have ... so I recognize that they are experts in what they do, and I don't try to act like I know more than they do.

I deal with this issue by doing personality matching. If the person that I am speaking with is a very quiet/shy person, I will not be as forward with them to make them feel comfortable with me ... if the person is very outgoing and loud speaking, I will be more forward ...

This theme must be considered in light of what is known about those from the Millennial generation. As we discussed earlier, they tend to be hopeful (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

So it is possible that the confidence illustrated here may be part of who the Millennials are. It is also possible that it is rooted in the basic sales training they received as part of their education or job orientation.

## 4.2 Strategies deployed

### *Establishing similarities*

Having established that IGRS selling is a real issue for Millennial salespeople, we turn our attention to the strategies that these salespeople use to compensate for their seemingly disadvantaged out-group status. SIT tells us that the psychological response from an individual within a disadvantaged out-group is to deploy social creativity identity management strategies. The aim of such strategies is to allow the individual to see himself/herself in a more positive light relative to the favored in-group (van Knippenberg, 1989). During our interviews, one strategy in particular emerged as a very clear pattern where Millennial salespeople were able to credit successful sales relationships to establishing similarities with their buyers. Take for example, the following situations:

I deal with a customer in (city) who grew up in the same area as me but only 30 years before. I got to know him, and we shared some stories and found some things in common.

[...] he is very tech-savvy and owns his own internet search engine business. Where we hit it off was that I understood the.com business where other salespeople in their 40's did not. We were able to make small talk, and he seemed genuinely interested in talking with me as a person. It was our shared knowledge of technology that bridged the gap ...

[...] one of my clients in his early 40's likes to run and bike - I also like to do that. He was easier to crack ...

A lot of them just like to talk ... might not have buddies ... be a friend to them ... the more talking they do, the more you seem like a friend.

I did have some clients who would comment that they had a son/daughter my age. It was a fair rapport builder. Depending on their social style and our relationship, I would ask about their kids. Most of them liked to talk/brag about their kids.

The emergence of establishing similarities as an identity management strategy is completely consistent with what has been uncovered in extant sales literature regarding buyer-seller relationship building (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1990; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and thus should be totally expected. Such similarities are based on identifying with individuals who share common attributes and demographics (Stephenson and Lewin, 1996) and has been shown to positively impact interpersonal attraction, trust, and communication (Linville and Jones, 1980; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). As such, it represents a viable, trainable strategy for preparing Millennial salespeople for dealing with IGRS.

### 4.3 Establishing credibility

A basic understanding of the sales and marketing processes will reveal the important role of credibility in marketing communication (e.g. Weitz *et al.*, 2004). However, in the situation where a group is viewed as different and in particular as less experienced, credibility may take on a new level of importance:

You need to develop a strategy to gain his (the customer's) confidence ... you need to "sell yourself" that is present yourself in a way your customer believes you like what you are doing and are interested in what they do.

When I go into a call, I come equipped with numbers or data ... this tends to make me look more credible in the customer's eyes ... I think that building credibility is a major issue here since we do not have the age and experience.

I establish myself as a credible resource by sharing my accounting knowledge and relevant current events ...

[...] I feel that I need to show the customer that I know my trade despite my age ...

As an identity management strategy, establishing credibility seems to be a viable mechanism for Millennial salespeople to cope with their disadvantaged out-group status. It not only serves to signal to the buyer that they are competent, but also gives them the self-assurance that they are prepared to handle the selling situation. Faced with buyer discrimination challenging their competence, it is important for these salespeople to maintain an increased sense of self-worth stemming from the knowledge of their trade. Therefore, being prepared in terms of product knowledge can be seen as another specific manifestation:

[...] the importance of product knowledge is magnified because I commonly will get tested to be sure that I know my stuff.

[...] you have to be prepared and show them (the customer) you know the industry, market, and different products ... you can't sound like a kid one year out of college ...

[...] once you show that you have the knowledge, the whole age issue is less of an issue ...

This strategy resounded loudly across our sample of salespeople. It became apparent that an identity management strategy that Millennial salespeople use is to go the extra mile to establish creditability. Admittedly, establishing credibility is a viable strategy for salespeople of all ages and generations. However, because of their age, maybe Millennial salespeople feel the added pressure and critical nature of showing buyers that they can be considered a credible sales resource.

