

time out

Meeting War Stories

The Man with No Pants and the Little Engine that Couldn't

BY DARIN HOWARD



MANY VIEW THE MEETINGS, events, and incentives industry as one filled with glamour and travel. Those would be the people on the outside looking in. For those in the trenches, it's most often filled with long hours, tedious details, unexpected occurrences ... and an occasional incredible experience that makes it all worthwhile.

It is the unexpected that validates our careers, provides our greatest challenges, and gives us our greatest sense of accomplishment. Good planners anticipate and plan for *most* surprises, but I couldn't have seen this one coming.

It was departure day in

Monte Carlo. On the last night of the trip, the 400 attendees were instructed to pack and leave their luggage outside their room before going to bed. The luggage would be collected by the hotel bellman during the night, inventoried, loaded onto trucks, and shipped to the airport to be loaded onto the charter plane.

I was the lucky staff member assigned to manage the luggage pull throughout the night and to facilitate the transportation by buses back to the airport in the morning.

The luggage pull was complete and the trucks were dispatched to the airport without a hitch. It had been a long night.

As the sun rose, I stepped

outside to line up my buses and dispatch my group. A very distinguished-looking gentleman in a pinstriped tuxedo with tails came up to me. In a very thick French accent, he inquired, "Are you Monsieur Howard?"

"Yes," I replied.

"We have a problem!" he stated emphatically.

My anxiety level rose further when he introduced himself as the general manager. What could be so important at 5:30 on a Sunday morning that the general manager of a luxury hotel in Monte Carlo had taken direct action?

"Monsieur Gilbertino has no pants," he proceeded to inform me.

I tried not to smirk as I realized that Monsieur Gilbertino (the name has been changed to protect the absent-minded) had neglected to plan for a very important part of his travel attire. His pants, and the rest of his luggage, had already departed the hotel and were by now in the belly of the plane.

I contemplated my options. Where do you find pants on a Sunday at 5:30 a.m. in Monte Carlo?

Then it dawned on me. "Do you have a uniform room?" I inquired. A grin spread across his face. "Ah! Bonne idée!" he exclaimed.

He abruptly turned on his heel and went to resolve the sit-

uation. Thirty minutes later, he returned with a very big smile upon his face, and proudly exclaimed, "No problem! We found him a pair of pants. It fits him like a sausage!"

For the next hour, as I loaded the bus, I couldn't resist informing the rest of the guests that Monsieur Gilbertino had packed his pants, but no worries ... we found him a pair of uniform pants that fit him "like a sausage!"

A Series of Sorry Events

This ranks among my favorites in my arsenal of war stories. I remember the details vividly even though it happened more than 17 years ago.

I had been assigned to a program that was scheduled to operate at a luxury hotel on California's Monterey Peninsula. The evening was set up to be memorable one.

The event was to begin with a 30-minute bus ride from the hotel to an amusement-style logging camp in the Sequoia Forest. Beverages would be provided on the bus ride over. A 45-minute open-air train ride up the mountain was scheduled next. The guests would experience the majestic Sequoia Forest while traveling on an antique steam engine train and listening to an onboard naturalist offer a narrative of the surroundings. The evening would continue with a bonfire, steak-fry barbecue, and good old-fashioned hoedown with a Country Western band. The guests would then be directed on a quarter-mile stroll through a meadow and across a brook. The route back to the buses would be lit with votives in brown paper

bags lining the path.

The evening began as planned. We had lined up seven buses at the hotel entrance for a prompt 4 p.m. departure. The guests gathered on time and boarded. They helped themselves to beverages and took their seats. Each staff member selected a bus to host. The seventh bus was left without a host due to an unexpected conflict. (So began Problem No. 1.) The buses pulled out in single file and we were off.

Within 15 minutes we had ground to a halt in stop-and-go traffic. We were told this was highly unusual. No problem, we had bever-



A reliable source on the Monterey Peninsula has told me that that evening's events have grown in lore among local Monterey planners.

ages on board. So we served another round!

Our 30-minute transfer took an hour and half. The guests were quite "happy" upon arrival. The camp management assured us the revised timing would still provide a quality experience on the train. At most we could anticipate 15 minutes in the dark on the ride back down the mountain, but there was no time to lose.

We quickly ushered our guests off the buses and directly onto the train. We departed on the train at 5:30 p.m. The first 20 minutes were awe-inspiring. The

Sequoias towered overhead at more than 100 feet tall. The naturalist was passionate and knowledgeable.

Then we stopped. Chug! Chug! Chug! We went in reverse back down the hill. Chug! Chug! Chug! Back up the hill. Chug! Chug! Chug! Back down the hill. Chug! Chug! Chug! Back up the hill.

By now the sun had set. It was pitch black. The Sequoia Forest at night is black, very black. The temperature had dropped to the mid 50s. The guests had been drinking for an hour and a half with no allotted "break" time. We discovered there were no restrooms on

the mountain. Returning with the train in reverse was not an option. We had to make it to the turnaround at the top.

