### **Communicating Across Generations**

By Sandy Sponaugle

### HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH AUDIENCES RANGING FROM GENERATION Z TO THE SILENT GENERATION

This article explores different examples of organizations that were targeting millennials and Gen Z's. It also looks at examples in traditional economic development where organizations need to reach a more mature generation. Interviews with six economic developers are featured throughout the article. In each scenario, there are key strategies that can provide inspiration for more effective communications across the board, whether you're a one-person office or have a team of 20+ people inside your organization. Effective communications are necessary for everything from marketing campaigns to reports for stakeholders to running your organization internally.

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# communicating across

**GENERATIONS** 

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e hear all the time that it's important to know your target audience. But why is it so important? You can't communicate with everyone all the time. And when you try to, communications will be flat. However, an Economic Development Organization has more than one target audience it needs to reach, which might include existing businesses, potential new businesses, an expanding workforce, and stakeholders. The people in these audiences may range from the 18-year-old Gen Z to the more mature Baby Boomer or Silent Generation.

The question then becomes: how can we communicate effectively to different generations? We often think about this issue in regards to reaching millennials. But we also need to resonate successfully with other members of the population, like the Gen X executive or the Baby Boomer CEO. This also isn't limited to workforce attraction initiatives. Effective communications are necessary for everything from marketing campaigns to reports for stakeholders to running your organization internally.

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#### Breakdown for each generation:

The Silent Generation: Born 1928 - 1945 (73-90 years old)
Baby Boomers: Born 1946 - 1964 (54-72 years old)
Generation X: Born 1965 - 1980 (38-53 years old)
Millennials: Born 1981 - 1996 (22-37 years old)
Generation Z: Born 1997-Present (0-21 years old)

### HOW DOES YOUR AUDIENCE WANT TO RECEIVE INFORMATION?

When thinking about how to market to a specific demographic, a key rule of thumb is this: Share information in the way that your target audience wants to receive it, versus what your personal preferences are.

A common marketing mistake that many EDOs make is sticking to the way they personally feel most comfortable communicating, instead of investigating how their target audience wants to receive information. This might require getting out of their comfort zone, doing some experimenting, and embracing some new technology, especially when it comes to reaching millennials or Gen Z.

# EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY TO COMMUNICATE WITH MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z

Millennials and Gen Z aren't exclusively focused on technology, but it is a big part of their lives. Isn't it a big part of everyone's lives these days? We'll dive into some examples where organizations engaged with their millennial and Gen Z audiences in new ways, but we'll also show how they created and implemented these plans in manageable ways that suited their community and organizational culture.

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This article explores different examples of organizations that were targeting millennials and Gen Z's. It also looks at examples in traditional economic development where organizations need to reach a more mature generation. Interviews with six economic developers are featured throughout the article. In each scenario, there are key strategies that can provide inspiration for more effective communications across the board, whether you're a one-person office or have a team of 20+ people inside your organization. Effective communications are necessary for everything from marketing campaigns to reports for stakeholders to running your organization internally.

The following specific case studies focus on several organizations that embraced technology to reach millennials and Gen Z's in Minneapolis St. Paul and Anne Arundel County, MD.

### "WE STARTED BY LISTENING – NOT TALKING" GREATER MSP'S SUCCESSFUL YOUTUBE CAMPAIGN

Greater Minneapolis St. Paul created a targeted multimedia campaign to technology professionals to draw them towards jobs and internships in the community. The campaign was successful – reaching 284,605 engagements in 10 metros. The regional talent initiative driving this campaign called Make It. MSP. later received IEDC's 2018 Gold Award for Human Capital. They looked at this not just as a marketing campaign, but as a movement to drive traffic to their website and ultimately define the community.

A key part of the strategy started with learning about the target audience through focus groups and surveys. Peter Frosch, CEO of the Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Economic Development Partnership (GREATER MSP), shared that this was the foundational secret to their organization's successful tech initiative, as well as many other campaigns. "We started by listening, not by talking," he said.



They spoke with over 6,000 people in focus groups of different ages, races, and backgrounds to find out what was really important to mobile professionals, including those already living in Minneapolis-Saint Paul and others living in 20 other metros around the U.S.

