



# The Millennials Are Here





Don't worry; they are our  
clients and our teammates

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

MILLENNIALS! MILLENNIALS! MILLENNIALS! It seems we are bombarded by references to the millennials. Who are they? And why are they so important?

Simply defined, “millennials” are those persons born between 1982 and 2004. They’re given that name because most came of age around the year 2000—the millennial year.

This is the year the millennials overtake the boomers as the largest living generation. They are not to be ignored.

Authors and demographers William Strauss and Neil Howe are usually credited with using the term millennial as early as 1987, though you will also see the phrase “Generation Y” referring to this group—as different from “Generation X.”

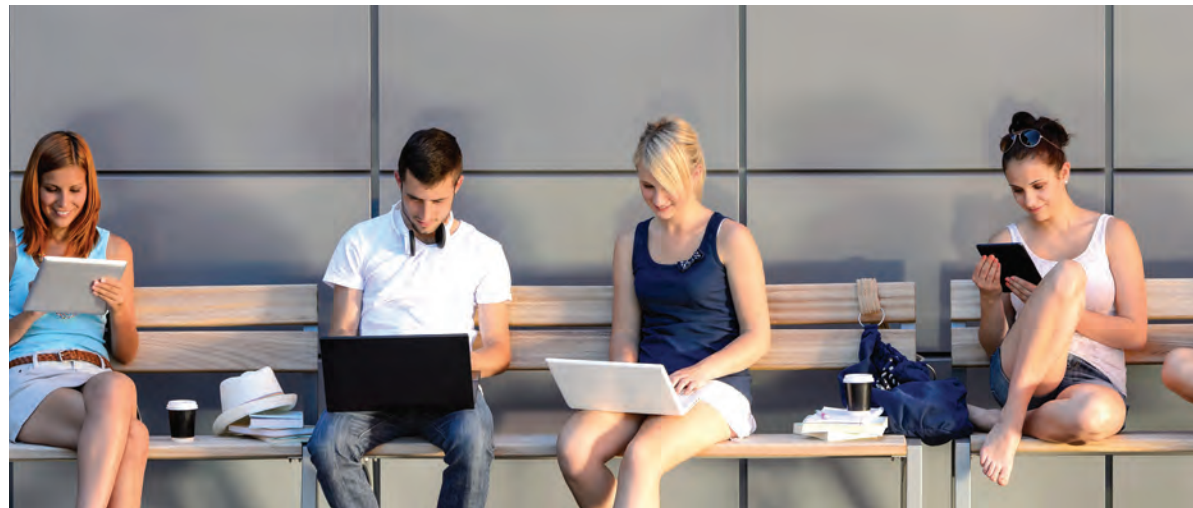
Though it is always dangerous to paint any group with a broad stroke, it has been nonetheless helpful to consider general characteristics of different generations as a way to understand differences. Each generation experiences “defining moments” in history that impact the thinking and actions of that generation. Each generation enjoys different styles of music and entertainment that emerge on the cultural scene. And each generation faces a different economic and political climate, which can affect attitudes and behaviors.

#### 4 generational cohorts

Demographers and other observers have traditionally defined four generations of adults currently living in this country:

- **Veterans** (born before 1945). These people are usually thought to be hardworking. They are savers (even hoarders) as a result of their experience with the Great Depression. During World War II, they accepted the duty that their country required.

- **Boomers** (born between 1946 and 1964). This group includes the hippies and dreamers. They are often recognized as having brought new forms of music to popularity. Eager to change the world, many in this group ushered in social changes regarding race relations, women’s roles, and the “war on poverty.”
- **Gen Xers** (born between 1965 and 1981). Many of those born during these years became known



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as “latch-key” children, as more mothers went to work. They became independent and resilient. They lived through the 1970s Watergate Scandal, the Three Mile Island nuclear episode, and the disaster in Chernobyl—events that may explain why observers find many in this generation to be cynical and critical of institutions (religious, corporate, and governmental). With segregation ending in 1964, this generation grew up in schools that were more racially diverse than those of their predecessors, leading some observers to call them the first “color-blind” generation.

- **Millennials** (born between 1982 and 2004). Observers have identified many characteristics, sometimes conflicting, as detailed below. It’s up to you to consider what matches with your experience.



## 10 characteristics of millennials

Individuals differ, and subcultures of racial groups and economic groups also exist. This means that observers who cite characteristics of millennials may actually be considering only white, Hispanic, black, or Asian young people, or they may be considering only middle-class folks. In spite of stereotyping or gross generalizations, however, there is often truth in subjective observations.