By now the guests were demanding a "break." After consulting with the conductor, it was determined that the forest glen at the turnaround at the top of the mountain was the only option. We arrived at the forest glen and 200 or so guests stepped off the train into the pitch-black for their much needed "break."

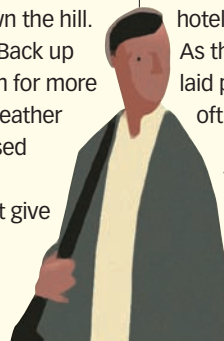
We blew the whistle after 10 minutes. They came back running. Our trip down went much faster. We arrived back to the camp well over an hour and half late. Upon arrival, we learned the seventh bus, with no meeting staff, had gotten lost along the way. The driver was not a local. They had stopped at a 7-Eleven to buy more beer and get directions. The CEO had been on that bus.

The steaks were very well done by this time. The "bonfire" consisted of four logs in a fire pit. Not a soul was dancing. After a very short dinner, we directed everyone toward the buses.

The wind had blown out the candles in the meadow. The camp staff pulled their cars up and turned on the headlights to light the way. The guests quietly boarded and returned to the hotel. So ended the evening. As the poet said, "The best laid plans of mice and men go oft awry." ■

↔ **Darin Howard** is a senior travel buyer.

Editor's Note: How about sharing your meeting war stories? Send them to pswisher@pcma.org.



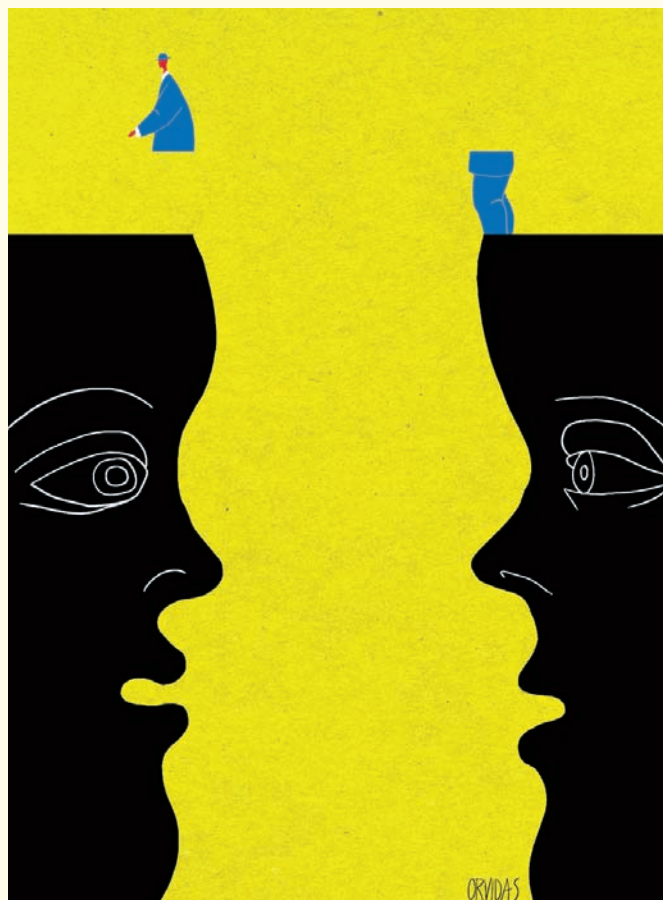
On the Cusp: A Generational Subgroup Makes a Name for Itself

By Jeanne Martinson

PEOPLE BORN IN GENERATIONAL cusp years demonstrate behaviors of the two groups they are closest to. For example, someone born in 1962 and technically a Boomer, could have both Boomer and Gen X behaviors and beliefs. One generational group flows into the next. In this way, we understand how those born in cusp years (a handful of years on each side of a demographic boundary) behave like a hybrid of the two groups they are sandwiched between.

Author Jonathan Pontell believes that there is more to this decade of late Boomers than just the crossover effect of being born in the first or last years of a demographic era. He coined the latter decade of the Boomer generation (those born between 1954-1965) "Generation Jones," and believes "Jonesers" are different enough from both Gen Xers and Boomers to justify their own generational tag.

In a survey Pontell commissioned of 1,200 Americans born during those years, less than 10 percent felt like either a Boomer or a Gen Xer. More than 80 percent said that they felt in-between the generations. But does this give power to his argument that this decade is somehow special, or does it only reinforce the fact that we know cusp years need to be respected as crossover years?



How Do They Feel Different? Economic and Political Dissatisfaction

Jonesers were too young to be engaged in the anti-war movement, political activism, fashion changes, music redirection, and the Woodstock thrills that dominated the youth of the first decade of Baby Boomers. As well, they have been excluded from the political and economic agenda of America, which has been dominated by the older

Boomers. Although the world is telling Boomers as a whole that they are the generation in control of the system, Jonesers feel that not only are they not in the driver's seat, but have been tossed in the trunk along with the luggage and are merely along for the ride.