#### 4.4 Establishing dependability

Trust is critical in the relationship between buyer and seller (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, one definition of trust in the buyer-seller literature focuses on the development of confidence that one has in another's dependability (Swan *et al.*, 1985). One identity management strategy that Millennial salespeople seem to use is to establish dependability with their (older generations) buyers. They report that their buyers seem to feel they will not be in the position long. This is problematic because it can become a barrier to relationship development:

[...] a customer may question whether I will be in the job a year from now.

[...] one customer said that I was his 13th rep in 13 years ...

To compensate for this, they try to employ strategies to assure their buyers that they are dependable:

[...] to make the customer feel that I am dependable, I need to go the extra mile for them ...

[...] so you say to them (customers) – yes I am new, and I am young, but I am willing to learn. I am willing to find the answer for you ... I can help you ...

[...] my long term focus helps to overcome the stereotype that "this young guy is going to sell me stuff to get his commission and then move on." I'm there to help the customer grow their business.

It is more important to build relationships with customers and other businesses by following up with any promises you make ...

#### 4.5 Focus on professionalism

Another identity management strategy that seemed to emerge was the need by Millennial salespeople to demonstrate high

levels of professionalism – especially when faced with difficulties relating to older generation buyers. Some of the comments from our sample led us to this conclusion:

[...] the customer called my presentation "professional" because I grouped their needs and went over each of them one by one. I told them "what was in it for them" and kept it very clear and crisp [...]

My overall strategy is to be polite. I always begin by calling someone Mr or Ms until they tell me otherwise ... I want to show them the proper respect ...

[...] once they heard that I just graduated from college, they start looking down on me ... I overcame this by keeping them thoroughly engaged in the conversation, and not backing down ...

A lot of times, they don't want to talk to a "kid" so you have to come across as a very mature, well spoken person.

[...] the only way to prepare for it (individual differences) is to look at the basic business stuff: good hand shake, eye contact, dress well, know product, relate to the prospect ... hopefully that gets you the client ...

As an identity management strategy, demonstrating professionalism serves multiple purposes. First, it signals to the buyer that the salesperson respects his/her time, position of power, and need to accomplish business goals. It is quite possible that, based on the salesperson's age, the buyer may not expect high levels of professionalism. When the salesperson acts in a highly professional manner, this may help distinguish the Millennial salesperson from what is "expected" by the stereotype. Tracing this back to our earlier (expectancy theory) discussion, the positive disconfirmation experienced by the buyer in this case provides an opportunity for his/her to re-evaluate the seller and potential for a more satisfactory relationship to develop (Babin *et al.*, 1995). Second, Millennial salespeople felt that demonstrating high levels of professionalism gives them a sense of equality relative to their buyer's in-group status. To illustrate this point, one salesperson commented, "... if I show them a level of maturity and intelligence that exceeds their expectations, they will want to speak with me and give me some level of respect..." By acting professionally, these salespeople are psychologically equalizing the playing field; granting themselves in-group status along with the buyer. This in turn, creates a more positive social identity for the Millennial salesperson. Thus, we believe if Millennial salespeople can demonstrate an unexpected level of professionalism, this will keep the buyer more open to developing a relationship.

#### 4.6 Using youth as an advantage

For some Millennial salespeople, they are able to see a positive side to their youth and differences. Our interviews revealed that some were actually motivated by the age gap and used their energy, personality, and character to create a positive selling advantage.

[...] for me, it [IGRS] is an advantage. Since I have less experience using these products, I am able to ask a lot of questions and make them feel that they are helping me understand more of the products' applications. They seem very willing to help me learn and at the same time, I am able to listen and pick up on their problems, issues, and concerns ...

Being younger provides some positives ... having more energy, not having to worry about a family ... the hunger to succeed seems to be a function of someone my age. Older customers tend to respond to all this favorably.

[...] if I say something wrong, or make a mistake, I always use the card of "Oh, I didn't know, I just started this position" ...

[...] customers see the fire and enthusiasm that I bring, and they get excited when I am around ...

[...] one of my customers was enthusiastic to have me as her rep ... we seemed to hit it off ... possibly because she sensed some added enthusiasm on my part (that she didn't see in other reps) ...

[...] sometimes customers will view me as having enthusiasm and fresh ideas. This works out to my advantage ...

