Dave Wisniewski:

Hello and welcome back to our very exciting Vermeer Podcast series, Scaling for Change Across Generations. I'm Dave Wisniewski, vice president of commercialization at Vermeer and I'm glad you're joining us again. We've already covered a lot in the first two episodes and today's show looks to be another great one. Our expert, Jason Dorsey, is a leading authority on generation Z, having led more than 60 studies and written bestselling books. Last episode we covered who gen Z is and today we'll be discussing how to communicate with them. Welcome back, Jason.

Jason Dorsey:

Hello everyone, this is Jason Dorsey. Welcome back to the latest episode in our podcast series, where we're going to explore how to most effectively communicate with generation Z. Thanks Vermeer for the wonderful introduction, always appreciate that. And thank you so much for making this possible so we can get these great insights out to leaders all around the world. As we think about the different generations, in the previous podcasts we've covered, what is a generation. And as we talked about generations are clues and not a box. Generations and understanding different generations, give us a great head start to be able to communicate, connect, influence and drive results. Those results are true with employees when you're trying to lead and manage different generations in your workforce and also true on the marketing and sales side, as you seek to build trust and help people to see that you solve their challenges through your products and services.

One of the questions I get asked a lot is about generation Z and how do we communicate with them, not just in this time of COVID, but post COVID? And what are we seeing work here at the Center for Generational Kinetics? And as you've heard in the previous podcast, our research from here is very much focused on separating myth from truth when it comes to generations. And we're in this sort of special place, if you will, because we get to constantly do our own research. We've done more than 65 generational studies all around the world, studying everything from communication and motivation to how people shop and how they ultimately buy and what drives loyalty as well as what drives recruiting and retention and engagement across each of the different generations. Gen Z is now at this really important stage to understand when it comes to communication.

The oldest members of generation Z are now 24 years old. So this group is now basically, depending on their trajectory and where they are they could be out of college, they could have been out of college for a few years or they could be straight into the workforce and they could be working anywhere from age 16, all the way up to age 24. And so when it comes to communication with gen Z, you're really looking across a broad spectrum, going all the way as young as potentially age 16 and all the way up to age 24. And knowing that helps us to understand what their expectations are, what they bring to a workforce environment when it comes to communicating, collaborating, driving innovation and being engaged. And the way I like to start when we want to think about understanding a generation is to go back and talk about what they experienced and what is their normal that they're bringing to that workplace or to that buying experience.

This is what we call at the Center for Generational Kinetics, we call this generational context, which is being able to view the world through the lens of different generations and then seeing how your own generational views compare to that. When we think about gen Z, let's think about what they saw when they came of age and what they used when it came to communication. What do we know that they saw, smartphones, smart devices. Many in gen Z came of age with an iPad or some sort of touch screen tablet. So for them engaging in communicating was really done through a screen. Many of us, myself included, I mean, we remember our kids who went out and tried to swipe the television in the sense they're trying to swipe up or swipe left or swipe down thinking that it's going to be this great interactive experience like their tablet or like that smartphone they use.

So they've always expected that level of interactivity with devices. At the same time, this generation has come of age with YouTube. And YouTube is not talked about enough and it should be because YouTube is not only the most trusted resource for gen Z and for millennials to learn how to skills, to get their questions answered, they use YouTube. I mean, millennials, I could say, we use YouTube as our search engine, as our Google, we type questions directly into it, gen Z does the same thing. So, think about that process or experience, they go and they type in what they're looking for or some gen Zers, who we researched, they actually just hit the voice icon and then they speak whether they're looking for whatever that is, how to make an omelet and then we will go and search for that.

But then here's what happens, it's really magic. Videos are served up that YouTube believes that answer that query that you've posted. At the same time, there's all this recommended video content, right, suggested for you. So gen Z has come of age, being able to ask or type a question into a device, see videos recommended for them that answer that specific question or that content need. But here's the key that nobody talks about, those suggested videos or recommended for you, that's where the magic is on these types of platforms. Using artificial intelligence or machine learning to serve up what we think you're going to want to watch next. And in many content platforms, those suggested recommended videos are actually the ones that are most watched. So people go there to watch one thing and then they end up watching five other videos that they didn't necessarily go there to watch.

