

Communicating Across Generations

Information Sheet

Communicating across generations is challenging in any field. It is especially challenging in farm and ranch transfer situations because they often are emotionally charged. Today five generations are actively involved in farming and ranching and it can be tricky to balance beliefs and expectations between them.

Between the Traditionalists who were born before 1946, and the Zoomers who were born after 1996, communication channels have changed dramatically. No longer limited to being in person, writing letters and using land line telephones, today people communicate virtually and digitally, through a computer screen, internet, text messages and social media platforms.

Yet with as much as 40 percent of American farmland owned by seniors aged 65 and older, successful farm and ranch transfers often rely on intergenerational exchange. Embracing differences and moving beyond them builds empathy and trust, cornerstones of successful relationships which lead to successful farm and ranch transfers. Other ways to build relationships include things like sharing family stories, preparing a favorite meal, teaching a new skill, or sharing life experiences.

Each generation is shaped by history and brings a set of social beliefs and filters through which it sees the world. While not every person will share them, each generation has its own personality. When building relationships between people of different generations, it is helpful to keep in mind their common traits and the ways they prefer to communicate.

The chart on the following page summarizes the common traits, communication styles, and preferred modes of communication between the five generations:

1. Traditionalists, born between ~1927 and 1945.
2. Baby Boomers, born between ~1946 and 1964.
3. Gen X, born between ~1965 and 1980.
4. Millennials, born between ~1981 and 1996.
5. Gen Z, born between ~1997 and 2012.

SNAPSHOT OF KEY TRAITS OF 5 GENERATIONS

Generation	Roughly Born Between	Common Traits	Communication Style	Communication Modes
Traditionalists aka The Silent Generation	1927-1945	Conservative and comfortable with “command and control” leadership, Traditionals have a strong work ethic, are disciplined, risk and conflict averse, and hierarchical. They tend to be private, respect rules and authority and believe in duty and sacrifice.	Appreciate being consulted Formal Grammatical Respectful Silent	One-on-one Telephone Written
Baby Boomers aka Boomers	1946-1964	Accepting of diversity and more liberal than Traditionalists, Baby Boomers tend to follow the “chain of command.” Competitive, optimistic, and goal oriented, they coined the term “workaholic.” Team players, they are loyal, favor group decision-making and self-sacrifice, and appreciate security.	Appreciate background information Direct Formal Outspoken Use digital technology but technically challenged	Email Face to face In-person meetings Telephone Voicemail
Gen X aka Baby Bust	1965-1980	Gen Xers tend to be adaptable and entrepreneurial. While favoring collaborative processes, they are independent, individualistic and pragmatic. They seek work/life balance and are skeptical of authority.	Appreciate continuous feedback Courteous Informal Restrained	Email Telephone Texting Social media Voicemail
Millennials aka Gen Y	1981-1996	Adaptable, collaborative, and entrepreneurial, Millennials are confident, comfortable with technology, and thought to be demanding. Fast paced, fun loving and flexible, they seek work/life balance. Independent, tech savvy multitaskers, they are socially responsible and value teamwork and collective action.	Appreciate daily communication and continuous feedback Authentic Informal Outspoken	Coordination technology Email Social media Texting
Gen Z aka Zoomers	1997-2015	The most diverse generation, Zoomers are authentic and inclusive. They use gender neutral pronouns and are tuned into social and environmental causes. Fast paced and tech savvy, they process large amounts of information quickly, expect instant feedback and use technology as an extension of themselves.	Appreciate frank, to-the-point, “in-person” interactions Authentic Avoid confrontation Casual Concise Visual	Coordination technology Face to face Social media Texting



This resource is part of American Farmland Trust's [Farm Transfer Toolkit](#) which is available on AFT's [Farmland Information Center website](#). The toolkit walks agricultural landowners through key steps in a farm transfer process. It contains information, worksheets and other tools to help users set goals, assess their finances, communicate with stakeholders, and work with professionals to finalize decisions and implement a transfer plan.