

Choosing a New Medium

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Keywords

Millennials, communication channels,
marketing 3.0, outreach campaigns

Summary

The Universe fascinates us all, and yet science communicators have a difficult time bringing astronomy into the spotlight. In a society dominated by commercial brands, gadgets, entertainment and social media, we must take a different perspective on what makes a communication channel and how it can be used to foster science appreciation and engagement.

Introduction

In communicating science with the public, we strive to find the best channels through which to communicate. Throughout history, people have adopted and adapted the best means that society and technology can offer to communicate their messages. Recently, we have opened accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other online platforms, striving to keep pace. While these tools are valuable, communicators still face the difficult problem of making science stand out: while a YouTube clip of a music video can receive more than 150 million views, a podcast episode about the discovery of 50 new worlds orbiting nearby stars may only get 30 000 views.

A new type of communication channel has the potential to greatly increase the popularity of science, if approached wisely. This new medium is called “the millennials”.

Meet the millennials

Millennials are defined as a demographic group consisting of individuals born between 1981 and 1993. To understand them better, you are encouraged to watch a ten-minute video called *All work and all play*¹, created by the Brazilian research company Box1824. The video explains the work patterns of millennials, revealing many of their characteristics, and makes a crucial contribution to the rationale of this article.

Since the millennials form a demographic group, they would conventionally be considered a target group, rather than a channel. However, there are several features that these people have that give them the potential to become a communication channel. On the one hand, they can become engaged volunteers because they love collaborative work and they are passionate about what they do. On the other hand, they can be powerful endorsers, because they are connected online and very committed to what they believe in.

Engaged volunteers who can act as endorsers have everything that is needed to become powerful brand ambassadors. As a result, such a target group has the potential to become a channel of communication on their own, as multipliers and influencers. From science communicators, information can reach millennials, and from them millions of other people. But how can we activate these brand ambassadors?

How to trigger action

The key to how to trigger millennials is found in *Marketing 3.0: From products to consumers to the human spirit* (Kotler et al, 2010), by Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan. In the book, Kotler et al. introduce the concept of Marketing 3.0, which brings consumer values to the core of every business. In this new model, companies strive to offer products or services that satisfy the higher needs of creativity, participation, community and culture.

The authors identify three essential strategies in moving towards Marketing 3.0: evolve from *delivering* products to *co-creating*; abandon market segmentation and focus on creating communities instead; and move from building a brand to building a character. With this in mind, and taking into account the profile of millennials, the strategy of Kotler et al. in transforming millennials into a communication channel can be summarised as “the three Cs”:

1. Co-creation

In the process of co-creation, the communicator invites his/her audience to no longer be just a consumer of information, but to contribute to its creation. This method will appeal to millennials, as they love a work in progress, to collaborate and to contribute to the world. Kotler considers that co-creation can be achieved by opening a platform, by allowing the audience to customise it and by inviting constant feedback. It is worth noting that Facebook is already using this model.

2. Community

Kotler et al. argue for building a community around the platforms used to communicate. In *Getting Brand Communities Right* (Fournier and Lee, 2009), Susan Fournier and Lara Lee talk about several ways in which a community can be formed: around shared values, based on interactions, or by gravitating towards a central figure. Out of these options, building communities based on many-to-many interactions is the strongest, as

is shown by the steady rise of social networks.

3. Character

By character, Kotler *et al.* describe a brand that manages to create consistency between its identity, image and integrity. In other words, a brand has to be authentic in everything that it does and communicates. For the astronomy “brand”, we are lucky to already have high values, such as innovation and accuracy, embedded into the core of our “business”.

Rules of etiquette

In addition to taking these three steps to reach out to millennials, there are several “rules of etiquette” that have been extracted by looking at the lifestyle of millennials, as researched by Box1824 and the Pew Research Center (2010). These ten recommendations are meant to increase the chances of science communicators winning the support of millennials:

1. Give them a higher purpose because they have high aspirations.
2. Make interactions fun because they want to enjoy the ride.
3. Let them be creative because they live in a creative economy.
4. Engage them in works in progress because they live in a “beta world”.
5. Let them collaborate because they believe in collective power.
6. Challenge them to learn new things because they love to discover.
7. Treat them on equal terms because they appreciate knowledge exchange.
8. Do not keep them waiting because they live by fast connections.
9. Follow up because they like to receive constant feedback.
10. Give them a truly engaging experience because this makes them committed.

Putting such actions into practice is not an easy task, especially in the field of science communication, where we are not trained to have a very pragmatic and commercial take on science. Bringing millennials on board means relinquishing total control. It requires us to be more flexible and sometimes willing to make mistakes. Investing in engaging millennials is an effort that does not bring immediate results most of the time, making



Figure 1. Advertisement for the Hidden Treasures competition. Credit: ESO/A. Roquette

it important to always see the end destination and appreciate long-term results.

Seeing the results

What follows are three examples of successful science communication initiatives that involved millennials.