With this caution, I'll share with you some of the characteristics of millennials that have been noted, and let you decide if they give you insight to young clients or teammates you know.

### 1. Technologically savvy

Millennials are considered "digital natives," the first generation to be brought up with computers. You may have noticed that they are the early adopters and the ones that can locate and operate the technology that you need. They expect anytime/anywhere communications, as well as speed and convenience.

### 2. Tolerant and in support of equality

The common wisdom is that the millennials are more accepting of differences, accepting same-sex marriage and being open to the legalization of marijuana.

When it comes to racial tolerance, however, the data is mixed. On the one hand, the *Chicago Tribune*, cited by Gene Demby when writing for National Public Radio, called the millennials the most tolerant generation ever. It is also something that millennials say about themselves.

On the other hand, Demby found that both black and white survey respondents said that they grew up in homes where race was not discussed at all. Furthermore, public schools are more segregated now than they were 40 years ago.

### 3. Globally aware

Technology has shrunken our globe. The millennial generation has grown up with instant, live information being available from all over the world.

Yet, this is another characteristic about which there is mixed data. On the one hand, Gamaliel Perruci, professor of Leadership Studies at Marietta College, observes an increasing level of integration around common patterns of consumption.

On the other hand, political scientist Benjamin R. Barber points out that many millennials around the world resist globalization and have become narrowly aligned to a parochial agenda.

### 4. Socially responsible

Citing the millennials' experience with 9/11 and ongoing fears of terrorism, Michael Unger concludes that these folks have a desire to help others, as described in his book, *The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids*.

Journalist Peter Chen sees a similar phenomenon, based on a different aspect of millennials' experience: the downed economy. He has dubbed this group as "a generation of quiet rebels on the path to find a non-traditional, soul-enriching, values-fueled existence."

### 5. Entitled

Contrary to glowing and hopeful forecasts for this generation as being more civic-minded, with a desire to help others and work toward improving the environment, Jean Twenge, PhD, noted author and psychology professor at San Diego State University, found evidence that many in this generation are narcissistic and self-centered, with unrealistically high expectations for themselves.

### 6. Pragmatically ideal

"Pragmatic idealist" is the term that David Burstein, a millennial himself, used to describe his generation. In his book, *Fast Future*, Burstein described what he saw as a deep desire to make the world a better place combined with an understanding that doing so requires building new institutions while working inside and outside of existing institutions. Perhaps his term captures both the optimism of Unger and the critical view of Twenge.

### 7. Have great expectations, want lots of attention

Some have termed this group "the trophy generation" in response to the "everyone's a winner" mentality. Millennials' parents were told to boost their children's self-esteem. Brenda Beckett, SHRM-SCP, SPHR, human



resources manager at Omnitrac, says, “This group of employees wants immediate feedback. They want to know how they are doing, and they expect little nudges and high fives. Gone are the days of the annual review. You need to constantly engage with millennials.” She tells a story of a manager who thought her millennial’s work was exemplary, so she left him alone. The truth was, the employee was bored, and he moved on.

### 8. Work to live (not live to work)

According to a 2009 online survey conducted by *Monster.com*, 37 percent of employers report that “work/life balance and flexibility” is the most motivating factor for millennials, with only 17 percent claiming “compensation” as the primary driver.

Beckett explains that, unlike those of her generation who want flexibility in order to be with their family, this cohort wants flextime just for themselves—to “go surfing in the morning, if the surf is high, or to a yoga class mid-day or to mountain biking before dark.”

### 9. Committed to health and fitness

Evidence of this group’s interest in healthy living can be seen in the “explosive” demand experienced by Whole Foods Market for natural and organic food, especially among millennials. The chain is so certain of this millennial market that it has plans to launch a new tech- and value-oriented store concept. It will enter into partnerships with the Internet-based grocery delivery system, Instacart, and with Apple Pay, the mobile payment service that allows users to make payments using the iPhone or Apple Watch. This is all in an effort to court the millennial generation.

The growing fitness industry expected millennials to accelerate the trend toward fitness. It discovered that, while committed to fitness, millennials are redefining what personal fitness means and migrating into such exercises as cycling and aerobics, usually done in groups, where everyone helps to push other group members to do their best rather than compete. Wendy Hauser, DVM,

AAHA vice president for 2015–2016, notes that these millennials also like to work in groups.