In their mid- to late-40s, Jonesers continue to feel second class to the power of the older Boomers who are now approaching retirement and shifting the political and social agenda to reflect their chang-

ing needs. The Jonesers are in a significantly different stage of life: They are now in their prime earning years.

That's Not Who I am! Resisting the Boomer Stereotype

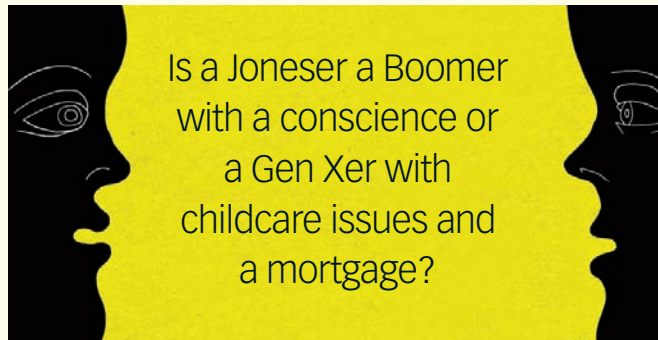
The term "Generation Jones" rose to the forefront in the last several years primarily in electoral and media contexts. The focus was on identifying who these voters were and motivating them to vote for the desired candidate. This population of 50 million (the largest U.S. adult generation) is unhappy with the current state of America and that is what makes them a media and electoral red flag. But outside of an election, what is the impact of Generation Jones? Most Jonesers are at a place where older Boomers were a decade earlier — with dependent children, cars, homes, and stock portfolios. Yet they resist being termed a Boomer and don't want to be identified with that group. Some of this resistance is the residual effect of being left behind when the economic and political bus left town, but Pontell thinks it is more than that. Jonesers often want to distance themselves from the Boomer identity because they believe Boomers talked about social conscience but eventually sold out to the establishment. That is not who Jonesers are! They want real

action, true practical change, and significant political discussion. They want a life to spend outside of the workplace.

So is a Joneser just a Boomer with a social conscience or a Gen Xer with childcare issues and a mortgage? Or do they really see the world differently?

Where Do We Go From Here?

Whether you believe Jones is a subset of Boomers or not, organizations need to be



aware of the dangers of pigeonholing any person too tightly regarding one aspect of their diversity. A retiring

Baby Boomer will be different than a Boomer who is 45 because generational grouping is only one of many ways

we are different from each other. Information about any group gives us insight to assist us in effectively marketing to and motivating that group. The danger lies in assuming that someone from a certain group will behave according to the beliefs we have about that group. ■

♦♦ **Jeanne Martinson** is a diversity strategist and best-selling author on leadership and diversity. She assists her clients in attracting, retaining, and engaging their ideal workforce. Visit www.martrain.org.

Who Are the Zoomers and Why Should We Care?

By Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender

ZOOMERS ARE AMERICANS aged 50-plus; they are a combination of Baby Boomers and those of retirement age, whom we call LOMLOTs (lots of money, lots of time).

As experts in generational diversity, we first began preparing our audiences for the aging of America back in 1992. Yet we're still not seeing many businesses — including hotels and convention centers — making dramatic changes to accommodate these important consumers.

Zoomers aren't old. They're in the prime of their lives. They are healthy and happy, and far richer than any other generation; in fact, Zoomers control more than 70 percent of the

wealth in the United States. Zoomers don't look old and don't act old, but we have special needs. Here are some to keep in mind when you design your next meeting:

- **We can't see clearly up close.** Pump up the type size on signage, marketing materials, preliminary and final programs, handouts, and publications. Size 14-type font makes more sense for most applications than the standard size 10 font.

As we age, it gets harder to adapt to different lighting. Many hotels, restaurants, and classrooms are unbelievably dark. This makes it tough for anyone to see, and tougher still for aging eyes that need two to three times more light

to see as clearly as younger eyes. Places that are too bright can also cause problems for Zoomers. The lighting in convention center and hotel meeting rooms is usually not as accommodating as it needs to be. Finally, consider making fun reading glasses a cool meeting giveaway.

- **We worry about falling.** Facility managers love shiny floors, but they scream trouble for older people who do not want to risk a fall on what appears to be a slippery surface. Look down at the next trade show and count the sneakers. We're seeing them more and more. When it comes to flooring, non-slip material is a sure bet.

- **We need comfortable seating.** In his book *Age*

Wave, Ken Dychtwald, Ph.D., points out that our world has been built to the form and fit of a 20-something year-old body. Think Zoomers are comfortable sitting for hours in those hard little chairs found almost everywhere? Check if the facility hosting your meeting can furnish more comfortable chairs — and make sure you have enough benches throughout the meeting space for Zoomers to sit and relax awhile. ■

♦♦ **Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender**, of Kizer & Bender *Speaking!* (www.kizerandbender.com), are speakers, authors, and consultants who are nationally recognized experts in customer diversity. Look for more of their generational insights in the January issue of *Convene*.