As an identity management strategy, such positive energy seems to serve multiple purposes. For one, it may positively disconfirm the buyer’s expectations – serving to offset some of the negative perceptions that (older generations) buyers have of the Millennial generation (that they are not credible, dependable, hard working, etc). Furthermore, the psychological impact of elevating oneself to in-group status may also help bolster the salesperson’s confidence in being able to relate to the buyer (as a peer in-group member). Both should serve to create more positive and productive interactions between salesperson and buyer. Based on this, we suggest Millennials bring higher levels of energy and enthusiasm to their selling process, and that increased enthusiasm and energy may positively influence IGRS relationships.

Table II provides a summary of the Millennial strategies, IGRS research findings, and sample quotations from our study.

**5. Implications for practice and research**

Based on the comments from interviewing Millennial salespeople, we can confirm that intergenerational selling challenges exist. Salespeople deal with them without the benefit of formal IGRS training. Our study has implications for both practice and research – providing a stepping-stone for further consideration of the topic of IGRS.

From a managerial standpoint, the importance of establishing credibility and dependability becomes magnified as salespeople attempt to overcome the relationship-building barrier of a lack of commonalities. Understanding that buyers may have a tendency to “prejudge” a Millennial salesperson relative to his/her knowledge, reliability, work ethic, etc,

managers can reinforce the importance of preparedness for the sales call. If a salesperson goes into a sales call armed with the background research (of the buyer’s business), a strong base of product/service knowledge, and a professional attitude – the buyer is likely to experience unexpected levels of these important seller attributes. Sales managers can play an important role to prepare, train, develop, and coach Millennial salespeople to this end. In light of our conclusion that few sales organizations include IGRS as a training topic (yet salespeople mentioned that they wish they had exposure to this type of training), managers can take steps to incorporate IGRS into the training and development curriculum. At the very least, managers should make Millennial salespeople aware that they are going to face such issues and challenges. Subsequently, all this can be used to augment the account plan (e.g. researching the customer’s hobbies or interests) or call planning process (e.g. invitation to special interest seminars or workshops). Sales managers should reinforce such preparation and spend time coaching and role-playing to train their young sellers to respond appropriately when faced with a comment, objection, or IGRS obstacle as exemplified from our research findings.

For sales researchers, our study provides a theoretical baseline for more needed empirical work on the topic of IGRS. The paradigms of expectancy and social identity theory, combined with our grounded theory style approach, provide a rich body of work to draw on to identify antecedents and consequences of IGRS for further study. The basis for subsequent studies in the short term would be existing constructs and measures used in (expectancy and social identity theory) studies that help explain the circumstances surrounding individual (who are cast in situations of perceived inequity) feelings of disadvantaged-ness. Such measures would be adapted to the IGRS domain between seller and buyer. For example, on the antecedent side of

**Table II** Intergenerational relationship selling: social identity management strategies and findings

Strategy	Findings	Quotes
<b>Establishing similarities</b>	Millennial salespeople attempt to establish common ground/interests with their customers	“I deal with a customer in (city) who grew up in the same area only 30 years before. I got to know him, and we shared some stories and found some things in common”
<b>Establishing credibility</b>	Establishing credibility seems to be a viable mechanism for Millennial salespeople to cope with their disadvantaged out-group status	“When I go into a call, I come equipped with numbers and data ... this tends to make me look more credible in the customer’s eyes...”
<b>Establishing dependability</b>	Millennial salespeople attempt to establish a sense of dependability with their customers early on in the buyer/seller relationship	“... one customer said that I was his 13th rep in 13 years.” “... to make the customer feel that I am dependable, I need to go the extra mile for them...”
<b>Demonstrating professionalism</b>	Millennial salespeople need to demonstrate a high level of professionalism	“... the customer called my presentation ‘professional’ because I grouped their needs and went over each of them one by one. I told them ‘what was in it for them’ and kept it very clear and crisp...”
<b>Using youth as an advantage</b>	Millennial can use their energy, personality and character to create a positive selling advantage	“... for me, it (IGRS) is an advantage. Since I have less experience using these products, I am able to ask a lot of questions and make them feel that they are helping me understand more of the products’ applications.” “... Being younger provides some positives ... having more energy, not having to worry about family ... the hunger to succeed seems to be a function of someone my age. Older customers seem to respond to all this favorably.”

IGRS, expectancy theory draws attention to key constructs such as distributive justice, fairness, and preference (Oliver and Swan, 1989). A survey designed to capture salesperson's perceptions of these factors before and after an actual IGRS interaction can provide the necessary measures to test the positive/negative disconfirmation – satisfaction/dissatisfaction relationships in the IGRS domain. Relative to social identity theory, out-group member's feelings of disadvantaged-ness lies central to the notion that individuals will experience feelings of discrimination. Existing measures from the literature on discrimination (Garstka *et al.*, 2005) would also provide the basis for identifying key antecedents in an IGRS model.