The data gave them information about their key audiences, which led to the creation of audience segmentation and key strategies. And then, they responded in a way that felt most authentic for them as a community.

The primary target audience for this campaign was millennials, but it was also not limited to millennials. The organization used mixed platforms of web, video, testimonials, social media, and live events, resulting in a very relatable campaign that resonates both with millennials and those in older age ranges. Minneapolis St. Paul is fortunate to have the corporate headquarters of Target within the community, which is a great starting point for younger millennials.



One of these events was the "MSP Welcome Week," which they also highlighted in a YouTube video. This video included testimonials of MSP transplants of varying ages and races – from young millennials through Baby Boomers.

They created YouTube videos, like "Interning in Minneapolis St. Paul" which features a young woman sharing why she decided to find an internship in St. Paul and what she loves about living there. Having her share her story and sing the praises of relocating to Minneapolis St. Paul is much more effective than someone inside the organization "selling" you on the value of working or living there.

It also wasn't all social media and technology. One key data point they found in their focus groups was that new-comers to MSP or any region can feel isolated if they don't make personal connections quickly. So they created meet-up opportunities for newcomers to connect and enjoy the town once they've relocated.



We often neglect to ask our community for help because we don't want to bother people. Through making simple asks, we can get a really great buy-in. Especially from an economic development perspective, people are going to be inclined to help you out because they want their community to be successful and thrive.

Whether you're communicating with people just like you or speaking to generations outside of yours, imagine how your recipient likes to receive information. What colors, images, language, and words would appeal to them? What kind of media would get their attention? Determining what messaging will resonate with a specific target audience requires a lot of talking, testing, interviewing, and trial and error.

Perhaps you don't have the budget to lead focus groups totaling 6,000 people like Greater MSP did. You might think of focus groups as being massively expensive. However, you could do something as easy and informal as a mini focus group over pizzas in your office. Or, you could go into a business you'd like to replicate, with the types of employees you want to target, and ask them questions. You could also create an online survey using a Google form or SurveyMonkey.com. Then, email it to your newsletter list, share it on social media, or ask specific people to fill out the survey.

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Let's take a look at another multimedia campaign targeting millennials.

### WHAT IF I'M A ONE-PERSON OFFICE?

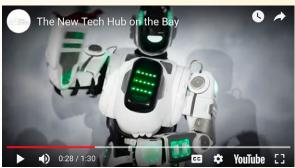
If you're a one-person office, you may not have the time to learn new technologies. While you might not be able to create the savvy digital YouTube campaign, you can still narrow your focus to a specific target market and start there.

Perhaps you're comfortable using LinkedIn. Focus on the target audience you can reach on LinkedIn and be strategic in your outreach efforts, making all your communications very specific to that audience.

After that, move your focus to millennials or Gen Z. Consider bringing on an intern or a millennial in your community or from another partner organization who could help identify the types of content and communication that would be most resonant with this audience, and then you could execute.

### HOW ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION USED DISRUPTIVE VIDEO TO REACH A SKILLED MILLENNIAL WORKFORCE

It was the kind of video that some generations might not like. It had fast cuts, a shaky camera, lights flashing, images constantly changing, and loud music going between rock and roll to classical with sharp cuts in between. The music stops for a moment as an A.I. robot says, "Anne Arundel County offers a disruption to your disruptive career."



The video itself was exactly that – a disruption. It was the kind of video that Baby Boomers might find to be too loud, too shaky, and too choppy. But... the millennial target audience loved it. In fact, they loved it so much that it was viewed over 38,000 times and later garnered an award from the Maryland Economic Development Association.



This tech-focused recruiting video was part of a campaign by Anne Arundel County to reach a highly educated and skilled millennial workforce for their cyber tech community. Their goal? Targeting millennials to get them to understand what Anne Arundel County has and why they should consider employment opportunities with the companies located here. A primary economic development team player in this campaign was Allison Akers, marketing and outreach manager, Anne Arundel Economic Development Corporation (AAEDC). "We decided that video was the best type of media to resonate with the millennial tech audience and showcase the region and quality of life in the community."

