How to Catch a Boomerang

By Sue Hays CBC

When I was young and growing up in Iowa, somehow one of my younger brothers got a hold of a boomerang from somewhere, threw it at me (totally undeserved, I assure you), and it bonked me on the head. “Time out” does not begin to describe the level of trouble he got himself into for that move!

Fast-forward to today, where the word “boomerang” is once again appearing in the popular press. I recall it being used several years ago to describe the phenomenon of young people returning to their home town to raise their children away from the big cities.

Now the term is being used to describe the behavior of the Millenial generation. Millenials have a tendency to switch jobs every 2 to 3 years to try something different, in complete contrast to the Boomers who got a job and stayed put until retirement.

I think that the term “boomerang” can be applied to our non-profit world to describe how people might manage their membership or their participation in our organization. This has always been happening, in my experience, and I suggest that there are some systems we can put in place to acknowledge and prepare for boomerangs. Here’s what I’m thinking:

* Membership: We all have Millenials in our membership, and they are one of the largest growing groups of consumers we’ve got. They are not going to conform to old-fashioned or traditional ways; they are going to find another way to get the services they need if they can’t get the services in the format they prefer. This means we may have to be more agile in our approach to membership. Can we solve this right now? Probably not. But we can be aware it’s out there, on the horizon. When we lose a member, we can:
  + Talk to them – not email them – and find out what’s happening that caused them to drop their membership.
  + Include them in our general email list – don’t drop them completely unless they request it.
  + Be sure they know the door is open when they are ready to return.
* Events: Millenials like collaboration, and they are very good at it. This means that the traditional Business After Hours or Mixer events might not result in the same success as in the past. In my experience with membership in chambers across the US, the key decision makers I want to talk to do not attend these events. Their sales and marketing people do, and this group may not be of interest to the Millenials. If we keep in mind that Millenials like to change jobs every 2 to 3 years to gain diverse experiences, and the fact that they like collaboration and are very good at it, I ask you what kind of an events can you design that would:
  + Get them the chance to talk to key decision makers at companies
  + Allow them to collaborate on a project or a situation
  + Engage them with your organization at a level where they clearly see how beneficial you are to their careers and their lives

In summary, I’m suggesting that we need to be aware of this emerging group of current and prospective members. When they change jobs every 2 to 3 years, chances are pretty good that they might return to a prior employer somewhere down the road or work for a non-member company. In either case, you want them to already be primed to boomerang back to your organization for the services you offer and they need.