

The Harper in Business

By Anne Roos

Bridging the Wedding Generation Gap

Is your once vibrant wedding business slowing to a crawl? Perhaps weddings are few-and-far-between. Are your numbers of website visitors down? Does it seem impossible to meet interested brides at wedding fairs? Maybe you are receiving inquiries, but you can't leave messages for brides, because their mailboxes are always full or they haven't set up voicemail. Don't get discouraged. Simply tweak a few things to be attractive to and communicate with millennial brides.

Dear Reader, if you are a millennial, please don't roll your eyes and utter, "Oh no, here come the millennial stereotypes!" No stereotypes here. In this article alongside solid statistics, I'll offer a few tried-and-true fixes to make you a pro at reaching out to, hearing back from, and closing the sale with millennial brides.

Those of you born within this particular generation may find a few gems below, including a section at the end of this article specifically for millennial harpers in business.

Defining The New Generation of Brides

Let's start with the term "millennial," defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (between the ages of 22 and 37 at the writing of this article) according to the Pew Research Center. Which life events guide the decisions of millennials? Here's a summary of the Pew Research Center's findings:

- This generation is old enough to understand the historic ramifications of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on personal safety and religious freedom.
- They experienced the 2008 recession as young adults, which created a slow start to many of their careers. This recession impacts their life choices.
- Technology plays a huge role in their lives. They grew up alongside the advent and development of the internet.

Millennials are accustomed to navigating through a technological world where "social media, constant connectivity, and on-demand entertainment and communication are innovations millennials adapted to as they came of age," according to Michael Dimock, president of the Pew Research Center.

The awareness of 9/11 and the monetary impact of the recession translate to the fact that millennials will demand the freedom of having a wedding their way, not necessarily following in the steps of family traditions. And they'll seek price transparency to know, at the outset, whether a wedding service will be a budget-buster. More statistics follow that back up these trends.

How Do Millennials Approach Wedding Planning?

These telling statistics from the WeddingWire 2018 Newlywed Report contain insights from some 18,000 newlyweds married in 2017:

- **Three out of four millennials are ahead of the ring and start planning their wedding prior to the proposal!**

Therefore many wedding fair attendees may not be engaged yet. And if they are, their wedding is so far into the future that they are not ready to book any services. They are looking for inspiration and not necessarily looking to hire wedding service providers.

Treat these hopeful millennial planners as if their weddings are right around the corner, feature a prize drawing, or email sign-up list in your wedding fair booth, and keep in touch with them. You may hear from them six months down the line when they are ready to hire you, but only when you keep the lines of communication open.

- **86% of couples announce their engagement on social media**, choosing Facebook (76%), Instagram (35%), and Twitter (12%). Inhabit these social networks, and brides, along with their friends and family, may find you there.

Post photo and video content consistently, promote your public performances, and accept friend and connection requests from even those you don't know. Respond to posts and direct messages with lightning speed to confirm your presence. Create a social media buzz about your music.

- **83% of wedding planning is done online**, with 42% on a mobile device (such as a smartphone) or tablet, and 41% on a desktop or laptop computer. If millennial brides can't find you online, then your business doesn't exist to them.

Your website must be mobile-ready. Check that your site downloads quickly and functions properly on phones, tablets, and desktops. Check that the site can be found in search engines on all devices. Check that it can be viewed in all browsers.

If your website isn't readily downloading and performing on all devices, contact a website guru. If your website isn't showing up on the first page of results in search engines when you type in "wedding harpist in (your location)," then consult with an SEO (search engine optimization) professional.

- **52% of couples watched their band/DJ perform in person prior to hiring them.** Today's modern bride knows that videos and recordings are edited to make us look good.

Millennial couples want to see the real thing to leave nothing to chance. Offer discounted or free tickets to your public performances, exhibit at bridal shows to perform for brides in your booth, and allow brides to audition you by appointment.

- **40% of couples in the survey used unique musical choices during their ceremony (such as bagpipes) and 61% preferred to walk down the aisle to non-classical music.** Now, more than ever, couples are steering clear of the cookie cutter wedding and adding unique elements that reflect their relationship and impress guests.

