

How Marketing Helps Retain and Attract New Talent: Raising the Bar for the Next 'Toolbelt Generation' | Stephanie Woodcock | Too Creative |



The construction industry has long struggled with a labor shortage, but new data shows that 'Gen Z-ers' are choosing careers in the trades rather than ones that require a four-year degree and high college debt.

College costs have increased 136% (when adjusted for inflation) over the past 40 years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The Wall Street Journal reports that "the skilled trades are newly appealing to the youngest cohort of American workers, many of whom are choosing to leave the college path," calling Generation Z the next "Toolbelt Generation."

How do we attract and retain this new talent?

This may surprise you... but my answer is... ramp up your marketing.

Build a marketing plan that strengthens your brand, encourages engagement, and showcases recent awards, projects, signature clients, and brand differentiators.

A company's worth is only as good as its people. Build your company's intellectual capital with a strategy that engages all generations and maximizes the differences of each.

Here are a few ways companies can attract and retain the next generation of workers:

- Training, Safety, and Mentorship Programs
- Community Engagement
- Education Opportunities
- Higher Pay & Quality Benefits
- Association Involvement
- New Technologies
- Career Recruitment Videos & Updated Materials
- Goal setting & Personal Development Classes
- Outlining the path to upward mobility and a lifelong career in construction

ADP reports 2024 as the fourth year the median annual pay for new construction hires ranks higher than earning for new hires in both the professional services and information sectors, such as accountants or IT workers.

Possibly this ambitious Generation Z is learning from their predecessors – the Millennials – many of whom are buried in college debt and still seeking meaningful careers and upward mobility in the professional sectors.

Interestingly this trend comes at a time when the construction industry is undergoing a makeover of sorts on its own – organically.

Safety, security, community, culture – are all buzzwords we hear more in this industry than before.

But they mean something this time – backed up by real marketing.

Most of my clients don't have extra time for marketing. They are hard at work doing the demanding work of building great companies and making clients happy.

So when we do marketing, we make it authentic and make it count. No marketing jargon.

Accurately portraying the identity and meaning of our company's staying power is the priority.

A real life example:

One of my subcontractor clients didn't think it was necessary to submit an award application for a significant project that had recently received national attention and met rigorous standards of safety.

The client:

Why do we want to get more recognition in front of general contractors when we already have more work than we can handle?

My answer:

To build your brand value. Winning awards for signature projects not only invests in your brand and reputation, but also shows your employees and future talent (your greatest capital) they made the right choice coming to work for your company.

Investing in the right marketing, building your culture, showcasing your identity and spotlighting your projects engages employees, encourages a team building attitude, and promotes a lasting culture.

But we need to do more.

Generation Z wants more in a job than what their parents had, as many working in the trade industries carried the stigma of "dirty jobs" or "low end jobs." We can change that.

The authentic representation of our safety culture, employee training, on the job experience, and mission to serve the customer are key takeaways that can attract and retain the right employees.

Clients look at companies' websites. They want to see an accurate picture of the company's essence and capabilities. With that, they want to see aspects of culture, longevity, employee retention, project capabilities – all elements of your intellectual capital – because that is what they are hiring.

In the same way, the next "toolbelt generation" wants to see the same thing. They are the new clients.

They want the bells and whistles from an industry used to only giving the nuts and bolts.

How do we do more?

- 1.) Utilize and learn new technology to worker smarter, not harder.
- 2.) Upgrade our websites, mobile sites, landing pages and career pages. Having a slow loading, outdated website turns off the techie, Gen Z worker.

- 3.) Provide training in soft skills for those who want to shift careers from trade labor to estimating and project management. Not everyone wants the “office job” as a project manager, but some do. Find those people and have a training system that hones those skills.
- 4.) Get to know your workforce through community building programs.
- 5.) Utilize trade associations, community colleges, and union partners to provide training and certifications.
- 6.) Get the word out about job opportunities that involve less labor but utilize the knowledge of hands-on workers – estimating, supervising and managing projects are all occupations that a person who has hands-on field experience can excel at.
- 7.) Keep educating the customer base about the technology and equipment that the AEC industry uses to make the world a better place.

These jobs are the opposite of “dead end” so called “dirty jobs”. They are an opportunity to be a part of legacy companies building something great.

I would venture to say the Gen Z worker sees through the corporate image of the “American dream.” They use technology to game the status quo. They don’t want to work in a cubicle or computer screen for 50 years.

Nor do they want to be a slave to their low paying entry level job because of disproportionately high student debt.

They want freedom, upward mobility, autonomy, a career path, authentic work that allows them to think outside the box and advance in a desirable set of skills.

Let’s give them the bells and whistles... to go along with the nuts and bolts.