To celebrate Youth Week, this month’s Social Justice Article focuses on engaging and communicating with youth.

Effectively engaging new generations can be challenging, and the reality is that the challenge increases the older we get. Rapid developments in technology, joined with complex and continual changes in trends and culture can render today’s youth a mystery, and ultimately a frustration, to many people from older generations.

The good news is that young people care about justice – or perhaps more correctly, they care about tolerance and respect for the rights of others. They believe everyone should be entitled to their own beliefs and their own lifestyle, so long as no-one gets hurt. This core belief positions them as a generation with potential to bring widespread change to issues of injustice throughout the globe.

The huge success of campaigns such as World Vision’s 40-Hour Famine and WWF’s Earth Hour show Gen Y can be mobilised for justice. The challenge for us is to ensure we are doing our very best to engage with young people right where they are at.

If you want to engage with youth on justice matters, or if you’ve been frustrated by trying to do so in the past, you may find the following 7 tips for engaging with Gen-Y helpful. Each of these 7 factors are evident in major campaigns such as Earth Hour and the 40 Hour Famine. Even adding just 2 or 3 of them to your approach could help you connect with the young people in your local area.

1. **Create an experience**

   Right at the heart of both the 40 Hour Famine and Earth Hour is the experience. They translate a world issue from an intellectual space into a place where the senses are engaged. You can see it. You can hear it. You can feel it.

   For Gen Y, experiences are like gold – they are a valued and prized possession. Young people are hungry for unusual and unique experiences. The 40 Hour Famine allows young people to feel what it’s like to go without food. Earth Hour does the same thing for electricity.

   Young people go away from experiences like these with tangible, personal stories that they can tell.

   When you talk to youth about injustice, how do you engage their senses? What do you allow them to experience?

2. **Low on rehearsal, high on authenticity**

   One of the worst things that you can do with young people is to read off a script in front of them. When you read off a script, their suspicions pick up:

   “What’s going on? Why doesn’t he know his topic well enough just to talk about it naturally? Does he really care about this issue, or is he just trying to sell us something?”
Youth are looking for authenticity. They want the real deal. If you’re serious about the issue you’re talking about, they expect your actions to match. They’ll be watching everything – your body language, your attitude, and the way you interact with people.

Lose the scripts, and focus on being able to have natural conversations about the things you’re passionate about. And make sure your actions back up your words.

3. **Give choice & ownership**
Gen Y’s have grown up being told that they can become whoever they want to be. They grew up hearing that with hard work, all of their dreams can become realities. They’ve been told that their opinions and their ideas matter, and that anyone can ‘make it big’, no matter how young they are.

And since that’s what they’ve been told, they’re going to hold the world accountable.

Gen Y’s have a strong distaste for having someone else’s agenda enforced on them. They value creative freedom and autonomy. They believe they’ve got something to offer, and will feel unappreciated if no-one wants to utilise their ideas and opinions.

With the 40 Hour Famine, young people are encouraged to make their own experience unique. It could be by organising a camping weekend, a sleepover, a church rally, or something completely original. (And -- surprise, surprise – the same pattern is being seen with the emergence of ‘Earth Hour parties’).

When you bring young people on board, are you looking at them just to pad out the numbers? Or are you actually looking to empower them to make some decisions and put their own stamp on your campaign?

4. **Pitch to the group, not the individual**
Research with young people identifies that one of their major influences in decision-making, if not the primary influence, is their circle of closest friends.

Translation?

An average teenager is unlikely to make a serious commitment to something until they find out what their friends are doing.

On one hand this can be incredibly frustrating, but it also offers incredible potential. If 3 or more teenagers from one friendship group decide to get passionate and active about a particular issue, they can become powerful, committed agents of change.

It’s amazing how often we miss this method of recruiting though. We’ll present in front of 100s, or we’ll mentor in 1s and 2s, but rarely do we pitch justice issues specifically at a single friendship group. But it’s the friendship group where real decisions are often made.

5. **Invest in presentation**
In my first job working for a non-profit, we used to aim for ‘slightly dodgy excellence’ with our communication. We actually avoided making our promotions look ultra-high quality. Why? Because if something looked too slick or too professional, people would assume that you had spent too much money on it and we’d receive complaints.
But the same approach is rarely effective with today’s youth.

In a media-saturated world, young people are ruthless at filtering information. If your poster looks boring, they’ll decide at a glance that you and your entire campaign are most likely boring and therefore not worthy of their attention. If you want to be taken seriously, it’s important to get your first impression right. ‘Slightly dodgy’ just won’t cut it.

Design work can be expensive, but a good networker can find people willing to lend their services to charitable causes. Design colleges are good places to build relationships with, because students are often happy to do cheap or free work in order to build their portfolios.

6. Get SOMETHING online
So you’ve talked it, you’ve handed out postcards, you’ve made phonecalls, you’ve recruited volunteers, and everything looks like you’re heading towards an exciting awareness rally.

But if you’re not online, it could all fall apart very quickly.

Postcards get lost, and conversation details get forgotten. When that happens, young people turn to the internet to fill in the blanks. What if it’s 1 hour before the event and they can’t remember the address? If you don’t have information online, young people have nowhere else to turn for information.

The good news is that tools like Facebook give event organisers cheap, simple and effective ways to connect with people online. If you’re serious about engaging with youth, you absolutely HAVE to be on Facebook. There’s no excuse.

If you’re not sure where to start, grab a teenager and ask them to show you how to set up a Facebook account and how to create an event.

7. Build it up, don’t draw it out
It seems that nearly every youth pastor has some kind of horror story regarding child sponsorship. It normally goes something like this:

“We talked with our youth group about sponsoring a child. They got so excited and pledged so much money that we decided to sponsor 3 kids instead! Everything was great for the first few months, but then it started getting harder to get money out of people. Now, these 3 sponsor kids have become a big drain on our youth ministry budget (or my personal budget!) every month, and I’m not sure we can afford to keep sponsoring them all”.

The lesson here? It’s easy to build a lot of energy leading into an event, but a lot harder to sustain that energy over a long period of time.

Here might be a better way to engage in child sponsorship: Run one major fundraising drive every year, and aim to raise enough money to cover the annual donation for your sponsor children in that one event. You’ll be able to get youth excited about making a difference, but you won’t end up with holes in your annual budget.