This video was pushed out primarily through Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. The organization also utilized influencer marketing via a platform called ContentAmp, which allows influencers to get talking points about the video so they can blast it out to their followers. The allure of digital media is that they were able to focus their money towards targeted campaigns and get a bigger bang for their buck, which AAEDC did with a budget of just \$1,000.

This is a campaign that can and will expand. Now that the organization knows what works, it can put more of a budget behind it in future iterations and develop it further.

This campaign proves that you do not need a giant budget to start utilizing technology. Start with where you are and what you can do, and you can grow from there.

### COMMUNICATING WITH GEN X, BABY BOOMERS, AND THE SILENT GENERATION

The Gen X and Baby Boomer generations are certainly engaged on social media, watching videos online, checking Twitter for news and growing their network on LinkedIn. This being said, they are doing many of the same things that millennials are doing – but they are doing it a little differently.

This demographic might still be reading a daily newspaper with their morning coffee. However that paper might be split between a combination of different formats – print, online or in a daily podcast environment on the ride to the office. This doesn't mean that the welcome event that MSP did for new residents might not work perfectly well for an older demographic, but in the planning of this type of event, you'll need to be very aware of your audience and how they want to connect and interact with others.

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Just like every millennial is not created equal, every Gen X and every Baby Boomer is not either. You might have a Baby Boomer who has a Gen Z child and as a result has kept up to date with technology. They might even play with Snapchat filters, but this doesn't mean it's their preferred method of communication – especially for work.

### CREATING A DIVERSE PORT-FOLIO OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Annie Davis of Salt Lake City's Department of Economic Development shares: "We are dealing with generational issues and are very aware we can't target all of them in the same way. We have a diverse portfolio of how we communicate what we do to our internal and external audiences."

Within their communication portfolio is a Friday report that goes to the mayor's office, a digital newsletter seen by city staff, partners and contacts, in-person business visits, and roundtable discussions – both with housing and real estate firms and developers, and with young tech entrepreneurs.

They also have a weekly earned media spot with a local TV station's 6 a.m. morning show. Earned media refers to media that isn't paid for, as opposed to paid advertising. In this case, they have coverage on the local news show without having to pay for the air time. "The focus is on branding our department and our talented staff. So many times, one of us will be out and about in the community and someone says, 'I saw you this morning on the news!" says Davis. This is a way of reaching the local audience of Generation X and Baby Boomers that is getting up early to go to work in the morning and reminding them of the initiatives taking place.

### BABY BOOMERS: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE NETWORKING

"One of the things I'm finding is that when targeting entrepreneurs, it's a younger demographic. When it gets into site selection, it tends to be an older demographic, and therefore the approach is different," says Laura Perdew, Director of Communications of the Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce in Irvine, California. She shared that when targeting Generation X or Baby Boomers, it tends to be all about networking.

Perdew offered an example of the powerful new business development director who attracts new members into Chambers. He has a fantastic presence on social media and he also embraces the power of face-to-face networking. The combination of in-person events and then online social connections (like LinkedIn) are highly effective marketing techniques for all generations.

# CREATING PERSONAS IN EACH TARGET MARKET

When you're approaching marketing from the generational perspective, it's important not only to focus on their age range but to find out all the details that make them individuals. Jennifer Wakefield, interim president & CEO and senior vice president of marketing with Greater Richmond Partnership, shares that her organization crafts personas for each target audience and initiative. "We have different personas for different types of CEOs," she says. Even if they are

similar in generation, if they are in different markets, they require different personas.

To create the personas, they look at the age, but they don't stop there. What are their values? Do they have children? Where are they located?

Following are some examples of personas an organization could have:

- Linda, the Tech Executive Could be mid-30's, female, more active online and that will be how she receives most of her information.
- Ron, the Fortune 500 CEO Could be early 50's with grown children. Active on LinkedIn and Facebook, but Facebook is reserved for personal use – not business.
- Austin, the New College Graduate 22 years old.
  Looking for a job that brings him great joy and
  career satisfaction. Sees room for growth and will
  relocate. Hasn't known a life without the Internet.
  Active on SnapChat and Instagram. Utilizes Facebook to connect with family. Hasn't gotten active on
  LinkedIn yet.

Obviously, these are all fictitious examples. Talk with real people in each target demographic and ask questions. [See sample questionnaire in the chart.]

### TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR TARGET CUSTOMER

What questions should you ask to clarify your target customer? Here are some sample questions to ask existing business owners whom you'd like to replicate in your community.

Custo	mar	Into	rmation:

Industry:	
Where do they live:	
What is their job position in the industry:	
What is their approximate age range:	

#### **Customer Questions:**

What are the advantages of doing business here?
What are the disadvantages of doing business here?
What is it that you love about living in this community?
What is it that you don't like about living in this community?

How would you describe your ability to recruit and retain employees?

What would you say about the quality of workforce from acceptability perspective?

What is one thing that surprised you about doing business here?

What were your biggest challenges that were solved by living and working here?

How do you describe the cost of doing business here? How do you evaluate the ROI of your business location?

What specific programs / services has your business benefited from (financing, loan programs, training assistance, etc)?

#### **Personal Questions:**

Do you have children? Are they living at home?

Are you involved in the community?

Are you on social media? On which platform do you spend the most time (personal / work)?

What kind of media do you read, watch, or listen to? Local news, radio, newspapers, online blogs or podcasts?

What are your interests outside of work?

Similarly, Wakefield has a lot of conversations with site selection consultants to better understand who they are in detail and adds them to her list of targeted personas.

The more details you can drill down within each specific audience, the better. This allows you to create relatable campaigns that get their attention.

If you're working within a large organization, you might have the luxury of having people within all demographics working with you. If you're part of a small

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Maybe if you're within that generational demographic and you're talking peer to peer, you can draw on some of your preferences. However, even if you're in the same age range, you may differ in other ways, such as: male/female, single/married, values, location, etc. In this case, you may need to tap into your community in order to learn more about different demographics.

Jennifer Wakefield says that once they figure out the personas, they tweak the phrasing and the visuals of the marketing campaign based on what would resonate with that persona – while keeping the core messaging intact. One helpful technique is to actually give a name to each persona, such as "Site Selection Consultant Sally". This can help you see them as "real people" and better tailor your messages. The key is to still fit the brand voice while using different approaches for different personas. Then, they target audiences in the places where they are already spending their time, using different social media platforms to reach different generations.

When trying to reach the personas in the Generation X or Baby Boomer generations, they may go to Facebook, utilizing phrasing differently than when reaching out to someone who might locate a company there. When trying to reach executives, they use sponsored content on LinkedIn.

When trying to reach younger millennials or Gen Z, they'll do it not as much on Facebook but perhaps on Instagram or Snapchat. Why? Because that's where younger millennials and Gen Z prefer to hang out.

### FIND OUT WHAT'S MOST EFFECTIVE BY MEASURING RESULTS

Ultimately, how will you know what is the most effective marketing campaign for the audience you are trying to reach? You need to track your data and measure your results.

Jennifer Wakefield of Greater Richmond Partnership says, "What works for one industry won't necessarily work for another – even if it's the same type of CEO with the same age and the same likes. Trial and error can and should be a part of finding what works and measurement is the most critical piece. Through measuring results, you can look back to see what's working and what isn't working."

When you collect this data, you can use it in an annual report, presentation to elected officials, presentations to community partners, and in your regular communications with stakeholders.

#### **COMMUNICATING TO STAKEHOLDERS**

As an EDO, you aren't only communicating with site selectors, investors, or entrepreneurs. Your communication strategy also needs to include ways of explaining to your stakeholders and board of directors why your strategy will work and what you are doing. This may be even more important when your campaign is targeted towards an audience like the younger millennials. A disruptive YouTube video that gets the attention of 25-year-olds may have the opposite effect on a Baby Boomer stakeholder.

At the end of the year, how can you get stakeholders and elected officials to see the value of increasing your budget so you can get more staff on your team and more marketing dollars? To justify a budget increase, you need to be able to show them your increased activities, results, and productivity through the year.

Annie Davis of Salt Lake City's Department of Economic Development noted earlier that every Friday, they send a report to the mayor's office. They also create a digital newsletter that goes to the mayor, communications offices, city council and public as well, which justifies what they are doing and what they have accomplished.