Use these facts to your advantage. We already play an unusual instrument. Increase your unique factor by creating a niche for yourself in your market. What can you play that is completely out-of-the-box? If you can whip out the rhythms of Loreena McKennitt covers or faithfully translate Harry Potter movie themes to the harp, your flexibility will help get you hired by millennials.

- **Couples underestimate how much they'll spend on their wedding day by about 40%.** Are millennial couples budget-conscious? Definitely. Will they spend beyond their budget for a wedding service they deem necessary? Yes. And when they fall in love with the prospect of your harp performance at their wedding, and they can't afford it, they will probably ask family and/or friends to assist with their expenses.
- **Millennial couples pay for roughly 40% of their wedding,** while their parents and other family members contribute to the remaining 60%. Additionally, 20% of millennial couples have their wedding fully paid for by others. Millennials will find a way to get the services they really want, even if you are outside their initial budget.

Eight Additional Tips

Consider these additional points, backed by statistics, when marketing, communicating, and selling your performance abilities to millennial couples:

- 1. 95% of millennial grooms are involved in the overall wedding planning process.** (Source Trendwatching.com). You'll find grooms attending wedding fairs and actively selecting wedding music. You can bet they have a say over whether you get the job or not. Consider that you are marketing to wedding couples, not just brides, especially if you are performing at same sex unions.
- 2. Nearly half (44%) of millennials are willing to promote products and services on social media in exchange for rewards.** (Source Wedding MBA 2016) Could this be the reason couples register on wedding-related sites that reward them for registering and reviewing their wedding service providers?

Use this fact to your advantage. Ask brides to post a review of your services in exchange for a gift, such as one of your CDs or album downloads.

How do you collect only the best reviews? Request reviews from couples that absolutely loved you. If I have a gut feeling that I don't know what a couple would say about me, I don't ask for the review. For instance, I don't ask couples who appeared drunk at their wedding, couples who were difficult to please from the get-go, and couples that were difficult to read regarding their emotions and thoughts.

- 3. 90% of millennials are influenced by reviews and want to hire vendors with stellar reviews.** (Source Wedding MBA 2016) "Stellar" does not necessarily mean "perfect." An occasional less-than-perfect review signals that the reviews are authentic and credible. Couples are highly suspicious of perfect reviews, especially if they lack details.

Anne poses with a happy bride after the ceremony.



4. Millennials enjoy validating their wedding experience digitally. (Source BookMoreBrides.com) Add wedding hashtags to make it easy for your couples to share photos and videos on Facebook and Snapchat.

Get comfortable with a few important social media platforms and don't worry about all of them. For instance, I never felt comfortable with Snapchat. So although I claimed a Snapchat profile when I investigated this medium, I abandoned the app. There's no point wasting time roaming around a social network when I'm not sure how best to use it for business purposes.

5. 80% of millennial couples consider transparent pricing important, so that they can determine whether you'll fit into their budget right up front. (Source TheKnot.com) If you are hesitant about spelling out your pricing, start with a price range first, and then, as you get more detailed info about a particular wedding, offer a firm quote.

TheKnot.com encourages vendors to list their prices online, but I only post where my prices start, because I individualize quotes according to the details of the wedding when I talk with couples. I avoid itemizing, because this leads to suspicions that I'll tack on extra, unexpected fees. I make it simple and offer a total package fee for each wedding I quote.

6. Update your images and videos. Millennials are accustomed to viewing professional photos and videos when they search for you online. (Source: Wedding MBA 2016) Mind the details in your images, and remove miscellaneous junk in photos that pull attention away from you and your harp.

Edit your images to perfection. Millennials want to see the experience in your photos. Include people in your photos—touched-up images of yourself and your audience smiling and having a great time. Always ask permission to post images of others. Show your work in the best light possible—don't post less-than perfect images in real time.

7. 53% of couples will choose the first vendor that responds to them. (Source Wedding MBA 2016) Respond quickly using the same channel of communication as the couples used to contact you. If they texted you, text them back. If they emailed you, email them back. If they sent you a direct message through Facebook or The Knot, respond through that portal.