Example one: Discover ESO’s Hidden Treasures

ESO’s Hidden Treasures competition in 2011 was an open invitation to the general public to dig into the data archives of the European Southern Observatory (ESO). The challenge was to find datasets that had not previously been released and to process them using the same techniques as the professionals. The prize was very attractive: an all-expenses-paid trip to ESO’s Very Large Telescope in Chile.

The assignment was so complex that ESO thought it would only receive a handful of entries, but the results took everyone by surprise: an impressive 94 entries. The standard of many of the entries was very high, with ESO co-releasing them as (so far) ten Photo Releases and 13 Pictures of the Week (with many more waiting).

What did this competition have that it attracted so many unexpected participants to such a daunting task? It challenged people to learn new things and engaged them in a work in progress. It allowed people to be creative and it treated them on equal terms, giving them the same task as would be handed to professionals in the field. The competition invited people to co-create and it allowed them to share their work on a platform where they could form a community (Flickr).

Later, the same format was applied to the image archive for NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope, but this time with two competitions: one for beginners and one for more advanced participants. Hubble’s Hidden Treasures had a staggering 1618 entries for beginners and 1208 entries for advanced works.

Example two: I’m a friend of Hubble
This example illustrates the millennials’ openness to be part of a common project, to co-create and share what they believe in. The ESA Hubble Facebook page² had reached 100 000 friends, which provided an excellent opportunity to tell our friends that every time

they share a news item or photo that they are Hubble ambassadors, playing a role in the bigger picture.

To illustrate the idea, we invited people to tag themselves in a photo with the message "I'm a friend of Hubble" if they wanted to be part of a surprise mosaic picture. As a Facebook photo allows only a maximum of 50 tags, eight identical photos were added to allow more people to join the project. One hour after kick-off, the incredible demand meant that more photos had to be uploaded. By the end of the project, 1153 participants had tagged 29 pictures, expressing their interest in being part of what we create at ESA/Hubble. The 1153 profile pictures were then used to create a giant mosaic image of the Hubble Space Telescope.

Example three: The Next ESO Picture of the Week Could Be Yours

To gather different perspectives on ESO, people were invited to submit their own photos of its observatories and staff to a dedicated Flickr group³ as candidates for a future Picture of the Week post on the ESO website. To date, the group has more than 800 photos shared and more are added every week. Dozens of Pictures of

the Week have resulted, with many more in the pipeline. Through this campaign, ESO engaged in a co-creation process where images of its sites would no longer come just from our professional photographers, but from anyone visiting us.

Links

- ¹ *All work and all play*, Box1824, 2012: <http://vimeo.com/44124657>
- ² ESA Hubble Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/hubbleESA?fref=ts>
- ³ The Next ESO Picture of the Week Could be Yours, Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/youresopictures/>

References:

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Kotler, P. et al. 2010, *Marketing 3.0: From products to consumers to the human spirit* (John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey)

Pew Research Center 2010, *Millennials. Confident. Connected. Open to change.*

Acknowledgements

The work outlined here would not have been the same without the inspiration of my talented colleagues in ESO's outreach ePOD team, especially Lars Lindberg Christensen and Mathieu Isidro.

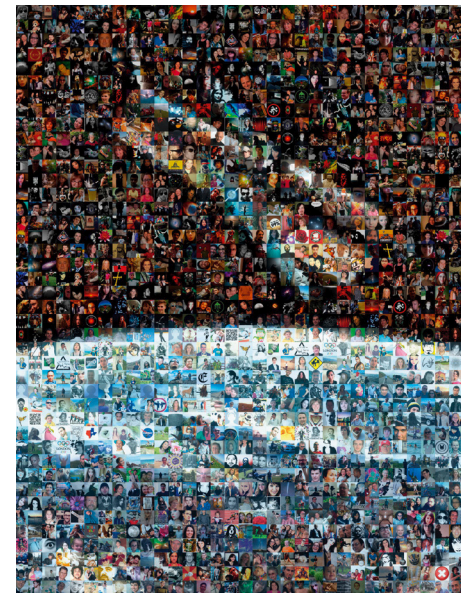


Figure 2. The mosaic picture of all the participants in "I'm a friend of Hubble". Credit: ESO



Figure 3. This image taken by John Colosimo of the Paranal Residencia in Chile is one of those selected from the Flickr Group to be featured on ESO's website as Picture of the Week. Credit: John Colosimo (colosimophotography.com)/ESO

Biography

Oana Sandu works as community coordinator for ESO's education and Public Outreach Department (ePOD). She is responsible for the promotion of outreach products or events and the social media presence of both ESO and ESA/Hubble. With a degree in Communication and Public Relations and a Master's Degree in Marketing, she worked for two years in a leading PR agency from Eastern Europe. As a volunteer, she was involved in projects such as Global Astronomy Month, the Space Generation Congress and World Space Week. She keeps a blog on astronomy communication at www.astronomycommunication.com. To get in touch with Oana you can connect on Twitter (twitter.com/oanasandu) or Facebook (facebook.com/oana.sandu).