### 10. Short of cash

This is the group that experienced the crash of 2008 and high student debt. Many are still unsettled in their careers. It’s not surprising, therefore, that this generation is delaying home ownership—renting for 6 years before buying, which is 2.6 years longer than a similar group in the early 1970s.

### Millennial team member behavior

A review of the above 10 characteristics of millennials can help your practice understand its younger team members. Based on these characteristics, what kind of veterinary employee behavior might you expect from these millennials? A few ideas are suggested below.

### Millennials bring their comfort with technology to the practice

When I visited Susan Morizi’s brand-new veterinary Village Veterinary Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., she told me about the state-of-the-art equipment she was able to install. Then she proudly added, “And I have young staff that can explain the technology to me.”

Not surprisingly, it’s often the millennial who persuades the owner to invest in software to maintain electronic

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medical records or customer service management. While this is clearly a convenience for staff, with

easy access to vaccine certificates and health histories, as well as upcoming appointment reminders and online scheduling, these features also become a major benefit for clients. The millennial staff member will likely champion and manage this software, as well as the use of social media.

Video has become an important part of the technical scene. Besides taking and sending photos to clients or posting on Facebook, millennials are comfortable with educational videos as an important resource for educating staff members as well as clients.

**Millennials want to play out their values in their veterinary work**

Most veterinary staff members describe their career mission as protecting the life of animals—a responsible act close to their values. This provides no conflict for millennials.

As for the interest among millennials in giving back to the community, Hauser says that one of the things she loves about this generation is its passion for improving our world and its commitment to service. Many practices have within their staff millennials interested in spearheading charitable events.

A good example is that of La Jolla Veterinary Hospital, which sponsored an event called “Paws and Pints” with the La Jolla Brewery, located next door. The money raised benefited Friends of County Animal Shelters. Stephanie Coolidge, practice manager, reported that it was a satisfying experience for the staff, raised money for a good cause, and drew a lot of millennials to learn about the hospital.

Hauser references the book fair the Coal Creek Veterinary Hospital in Centennial, Colo., organized. The money raised was donated to house the pets of women who were abused and could not take their pets with them to the shelter for battered women.

Amanda Donnelly, DVM, MBA, owner of ALD Veterinary Consulting in Rockledge, Fla., has observed a certain skepticism among millennials related to their



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commitment to being responsible. She notes that they might skip a protocol if they don’t understand the reason for it. They want to be sure that the action is not just to generate money, but is in the best interest of the pet. For example, she observed a millennial questioning the promotion of a pet food until he understood its nutritional value.

**Millennials impact the practice’s work style**

Millennial employees need direction. Mary Beth Albright, owner of Happy Camper Doggy Day Camp & Sleep Over

in Clearwater, Fla., called millennial employees “diamonds in the rough.” Even after 60 days in her employ, she says they are still asking what they should do. Her solution? First, give them a giant baby-sitter by making sure you have a mother as their manager.

Second, get into the mindset of your young hires. Albright tells the story of a young employee who was asked to print the organization’s newsletter. When she expressed her disappointment that it had been printed in black and white, the millennial explained that she was trying to save money. Albright realized that her new hire had good intentions, but needed some training in how and when best to save money.

Millennials also need to be needed. As the human resources director at Crown Veterinary Specialists in Lebanon, N.J., Frankie Williams got to know the young people on the staff. One young woman, for example, had some ideas often regarded as “out there.” But as a

tech-savvy millennial, she found an app that enabled her to discover that the veterinary practice was not capturing costs as it should. Her discovery resulted in saving the practice money and in helping her managers value her contributions, giving her the “pat on the back” she sought.

Williams says millennial employees may be self-centered and demanding, but they are also smart. And, like anyone, they want to be needed and valued. These “trophy kids” are capable and thrive when motivated. What’s unknown is how they will deal with failure—something for veterinary supervisors to keep in mind.

Unlike members of the Generation X cohort who learned to be independent and operate without a lot of feedback, the millennials typically want feedback (praise is best) and, to use Hauser’s term, “hanging out” together. Fortunately, veterinary practices usually have some tasks that staff members must complete alone and others that will benefit from collaboration.

### **Millennials seek to balance veterinary work with the rest of their life**

Hauser has noticed that many millennials want to be “out the door when their shift ends.” Eager for a life beyond work, some millennials don’t want to miss out on social activities with friends, even when they conflict with work.