So that's sort of the power when we think about communication. So gen Z has come of age expecting that they can make a request for information on a site, get a whole bunch of different answer options and get them in videos that are compelling, easy to watch and so forth and then get suggestions of what to watch next. So, that's the first thing we need to think about with communication. The second is gen Z's are graduating from high school and college being able to turn in all of their work through Google Classroom or any of these other cloud based systems. And why is that important? It means paper is not something that many of them had to use because they had the option to email it in, or they had the option to upload it to the cloud. So think about the experience now, when you go to show up at a workplace and your orientation binder or whatever those communications are all printed and not even double-sided, that definitely seems weird now to date. Particularly when you're working with a company that's supposed to be pretty progressive on the technological side.

So they're expecting the content to be digital even if it's something that looks like a PDF. So, that's the thing they're bringing. And then the third part I want to talk about as a trend that we've been watching closely with gen Z is their use video chat and everything from apps like Houseparty, all the way to Google Hangouts, they're using FaceTime. All of these different devices to be able to have conversations by video. Now, I think COVID-19 has shown other generations how valuable this is, also exhausting if you're on eight Zoom meetings a day like I am, but you're seeing that you get so much more information on video chat than you do on a traditional phone call because you can see the people, see the experience, see their expressions and so forth.

So all three of those things to be able to rapidly search for information, to be able to get that information video form digital and then to be able to have video conversations are exactly the types of expectations that gen Z brings into the workforce that they expect from you. So what are the key takeaways that we're seeing that you want to do as a leader to be able to effectively communicate with gen Z? And I want to pause here, if you've watched any of my videos online, you know I talk about this a lot, but if you haven't seen those videos, I want to make sure you know this, what we're seeing in our research is that the first time technology adoption and trend adoption is being driven from the youngest to the oldest. This is incredibly important. So if you want to understand how older generations are going to communicate, you need to watch how younger generations are communicating now. We saw this with things like FaceTime, we saw this with Houseparty, young people drove those initial communications and now what happens, all these older generations are suddenly using it. Same thing is happening and going to continue to happen in the workforce. So what does that mean to you as a leader, as a manager, somebody seeking to drive effective communication, particularly in a time when we have a lot of remote workers and we're not exactly sure when people are going to sort of return to a normal work style and if they will. So what do we need to know? Here's the three key things to know that are so incredibly

important to communicate effectively with gen Z and keep in mind that we believe these same things will now work with each of the other generations, millennial, gen X and boomers. It's going to happen and it already is happening as we see this sort of new normal take place, which we believe will continue on post COVID.

First thing we know is that when it comes to gen Z, communication has to be highly, highly visual. This is a visual first generation and so much of the communication, particularly historic communication, sort of what we would consider legacy knowledge, if you will, within organizations is tied up somewhere in a binder on some shelf or it's in between somebody's ears that we don't know that they know that, but then we got to go try to figure out who knows the answer to this question. Those kinds of things, that's not what we need. So, we need to take that information, those resources, that communication and make it highly visual. What are the ways to do that?

It can be video-based, it doesn't need to be fancy. You are like, "Oh, I've got to make fancy videos to share knowledge with an organization." No way. Particularly now we've seen everybody at home and what their house looks like and their kids are dropping in on the Zoom meetings and the dog is barking in the background. You don't need things to be professionally produced anymore, particularly when it comes to internal communication. What people want is candor, they want to see your energy, your emotion, they want to see you as you're sharing this information. So shooting lots of videos that answer questions, particularly the questions people have repeatedly is extremely helpful. Also, recording videos to message out to all of your employees, incredibly powerful now. And these can be short videos, 30 seconds, one minute. We're not talking big things, short things. And what video allows you to do is it makes a message extremely consistent across an organization. And this is so important.

It allows people to not only hear you sharing the message, but to see how you're delivering it. So highly visual content is important. If you're trying to train someone, particularly gen Z, whether that's onboarding, orientation or other types of leadership and talent development, the more you can make it visual process oriented the better. So instead of lots of texts, make each one a video, make each one an icon. Those types of things work much, much better with gen Z. And it's not that gen Z doesn't want to read or doesn't like to read, I'm not saying that at all. In fact, many gen Z are driving a resurgence of reading, particularly around books, but when it comes to workplace communication, the more visual it is, the easier it's going to travel and the more consistently it will be adopted and acted on correctly.