### COMMUNICATING ACROSS GENERATIONS INSIDE YOUR ORGANIZATION

The elephant in the room is that we aren't just communicating across generations when it comes to marketing. We also have to communicate across generations in the workplace. And this comes with its fair share of challenges.

I recently surveyed my audience asking their experiences with other generations. Here are a couple of the reactions:

A Baby Boomer said: "I find that I do alright with the Silent, Baby Boomers, and Gen X. It is harder for me to communicate with Gen Y (tend to get impatient) or Gen Z - they tend to communicate entirely on different platforms, know another level of shorthand that I don't, and know/realize that in their eyes, they see me as parental, or almost 'old'."

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### THE BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR EACH GENERATION

With 77 percent of people in the United States on social media and an estimated 2.34 billion worldwide<sup>1</sup>, you may be wondering: what are the best social media platforms for each generation?

#### Facebook:

- The largest social media network worldwide at this point in time with 1.5 billion+ active daily users.
- Facebook is a great place to reach everyone from millennials to Baby Boomers.
- More than half of Americans in every age group say they are on Facebook, except for those over 65.
- In the U.S., 82 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds and 79 percent of 30 to 49-year-olds have Facebook accounts.
- 34 percent of online U.S. teenagers think that Facebook is "for old people."

Source: https://blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-demographics/

#### LinkedIn:

- A place to build your professional network and make connections.
- Looking to recruit college graduates for your workforce, or connect with senior-level influencers? Go to LinkedIn!
- 61 million LinkedIn users are senior level influencers and 40 million are in decision-making positions.
- 13 percent of millennials and Gen Z (15-34) use LinkedIn.
- Over 39 million students and recent college graduates are on LinkedIn.

Source: https://www.omnicoreagency.com/linkedin-statistics/

#### Instagram:

- A very visual, user-friendly platform and a great place to tell stories through photos, videos, and small captions.
- Instagram attracts millennials and Gen Z as its primary users.
- 59 percent of internet users between 18-29 use Instagram.
- 33 percent of internet users between 30-49 use Instagram.
- 72 percent of teens use Instagram.

Source: https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/

#### Snapchat:

- A place where users can post or privately send photos and videos that are only available for 24 hours.
- If you want to reach millennials and Gen Z, Snapchat is a great way to become relevant and heighten your organization's visibility within this audience.
- 71 percent of Snapchat users are under 34 years old.
- People under the age of 25 use Snapchat for 40 minutes on average every day, more than Instagram's latest stat for the same demographic.
- 45 percent of Snapchat users are 18-24.

Source: https://www.omnicoreagency.com/snapchat-statistics/

### Twitter:

- The social media network where users post, reply and retweet 280-character messages, called "tweets."
- With an active economic development community, this social media network is a no-brainer for economic development organizations!
- 74 percent of Twitter users say they use the network to get their news.
- 37 percent of Twitter users are between 18-29.
- 25 percent of Twitter users are between 30-49.

Source: https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/

A millennial shared: "I've been in multiple meetings where the attendance is largely old generations (mainly Boomers) and they just sit around and badmouth millennials and how awful we are. It's extremely hard to want to work productively with groups that lay blame with millennials."

The judgments and perceptions of other generations can end up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy that ultimately blocks productivity, creativity, and easily flowing teamwork. So how can we move forward even with the judgments or frustrations of other generations?

### SHIFT YOUR PERCEPTIONS AND BE OPEN TO LEARNING FROM ANY AGE

If you have a diverse range of team members within your organization, this is actually a huge benefit for your team. The truth is that everyone brings a variety of perspectives to the table. Rather than seeing other generations as a problem to be dealt with, be open to

seeing what added value they can bring through their unique worldview and experiences.

Kim Clark of Baltimore Development Corporation noted that they have two team members who are 35 and 25, and they came up with a creative way of documenting business retention visits. They've created their own version of Salesforce CRM Software without the big price tag. They found a Google app which worked perfectly and helped the team transition to using it.

Everyone else in the office – ranging from millennials to Baby Boomers – had been used to using an Excel spreadsheet. They were in awe because this Google app was a tool they wanted and didn't know where to find it – and these two millennials found it.

Clark says, "In the past two years, I've made an effort to listen. If it's something we have tried, I look at it as how have we not done it in the ways you are suggesting."