Williams discovered this to be a common problem in her New Jersey practice during the summer when many millennials called in sick in order to join their friends at the beach. To address the problem, the hospital instituted a summer bonus plan, providing an extra stipend each pay period for employees who worked their allotted schedules with no time off.

In general, Williams found that millennials are willing to work hard when they are scheduled, but want time for family, fitness, or pastime activities that interest them during their off time. They like to know their work schedule in advance, so they can plan social activities with their friends. “They want a life,” she says. “In fact, working with millennials has taught me about living.”

Erin Epperly, DVM, a millennial who is an associate veterinarian at Peak View Animal Hospital in Fowler, Colo., said, “We do have a strong work ethic. We can work hard when we’re there (at the clinic) and play hard when we’re not.”

Given the millennials’ openness to diverse lifestyles, they both expect and demand tolerance and respect. Coolidge, who has been in an openly gay marriage for 13 years, is happy to testify that the veterinary hospital where she works does not discriminate. She says, “I think more people like me are setting the example for a changing society by being just another American family with the same aspirations and desire to excel in the workplace.”

### **Millennials champion health and fitness—even in their veterinary work**

New businesses are being created and new products are available that veterinarians can offer their clients, largely as a result of millennials’ interest in health and fitness.

One example is the rapidly expanding Healthy Pets stores founded by Julie Cantonwine. Her business offers products that are free of byproducts, pesticides, chemical preservatives, and artificial colors.

### **Millennials want a good workplace fit**

Management consultant Jay Deragon suggests that employers be ready for seven questions that millennials pose when looking for a place to work:

- How diverse are you?
- What impact are you making?
- Do you have a sense of community?
- Are you flexible?
- Will I be able to grow and learn?
- Will you encourage me to build my network?
- Do you have an open and understanding workplace?

### **Millennial client behavior**

What kinds of clients are these millennials? One aspect of their behavior is reflected in data released by the research firm GfK during Global Pet Expo 2015, which indicates that millennials have embraced the “pet





parent” trend and own pets at a rate higher than that of the boomer generation. The research also suggests that many millennials intend to own a pet in the future.

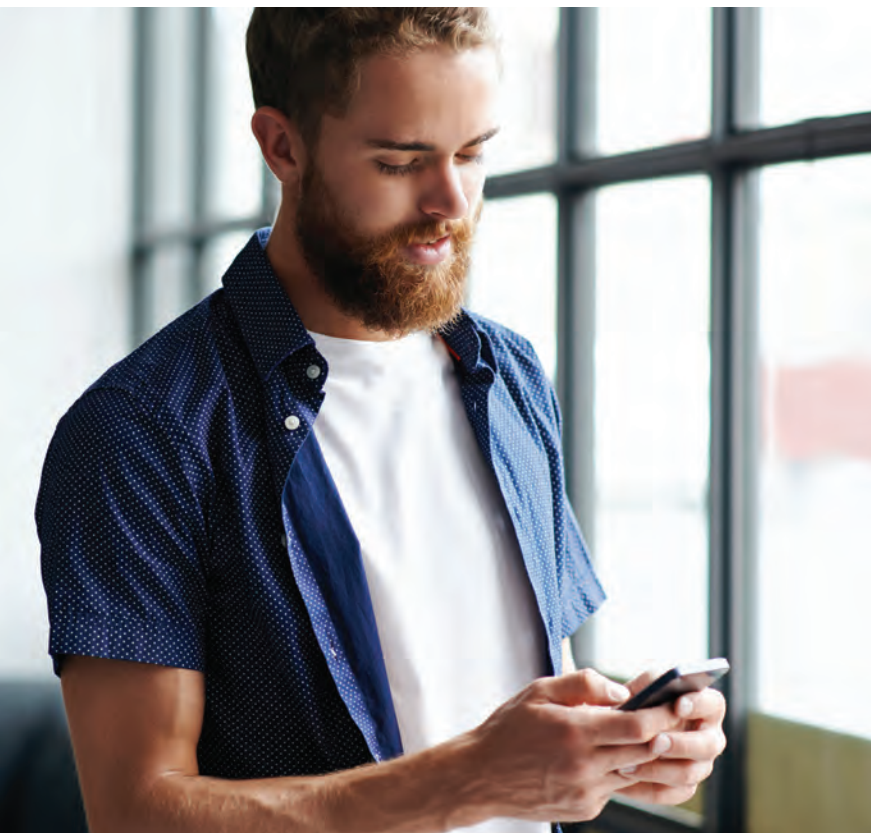
A review of the 10 millennial characteristics can help your practice understand its younger clients. Below we suggest a few behavior possibilities you might expect.