The good news is that only 27% of wedding businesses respond to an inquiry within minutes, and the average response time is over seven hours! (Source The wedding Report 2016 Wedding Market Insight) Your speedy response may mean that you'll book that wedding before the couple ever hears back from your competition.

The phone is often the least attractive choice of communication for millennials, hence the reason why they may not set up voicemail or check messages. I always like to offer firm quotes by phone, after I collect all the

details from the bride. This isn't an impossible task—I ask for permission to phone millennials during my text/email/direct message conversations.

When one bride wrote me, "If I can't book you through email, then forget it," I passed on her. I stand firm that the best way for me to guarantee that my client is not expecting me to do something crazy, is to talk with them. Couples will leave necessary information out of emails and digital communication that they know could cause me to raise my rates or turn down the job altogether (for instance, performing up a ladder in a tree house). I can get this information from them in a phone call.

Millennials are the digital communication pros and they have a deep appreciation for multi-tasking. Don't think millennials lack an attention span—they think of multi-tasking as an issue of utility. For millennials it is so much easier to respond to a text and then return to watching a YouTube video than it is to be interrupted by a phone call. Millennials are advanced users when it comes to consuming information: They want data and they want it fast. BookMoreBrides.com

8. Write personal responses that don't sound like form letters (Source Alan Berg, Wedding MBA). Millennials have an aversion to auto-responders that are impersonal and overly formal. Don't bother with form letter email responses after exhibiting at a bridal fair, either. And never ever use a hard-sell approach.

Personalize your response and kindly offer to solve a problem. For instance, include a link to your website and say, "I'll get back in touch with you tomorrow. In the meantime, feel free to check out the music list on my website to use as a guide to selecting your wedding music."

Ask lots of specific questions and allow the couple to choose their music. Be open to their ideas. The last thing you want to do is dictate to them what songs "should" be played at their wedding. Leave that up to their priest or rabbi. Go into the discussion with a team-mindset, and let the couple describe their wedding music dreams to you. You can always turn down their requests. However, in the true spirit of collaboration keep the conversation open and offer alternative choices that are do-able for you.

Just Three Points to Remember

When you keep track of these three points, you'll be on the path to better communications, and more wedding bookings, with millennials:

1. Millennials want to have a hand in co-creating and collaboration to produce a truly unique, one-of-a-kind wedding memory. Hear them out and then offer solutions to how you can help fulfill their dreams. Be flexible. Create a niche for your business—how do you stand out above other wedding musicians in your area? Share something that you alone can do for your couples.

2. Millennials are digital communicators. Email, text, and direct message are their preferred modes of communication, so get on board. Take the formality out of your responses and personalize the chat. They expect professional-looking images and videos, and they expect perfectly functioning websites that are easily found online through search engines. Digital communication is fast, so millennials expect quick responses.

3. Millennials do their research. Give past clients a gift for posting online reviews of your business. Share the reviews on your website and in all internet media, including wedding-related websites. Post blog articles to increase your reputation as a wedding expert. Allow couples opportunities to audition you in person, as part of their research (exhibit at wedding fairs and schedule in-person audition appointments). Create a fee structure that is easy-to-explain. Deliver exactly what you promise, and future clients will want to hire you for your integrity.

Tips for Millennial Harpers in Business

Even though the youngest couples tying the knot today may belong to your generation, they often assign their parents, older siblings, and other friends and loved ones to the task of researching and hiring musicians for their weddings. Be sure to communicate professionally and in their preferred method so they'll hire you and not another musician.

Here's how to bridge the generation gap when Gen X-ers and Baby Boomers contact you:

1. Recognize that other generations are not as skilled as you are at digital communication. In fact, some downright hate it. Some like to unplug for hours or days at a time. Some will only email you from work and unplug at home, making them completely unavailable on weekends and evenings. Be flexible and patient. Ask them when they prefer to be contacted.

When Gen X-ers and Baby Boomers are online, they often text and email in complete, grammatically proper sentences. Respond in kind, minding your spelling and grammar, even while texting short responses. It's okay to sound a bit formal with older generations, because this signals to them that you are mature, intelligent, and know what you're doing. This signals that they can trust you.