Consequences of IGRS may include both negative and positive measurable effects drawn from both literature streams. The literature on adaptive selling can be a useful framework to explain how salespeople deal with IGRS. For example, Weitz *et al.* (1986) describe adaptive selling as the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation. They identify several categories of adaptive selling behavior – one of which is the two way communication process that is essential to selling (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2009). By adapting the communication process in IGRS, salespeople can make the necessary adjustments to their communication style (e.g. professionalism, youthful energy), and source factors (e.g. similarity, credibility, dependability) based on perceived intergenerational differences with the buyer. Existing measures from the adaptive selling literature would be the basis for further empirical study of IGRS consequences. In the case of negative seller disconfirmation, feelings of discrimination may emerge resulting in psychological effects such as low job specific self-esteem and task self-efficacy. For resilient salespeople, such feelings could be motivators to increase work effort and/or alter selling strategies.

This topic also has implications for cross-cultural research. Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions of power distance and individualism/collectivism may be studied relative to their moderating influences on how salespeople perceive discrimination and IGRS cross culturally. Hofstede's work provides indices by country to allow researchers to collect data from specific sales cultures that would shed light on the pervasiveness of the IGRS phenomenon in a host of countries. The notion that salespeople with diverse cultural backgrounds may respond differently to intergenerational inequity may also warrant additional research to investigate whether managers should look to foreign sales resources to replace an aging US salesforce. Studying IGRS relative to this stream would address whether this is a viable solution (to a looming shortage of sales resources) and how this might affect the buyer-seller relationship.

Finally, the topic of IGRS can be examined from the buyer's point of view. By sampling purchasing managers and measuring their perceptions of dealing with sellers who are younger, we can add interesting insight as to whether the feelings perceived by sellers (from our study) are validated. Relative to buyers' perspectives, the buyer-seller relationship literatures provides a rich body to identify key antecedents to study. A few include buyers' perceptions of seller credibility (Ganesan and Hess, 1997), expertise (Liu and Leach, 2001), and trust in the seller (Doney and Cannon, 1997).

## 6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

As the buyer population ages and the number of Millennial salespeople entering the workforce increases, understanding the challenges and strategies of this generation of salespeople are of paramount importance for both theory and practice. The qualitative findings among the Millennial salespeople in our study confirm that IGRS issues are prevalent in today's selling environment. However, the good news is that Millennial salespeople are attempting to diffuse such obstacles with selling strategies designed to overcome any relationship building barriers that IGRS creates. Given that so many salespeople from this (Millennial) generation are earmarked to serve the sales profession for many years to come, their approach to relating with intergenerational buyers should serve them well in fostering productive buyer-seller relationships.

A limitation of our study should be pointed out and stems from our sampling frame, which consisted more of a convenience sample, than true theoretical sampling. Because we were dealing with subjects that were networked through the business college, it is possible that the sample was biased toward those with business backgrounds. It is quite possible that the education and training afforded to these salespeople as a part of their coursework may have provided them with a level of selling preparation separate from other Millennial salespeople who are beginning their sales careers. In particular, most of the salespeople that participated in the interviews had majored or minored in professional sales programs offered at universities. This preparation may have provided them with confidence and impression management strategies not necessarily available to all salespeople. However, it provides the advantage of highlighting some proven strategies, which might be useful to the practicing sales manager, recruiter, or trainer. Further analysis which deliberately sought out individuals to test these findings outside of those exposed to sales in school, and beyond those exposed to business colleges would certainly aid in understanding the robustness of the findings. It might also yield what we did not find, and that would be insight into the types of incidents of IGRS.

Finally, as with any use of qualitative, and particularly grounded theory style, research, the findings may be colored by the researchers own biases and interests. We would encourage a further exploration of the area by others, as well as qualitative testing of the propositions contained herein.

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## Appendix. Interview questionnaire

### Examples

- Provide me with an example of you building a relationship with and selling to a customer from a different generation (i.e. IGRS). Describe the situation and outcomes?
- Do you feel equipped to build relationships in order to sell to customers that are of a different generation? Why or why not?
- How do you typically deal with this issue (of building a relationship with and selling to customer from a different generation)?