### **Millennial clients embrace technology**

Donnelly points out that because millennials embrace technology, practices have moved to reminding clients of appointment via text, sending a text when their prescription is ready, and sending updates and photos post-surgery. Clients also appreciate videos in the exam room to inform and educate them on recommended

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procedures. These uses of technology benefit all clients, but the millennials expect it.

Brad Brazell, director of global product management for Henry Schein Animal Health, notes that communicating with millennials effectively often involves an uncomfortable shift from the use of postcard reminders and booking appointments over the phone. Many practices are adopting tools, such as the Rapport client communications suite, in order to easily provide personalized communication via multiple channels depending on the preferences of the clients. Such tools address millennials’ needs for efficiency, speed, flexibility, and convenience.

Even the reception area has gone high-tech. Remember the simple coffee pot that welcomed those who were waiting? Now it’s the designer coffee machine with 20 choices of tea, coffee, or hot chocolate—all available at the push of a button.

Client engagement is made inviting and fun when your practice has a social media presence, with health tips, animal photos, and special offers—and your millennial staff will easily run it. Millennials are eager to log on to their veterinarians’ Facebook page to see cute animal photos and learn vital pet information in the process.

### **Some millennial clients are short on cash**

In spite of their financial situation, Williams finds that millennials are more apt to put their credit card down and say yes to a recommended procedure, while the boomers typically want to go home and check their budget first. Why? Williams believes it is because the millennials have so much information at their fingertips. They are quick to “google” the advice and understand the what and the why.

To address cash constraints, practices are increasingly offering treatment options and third-party financing to attract and serve millennials. Donnelly cites a young woman whom she describes as a “good pet owner” but who was strapped for cash while in graduate school. Donnelly made sure that she knew to ask about CareCredit as an option.

Banfield Pet Hospitals (now owned by PetSmart) may have started it, but a growing number of veterinary practices are now also offering preventive care plans in order





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to help millennials—and others—manage their pet care costs. Hauser, along with Debbie Boone, CCS, CVPM, created *The Veterinarian's Guide to Healthy Pet Plans* to help practices move in this direction. Hauser points out that value-driven millennials are known for finding a way to pay for what they think is important. They want good care for their pets and are prime candidates for a preventive care plan. Putting their pet care into their monthly budget is like paying for their Internet and cell phone each month.

#### **Many millennials are committed to healthy living**

Some millennials are turning to the Internet to find such goods as the natural flea and tick control products marketed by Wondercide, which produces products for those wanting to protect their pets without pesticides. Veterinary practices can inform clients about these goods through their social media platforms.

Tricia Montgomery created the K-9 Fitness Club in Chicago after she lost 130 pounds exercising with her dog. The club inspires veterinary practices to encourage exercise to prevent heart disease and diabetes, which plague both clients and patients.

#### **Tips for interacting with millennials**

By now, the review of millennial characteristics and stories from those in the field have surely evoked ideas of how you can more effectively interact with millennials. Here are a few final thoughts to consider:

- Turn negatives into positives. If you have millennials who need feedback and the constant “pat on the back,” recognize that praise and validation are motivators for effort and achievement.
- If your millennials indicate a desire to work in teams, look for opportunities to connect teammates for learning and development.
- Remember that millennials value work/life balance. Flexibility and paid parental leave are important factors.
- Encourage health and fitness for teammates, clients, and patients by pointing the way to natural and nutritious foods and supplements and exercise opportunities.
- Take advantage of millennials’ knowledge of technology. Let them help you update your systems, and encourage them to engage with clients through social media.
- Support millennials who want to involve your practice in community activities or charities.
- Since millennials base their productivity on completion of tasks as opposed to time on the clock, experiment with work schedules that fit the new workplace.
- Adopt a preventive care plan to help your clients budget for their pet care costs.
- Beyond all else, learn to understand each young person’s thinking. Since you can’t paint the entire millennial generation with one brush, you’ll have to listen to every person as an individual. ✨



Carolyn C. Shadle earned her PhD degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo in interpersonal and organizational communication. John L. Meyer earned his PhD degree from the University of Minnesota in communication studies and speech arts.

They both write and train through ICS, Inc. ([icsworkplacecommunication.com](http://icsworkplacecommunication.com)). They have trained at numerous veterinary conferences, including AAHA, ICCVM, OAVT, and WVC.