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SHIFTING CAREERS

A New Generation, Poised to Reinvent

By MARCI ALBOHER

GROWING interest in cultural pursuits, diversity, authenticity and social responsibility is changing the way companies need to reach consumers, a new book argues.

In the book, “RenGen: The Rise of the Cultural Consumer and What It Means to Your Business” (Platinum Press), Patricia Martin cites early and more recent examples, like Absolut Vodka’s advertising collaboration with [Andy Warhol](#) and [Starbucks](#)’ promotion of socially responsible practices.

Ms. Martin says that this growing interest will also affect how workplaces are structured and careers are built. I caught up with Ms. Martin, president of LitLamp Communications, a marketing firm in Chicago, over lunch to learn about a blossoming of creativity and reinvention that she says will transform the way we work and live. This is an edited version of our conversation:

Q. Let’s start with the basics. Your book is called “RenGen,” which is short for renaissance generation. Define it for us.

A. The sociological definition of a generation is a 30-year swath of individuals living contemporaneously. The conditions we are facing today are what it looks like right before a renaissance.

Two things are going on simultaneously, and they live in creative tension. One is that we are ending one civilization and we are creating a new one. Witness what is happening on Wall Street. The second is the outpouring of creativity facilitated by the Internet. There is a generation that will lead us into what will literally be a second renaissance.

Q. So what does this RenGen person look like?

A. The RenGen is a psychographic more than a demographic, but when you look at census figures alone you have this large group of boomers who in their youth idealistically wanted to change the world, got frustrated and cashed out. You also have this even larger, rising segment of young people every bit as idealistic as boomers once were. If you look at a census table, it looks like a book-ended generation with these two groups on either end.

As for their characteristics — they are eco-conscious; they take their cues from nature so they are willing to accept products that are flawed but authentic rather than slickly produced and inauthentic. Dove figured this out with the

real-women campaign. They want to make a difference. They want to live many lives. They don't want to be told, "You can't be an architect and a poet." They are sensualists. Because they are both idealistic and cynical at the same time, they have learned to trust what they experience rather than what experts tell them. That is why design and aesthetics are so elevated right now.

Q. Is this phenomenon as far-reaching as the word renaissance suggests?

A. Civilizations end, and not for reasons people often think, like military overreaching or corruption. What happens is that so much change occurs right before a civilization reaches a mature point that all the values, institutions and beliefs that give meaning to our lives are no longer as relevant. So we shed them.

Look at your mother. How different is your life from your mother's? And how different is hers from your grandmother's? Look even at the different ways that you work, that you make a living. As I sit here in New York, my mind is going to the fact that we are going to reinvent mortgages. We're going to reinvent money.

Q. How will the rise of what you call RenGen affect the way we build our careers?

A. First of all, I predict that what we will see out of the younger RenGen is the largest class of entrepreneurs the United States has seen in a long time. Not only are they driven to do original work, but they are going to want to live that out in originally designed careers.

In order to do that, they'll work hard to create their own enterprises because that is where they can realize their dreams. Boomers are noted workaholics and appreciate the pluck of the young RenGen. But Gen X, often characterized as Dilbert-style middle managers, will struggle to lead these spirited young workers.

Q. You write about the importance of collaboration in this new age. Tell us more.

A. Most especially for younger RenGen, their agenda is to collaborate, to connect and to create. They don't respond to directive. They respond to teaming — where a boss puts a question or problem on the table and everyone can jump in. This isn't easy. It can be frustrating to get things done this way.

But smart companies, such as Pixar for example, have created social norms for the workplace to help expedite collaboration because it's vital to their product. In fact, in making hiring decisions at Pixar, good hand-drawing skills and sociability are the prized traits in candidates. Employees need to grasp that during creative brainstorming sessions it's uncool to feel threatened if someone draws on top of your drawing. I think we are also going to see something evolve that's less like a mentor-mentee model and more like a master-apprentice relationship, which is far more hands-on.

The young RenGen are eager to learn what it takes to make their mark. Boomers want to leave a legacy. Innovative companies will transform training and internships into apprenticeships that pass the torch.

Q. You talk about a new model for arts patronage in which an aspiring filmmaker can get a job making commercials for niche corporate clients. How is that work going to feel fulfilling to someone who thinks of himself as an artist?

A. This generation doesn't have the same negative notions about commercial work. They are also incredibly savvy about when they are being marketed to, so you cannot lie to them.

Rather than waiting 30 years to see if [MOMA](#) finds their work worthy, they will shoot a 30-second spot for DDB Needham. Unlike their parents, who would have stayed at the agency, they will use that money to fund their independent documentary.

Q. As we sit in the midst of chaos and uncertainty in financial markets, you see bright spots and opportunities. Why?

A. I see all of this as inevitable. This is not a research-based opinion, but we have always been innovators, optimistic and open-minded. We will rise to this challenge. It's already under way. Entirely new businesses, business models and ways of communicating are being created.

There is one worry. It is possible if we mismanage this period we could fall into a dark age, so who is in charge will be a pivot point.

Shifting Careers, a blog by Marci Alboher, is at nytimes.com/shiftingcareers.

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