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E-commerce faces a generational divide

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Thad Rueter
Senior Editor

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By her own admission, 22-year-old Nicole Pepe is bold, outspoken, maintains a sense of entitlement and would rather work *with* a boss instead of under him, on teams instead of as part of a hierarchy. She may sound like one of those typically brash youngsters whom fogies with decades of work experience love to complain about—after all, it's doubtful Pepe ever deigned to walk to school uphill both ways, and through blizzards, as did her elders—but those traits might just make her a perfect employee for many online retailers.

So went the message during a session entitled "Meet the Facebookers: Finding the right person for the social marketing job" held during the last hours of the Internet Conference & Exhibition 2011 last week in San Diego. Pepe, a college student who also works as the [social media](#) manager for online jewelry retailer GEMAffair.com, spoke with her boss, CEO Mike Jansma. "Social media is an online cocktail party, with constant change," Jansma said. "It is critical to have someone involved in this."

Attendees who resisted the urge to sneak out to the beach or the hotel bar were rewarded with an often blunt discussion about how [generational differences](#) are playing out in the ever-changing e-commerce industry, where traditional retailing methods constantly conflict with, and also complement, the newest web technologies and marketing methods. Even if attendees did not always welcome what Pepe was telling them, her presentation gave a glimpse into the work habits and expectations of the youngest job candidates posting their resumes to Craigslist. Like it or not, they soon will be holding down cubicles and manning laptops for web merchants and marketers—or, perhaps more accurately, running e-commerce tasks via smartphones, even as they [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) with friends.

Pepe is what Jansma called a digital native, someone who all but came out of the womb with her tiny fingers typing away at a keyboard. Pepe says she learned to type at age six, sent her first e-mail at age seven, was downloading music (illegally, as it turns out, though she didn't know it) at age 10, and launched her first

blog at age 14. Today, she's always on Twitter, communicating with her BFFs—that's native speak for best friend forever—and she can navigate social media as well as some digital immigrants—if you remember the ubiquity of mustard-yellow land-line telephones, that would be you—still can find their ways through print newspapers. "Natives are multitaskers from the word 'go,'" Jansma said. "We hired a native because we figured she would have the instinct for all this." In fact, he said, there was no chance he would have hired an immigrant for the social media job.

Pepe's nearly all-digital life provided some quick benefits for GEMAffair.com. Right after she started her job, for instance, her instincts led her to introduce herself to consumers via the social networks the online jewelry retailer uses. But not everything came so easily. Though she has blogged since the first days of high school, she typically wrote about her daily life and all the minutiae that can be involved in that. Learning to blog for an online retailer proved challenging. "Michael wanted informational articles, but for me blogging is very personal," she said.

For his part, Jansma, while seemingly pleased with Pepe's efforts, admitted his apprehension at hiring such a young employee—and one with no prior e-commerce experience—for such an important job. "Trusting a 20-something to take this brand out into the world is pretty scary. I had to work through some issues on that," he said. "They are going to play at work, they are going to chat. But they get paid to chat. I spent a good number of years trying to get my employees *not* to chat."

Still, much like a kind-hearted father trying to understand why his son has come home with purple hair and strange music blasting from his headphones, Jansma urged patience and understanding when it comes to employees like Pepe—who, it should not be forgotten, might just find new ways to win over customers and boost sales. "Don't hire a native and crush their creativity," he said.

Jansma didn't speak much to the revenue-enhancing effects of Pepe's hiring, but he did offer advice for other retailers faced with a need for a more robust social media marketing presence, and a growing pile of resumes from young job seekers of Pepe's generation. No, those candidates are not likely to have years of [social media](#) management experience, or even much experience at all, but it would help if they have paid their dues through at least basic customer service jobs in order to grasp the importance of pleasing consumers. Yes, they should be able to type and have mastered a range of computer software and applications. And candidates should have specific ideas about how to improve the company, including through social media marketing. Finally, marketing majors are not the only prime candidates; Pepe is studying education at a southern Florida college, preparing for a career with special-needs children.

Audience members in some cases couldn't get seem to get over what is emerging as a central trait of Pepe's generation: The need, and apparent ability, to merge their personal lives with work, to digitally talk with friends while also doing their assigned tasks. That, and the largely unproven return-on-investment power of social marketing, led to one of the central lines of skeptical questioning, as expressed by Mildred Munjanganja, general manager at CableOrganizer.com Inc.: How does a retailer measure the impact of an employee such as Pepe, especially if she is tweeting and Facebooking with friends during work?

Jansma said he is trying to measure those returns, but that's hard because social marketing remains a fledgling part of online retailing. But, he continued, such a question might reflect a generational bias, an inability to understand the ways of the youngest e-commerce employees—not only Pepe, but those who will follow her. "That's an immigrant question in a native world," he said.

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