2. Take the time to read through and absorb lengthy emails. Older brides, including those walking down the aisle for the second or third time, may relay their excitement in long emails that are sprinkled with bits of important information about their favorite songs, the location of the wedding, and more. Gloss over these voluminous communications, and you'll miss a valuable piece of information that could help you determine how to close the sale with this bride. Respond to them too briefly, and they'll think you aren't interested.

3. Drop the phubbing. "Phubbing," or "phone snubbing," is interacting with a smartphone (or another digital device) instead of interacting with human beings. Some people

interpret phubbing to mean that whatever is going on in your device is more important than they are. Give your brides and all potential clients your full, undivided attention. Don't text, email, or turn your attention to your smartphone or laptop while talking with anyone. Even when you are talking on the phone with a bride while you are typing away on your laptop, that bride can tell you're distracted.

When your phone rings while you are talking with a client in person, send the caller to voicemail. Stay offline from the time when you arrive at a wedding to the time you leave. If you find this impossible, leave your phone in your car. Only refer to your smartphone at a wedding fair to check your booking schedule or take SquareUp.com credit card deposit.

4. Moms gravitate towards tradition. When the millennial bride gives the reigns of the musician decision over to her parents, they will choose the music they love. You'll lose this wedding gig when you are unfamiliar with traditional wedding titles or when you attempt to sell parents on music that you think their millennial children will prefer. Expand your horizons and be willing to learn and play music that older generations call "nostalgic."

5. Get comfortable using the phone and chatting with brides in person. As a business owner, you will discover that you can learn a lot more about your client in one 20-minute phone call than you can in days of going back and forth in emails and texts. And, most importantly, you will be able to determine whether you want to work with a bride or run in the other direction by their demeanor on the phone.

Older generations grew up using the phone—before digital devices, the phone was the quickest way to converse with anyone from long distance (certainly quicker than snail mail). So make yourself available for conversations, and take the step to set up voicemail and check it on a regular basis. Leave a pleasant, business-like outgoing message.

If you don't know what to say in conversation, write down all the questions you have for clients and place this list at your desk. Refer to your prepared questions when you are on the phone or at a wedding fair. Sound as professional when you speak as when you reply to formal email inquiries.

6. Avoid talking like a millennial when you conduct business. Even when you chat with clients of your own generation, you'll get dismissed if you are impatient and keep trying to move the conversation along. This behavior will get you written off as rude.

Expand your vocabulary to avoid overusing the same words in digital and in-person conversations. For instance, if you find yourself saying "awesome" at every juncture, find some other worthy synonyms. You'll look intelligent and be taken seriously with an all-generation friendly vocabulary.

For specific examples, review the article “12 Speaking Habits that Make Millennials Sound, Like, Literally Unprofessional” at inc.com at Tinyurl.com/yaet3ar6. Avoid “upspeak”—practice dropping your voice at the end of sentences to keep from sounding like you are unsure about what you are talking about. “Vocal fry,” or “creaky voice” (explained online at Tinyurl.com/y9kld6ld) may be acceptable and cool to you and the younger, post-millennial generation, but it can signal to older generations a lack of authority (see “How Millennials Talk Differently to Older Generations” at Tinyurl.com/yd8qeaza).

Millennials, and all generations of harpers in business, can choose to bridge the generation gap and alter communication methods to fit our clients’ preferences. Make a few adjustments to be better perceived by wedding clients, and you can expect a continued stream of bookings.



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Anne performed on the 2015 GRAMMY® Award Winning Album, *Winds of Samsara* (Best New Age Album). Her music has flown around the world on United Airlines Inflight Music Service, and you'll often hear her tracks on the NPR radio show, *How To Do Everything*. She is the author of two books published by Hal Leonard Books. Read more concrete business advice in Anne's book, *The Musician's Guide to Brides*, published by Hal Leonard Books.

Visit Anne's website at HarpistAnneRoos.com. Connect with her on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google+, and Pinterest.



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