Jennifer Wakefield is a former adjunct professor and manager of interns who has worked with close to 30 interns. "I've learned as much from mentees as they have from me. You can learn from anyone at any age. Make sure you have a wide enough circle of friends and influencers you interact with that you can turn to for advice."

When you have a diverse range of ages, everyone can draw on their own individual strengths and abilities, and then ask for the help of others when their techniques may not be working. If you are one of the many EDOs with teams of fewer than three people (maybe you're even a one-person office), don't let this stop you from getting that outside feedback or support. Connect with others in your community, with volunteers, or those in other organizations to get support.

#### **CREATE AMBASSADORS**

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Kim Clark shares that in her organization, they create ambassadors. For example, Ira, 37, is ambassador to new hires. It's his job to explain workplace dynamics such as: "bring your own coffee mug and make sure your coffee vessel has a lid on it."

"There are others who take people under their wing. One of their peers takes them on their outreach visits and shows the others how you sign out, track mileage, and other day-to-day duties of whatever their position is."

"The biggest adaptation is if we hire someone out of school they aren't used to the office environment. We had a few problem situations coming up with a young new hire, and I had to sit down and talk to him. That's when I realized that all the others on his team were Baby Boomers and he had no one on the team he could relate to. I had an older millennial take him under his wing and after that, everything changed."

At the end of the day, the goal is to maintain an employee versus losing someone who wasn't happy in the environment. Clark found that the answer was finding that ambassador who can be relatable and supportive for the new person.

### COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

A lot of challenges that crop up when multiple generations are working together can be overcome by more effective communications. Here are a few tips to help establish that communication.

Communicate your expectations clearly and up front. With all of your employees and subcontractors, be very clear about what you need from them, how you prefer to be communicated with, and at what frequency. You aren't a mind reader and neither are they. Be upfront about your expectations, and you give them a greater chance at success.

Notice what you take for granted about what you know to do. You might be accustomed to communicating in a certain way and get confused about why the millennial doesn't naturally pick up on it. If you have preferences, it's on you to assume the responsibility and explain them to your team members.

For example, with texting versus calling, millennials (and the emerging Gen Z coming into the workforce) have the default of texting. There's a time and place for texting, and a time and place for picking up the phone and dialing. It's up to you to train millennials and Gen Z's to work within your parameters and expectations.

If an issue comes up, have a conversation quickly and professionally before it escalates. The sooner you address the problem and provide guidance on what to do instead, the sooner you can peacefully resolve the issue.

Don't be afraid to communicate expectations again and again. Just like with your marketing messages, you may need to reinforce expectations multiple times.

Remember... none of us are born knowing the preferred etiquette of others. We all have to learn somewhere, and the learning curve takes patience from both parties.

#### CONCLUSION

Just as everything has changed in the past 20 years, everything will continue to change!

Personally as a Gen X, when I joined the workforce, I didn't have a laptop. I couldn't check email from my phone. There wasn't a large online social network where I could get in front with potential clients. As technology has evolved, all generations have been able to reap benefits.

In marketing, what worked five years ago may not work in the same way now. Nowadays, being strategic requires taking some chances and trying something new, and course-correcting along the way.

In many ways, we aren't so different, even with the generational gaps. No matter what generation you are, we all desire to feel seen, heard, and understood. In other ways, we *are* different. Through understanding our differences, we can better communicate with one another.

So as you look for ways to communicate better, make it your goal to engage in conversations, learn about the preferences of others, and get out of your comfort zone.

#### **ENDNOTES**

Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percent-age-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/

#### **INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED:**

- Allison Akers, Marketing and Outreach Manager, Anne Arundel Economic Development Corporation, Anne Arundel County, MD
- Kim Clark, Executive Vice President, Baltimore Development Corporation
- Annie Cutler Davis, Marketing and Research Manager, Department of Economic Development, Salt Lake City Corporation
- Peter Frosch, CEO, Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Economic Development Partnership
- Laura Perdew, Director of Communications, Greater Irvine Chamber of Commerce, Irvine, CA
- Jennifer Wakefield, Interim President & CEO and Senior Vice President, Marketing, Greater Richmond Partnership