### Problems and implications

- How important do you think IGRS is in making you more effective in selling? Explain?
- Provide me an example where IGRS has been an obstacle to you and how did you handle it?
- Provide me an example where IGRS has been an advantage to you and how did you handle it?
- What are some of the key issues you face relative to IGRS?

### Training

- What kind of training did you have on IGRS?
- Have you used the training concepts in your own efforts? How? Does it work?
- How would you change the training to best prepare you for IGRS?

### Research questions

- What more would you like to know about this topic?
- What three research questions would you recommend be studied relative to IGRS?

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## Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.*

If you're a twenty-something salesperson who knows their product or service well and is enthusiastic about helping the customer, how discouraging it must be to be met with comments such as:

You know they are thinking how old are you, 22 or 23? You don't have enough experience to know what you are doing ...

One person actually told me I was young and dumb.

Welcome to the world of the Millennial salesperson – i.e. those born after 1981 – who face the hurdles of overcoming the judgment and skepticism of customers who are, for the most part, older. Based on their age, the Millennial salesperson seems to be subjected to a level of scrutiny and discrimination from buyers that create an added layer of frustrating obstacles to an already challenging trade. Due to inexperience; their competence, credibility, dependability, and overall ability to support customer needs are questioned.

But it is not just a problem for the young salespeople and their employers; it is much wider than that, for the imbalance between ages among sellers and buyers is likely to grow. Labor numbers reveal an imbalance on the horizon in the relationships between professional salespeople and purchasing agents/buyers. An aging of the workforce, the number of available new entrants into the workforce, and the tendency towards early retirement have combined to this imbalance – a trend exacerbated in the sales industry where the number of business-to-business salespeople is expected to grow 9–25 percent through 2016, faster than other sectors.

Given generational differences, it is not surprising that the Millennial salesperson faces challenges and clash-points when dealing with a buyer from the Baby Boomer or Generation X generations. To compound the issue, research on the topic of generational differences in the workplace reveals that management does a poor job tailoring training and work preparation to the unique needs of each generation. This begs the questions: Can productive buyer-seller relationships be forged between these diverse groups? and: Why does relationship building pose such a challenge?

In “How salespeople deal with intergenerational relationship selling”, Ellen Bolman Pullins *et al.* try to better understand the roots of these challenges, turning to the literatures on expectancy theory, discrimination, stereotyping, and social identity theory. In essence, intergenerational relationship selling (IGRS) represents in-group/out-group

stereotyping based on age cues. This serves as a source of dissatisfaction to the seller because of the inequities perceived in the interaction with buyers.

The study confirms that intergenerational selling challenges do indeed exist and that salespeople deal with them without the benefit of formal IGRS training. Few sales organizations include such a training topic, yet salespeople mentioned that they wish they had exposure to this type of training. Managers can take steps to incorporate IGRS into the training and development curriculum. At the very least, managers should make Millennial salespeople aware that they are going to face such challenges. Subsequently, all this can be used to augment the account plan (e.g. researching the customer's hobbies or interests) or call planning process (e.g. invitation to special interest seminars or workshops). Sales managers should reinforce such preparation and spend time coaching and role-playing to train their young sellers to respond appropriately when faced with a comment, objection, or IGRS obstacle.

The importance of establishing credibility and dependability becomes magnified as salespeople attempt to overcome the relationship-building barrier of a lack of commonalities. Understanding that buyers may have a tendency to prejudge a Millennial salesperson relative to his/her knowledge, reliability, work ethic, etc, managers can reinforce the importance of preparedness for the sales call. If a salesperson goes into a sales call armed with the background research (of the buyer's business), a strong base of product/

service knowledge, and a professional attitude – the buyer is likely to experience unexpected levels of these important seller attributes. Sales managers can play an important role to prepare, train, develop, and coach Millennial salespeople to this end.

On a positive note, some Millennial salespeople were actually motivated by the age gap and used their energy, personality, and character to create a positive selling advantage.

“Since I have less experience using these products, I am able to ask a lot of questions and make them feel that they are helping me understand more of the products’ applications. They seem very willing to help me learn and at the same time, I am able to listen and pick up on their problems, issues, and concerns...”

“Being younger provides some positives ... having more energy, not having to worry about a family ... the hunger to succeed seems to be a function of someone my age. Older customers tend to respond to all this favorably.”

Such positive energy seems to serve multiple purposes. For one, it may positively disconfirm the buyer's expectations – serving to offset some of the negative perceptions that older-generations of buyers have of the Millennial generation.

*(A précis of the article “How salespeople deal with intergenerational relationship selling”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)*