Second thing, you want to make your communication portable and searchable. What do I mean by that? Sort of the example I gave around YouTube, you're able to type in a question or look for some piece of information and it gets served up to you. There is now an expectation among gen Z and other generations increasingly that information needs to be unlocked, it needs to be searchable, it needs to be findable and frankly, it needs to be rate-able inside an organization. So how are people doing this, how are companies doing this? Just a really simple example would be Slack, a technology like Slack where people can post questions, post information and then also search for information. It's just a really simple way to begin to see how you can answer a question once, but it helps people a hundred or even a thousand times. So you want to make that information very searchable.

We're advising lots and lots of companies right now, particularly sort of the midsize companies to step back and use this time and sort of this downtime, if you will, for some people where they have bandwidth to take common questions, ongoing training resources that's tied up in paper form or a question you would normally have to answer by phone and actually shoot a video or post it somewhere internally where everybody can then access this. This will save tremendous, tremendous time into the future and really be an asset going forward in core IP. So you want to make things portable and searchable. One key thing to know that isn't talked about enough is it doesn't have to be video, but it does to be shareable with others and let me give you an example. When COVID hit, lots of companies called us and said, how do we message this type of information across the generations?

And one of the things they said is what we're going to do is Zoom or we're going to do some other video meeting, which is great when you need to do that. The problem is every generation is in heightened state of anxiety, tremendous stress, it can be very hard to remember everything that's being shared with you, particularly when you're in that emotional state. So what do we advise you to do, particularly with gen Z, you need to make that information portable. So for example, instead of just doing a live Zoom meeting,

you need to make the recording available so they can go back and reference it. Even better, you create a PDF, why a PDF, you need to create something that they can share externally. Lots of times videos and recorded videos cannot be shared. But if you're in gen Z and you're 22 years old, you need to share that information with somebody who do you need to share with. Well, maybe your parents that was a big one.

Maybe you need to share it with your roommates. Maybe you want to talk about it with your mentors or somebody older to help you understand what to do. So making it portable outside the organization in an approved way, incredibly important when communicating with gen Z. And then the third one, the last one is actually not about using technology necessarily. What we found when it comes to communication and gen Z, is that the most important person in an organization to gen Z is not the CEO, is not the owner and is not the boss. People often think that and that's certainly what people would guess, but we find that not to be true. In fact, when it comes to gen Z and we asked them who is the most important person when it comes to communication, your performance, your loyalty, even to the organization, they always say it's their local leader.

And that's the term we use to describe the person who has the highest ranking yet most accessible to gen Z. This is sort of their boss or their supervisor. And we saw this play out all throughout COVID and we believe that it's going to continue well into the future because even our studies pre COVID pointed to this, but now it became even more important. And that is the gen Z was looking to what their manager or supervisor was telling them or modeling to them during this very stressful time of their pandemic. That actually represented the company, not the video that the CEO made and posted on Twitter, those were all nice, but they went to their boss or they watched their boss or supervisor to see how scared should they be? Are these benefits? Are they going to go away? When are we going to go back? What's our schedule is going to look like?

All of these types of things were very much driven by what we call that local leader, that boss or that supervisor. So this what it means, it's incredibly important for senior leadership, the people that we're talking to, CEOs, CMOs, boards, all those senior leaders who are sort of setting the vision, setting the message, they need to communicate it very effectively, but not just to the front lines, they absolutely have to communicate it to the management, to the supervisors of the front lines, those local leaders. Those are the ones who are actually determining the effectiveness of the message and whether or not gen Z will be able to trust it. Okay. We covered a ton in this podcast. I'm so excited to be able to share these insights with you based on our research here at the Center for Generational Kinetics. And I want to give a huge shout out to Vermeer again for making this possible. I very much look forward to being with you on the next podcast in this series. This is Jason Dorsey, talk with you soon.

Dave Wisniewski:

Very interesting stuff. Thanks for those tips on building trust with gen Z. These insights can really be applied in everyone's day to day workplace setting. Next week, our series on generations continues with Jason exploring how to lead and motivate across generations. Catch us at vermeer.com/podcasts to subscribe. Look forward to seeing you then.