



The Army may use social media, video games, and other digital platforms to reach young people. Mobilizing veterans and active-duty members to tell their stories through a video recording about what service has meant to them, their families, and their success could benefit recruiting efforts. (U.S. Army photo by Joshua Rojas)

Making Military Service Relevant to Gen Z

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In recent years, the U.S. Army and other military branches struggled with recruitment, especially for Soldiers in the enlisted ranks. Although the military has resolved the issue, continuing to meet goals requires innovative action.

Let's take a closer look at the factors involved in those recruitment deficits and consider how new approaches to branding and representation can ensure

they don't return. By creating a marketing campaign highlighting the service's path to professional civilian success, the Army can reach younger generations who perceive the military negatively.

The Issue

The Army only achieved about 75% of the fiscal year 2022 recruiting goal (Asch, 2023). Efforts to

address the challenge included volunteer incentives, such as promotions, for NCOs willing to serve as recruiters (Thayer, 2023).

Previously, the Army advertised increased bonuses, resurrected a legacy slogan (“Be all you can be”), touted education benefits, and tried other methods to recruit for the enlisted ranks (Asch, 2023). Despite these efforts, the Army missed its goal. Why?

The answer may relate to the wants of younger generations, such as a desire for better pay. The Army competes with the civilian workforce, where the job market is viewed as offering better wages and benefits (Linn, 2023).

Maj. Gen. Alex Fink, the head of Army marketing, said young people “see us as revered, but not relevant, in their lives” (Baldor, 2023). The challenge now is proving them the value of joining.

Service’s Relevance to Young People

Generation Z’s needs differ from those of their forebears. The younger generation wants a fun work environment, a positive team atmosphere, and supportive relations with colleagues and superiors (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). They don’t see the military as a good career path and believe joining would put their lives and civilian careers on pause (Baldor, 2023).

The Army must counter this perception through marketing. The bonuses and slogan changes alone don’t convince young people to enlist (Baldor, 2023). A new marketing campaign should focus on how joining provides relevance during service, followed by success. The effort can spotlight how post-military achievement builds upon military service experience.

Military-to-Civilian Journey Examples

As a member of the millennial generation, I made many achievements. I enlisted the year after I graduated high school and was honorably discharged as a sergeant. During my time in service, I gained leadership and administrative skills that gave me what I needed to progress in the civilian workforce (where I am a part of a health care administrative team). Army experience helped me get to where I am today.

The continued desire to grow since my NCO years led me to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Organizational Leadership, Summa Cum Laude, from Arizona State University and a Master of Science in Health Care Administration with Honors from Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. I am pursuing my Doctor of Business Administration degree from the University of the Cumberlands. The GI Bill covered



Williamsport High School students meet members from the U.S. Army Medical Materiel Development Activity during a career opportunity visit, Williamsport, Maryland, May 3, 2024. The Army can reach younger people through marketing focusing on how military service leads to success in civilian careers. (Army photo by T. T. Parish)

my education, which in turn enabled my career.

My example, and those of other veterans who found success after the military, show the younger generation the relevance of serving. For instance, another Soldier with whom I served, returned to school, earned his bachelors and masters in electrical engineering from Arizona State University, and filled roles in fuel cell engineering and renewable energy design. He exemplifies how a single enlistment can contribute to future success (Winkie, 2023).

A Fresh Perspective on Military Recruiting

An Army rebranding and marketing campaign could emphasize how joining:

- Creates success in people during and after service
- Provides relevant professional experience
- Develops individuals rather than pausing lives and careers

To bolster the effort, marketing could illuminate how Army education (such as the Basic Leader Course) enables further success.

The campaign could also spotlight programs such as the Army's Career Skills Program (CSP), which is available to Soldiers with command approval within 180 days before their discharge date. While servicemembers are still active (still receiving their pay and allowances), the program provides opportunities to learn employment skills and participate in on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeships, and internships with a high probability of employment in high-demand and highly skilled jobs (Hill, 2023). The program bridges gaps for transition and demonstrates how Soldiers benefit after service.

The tuition assistance program deserves highlighting, too. The Army could also create more certification and apprenticeship programs to support messaging around educational opportunities – which could be vital to increasing recruiting numbers.

The Army could use social media, video games, and other digital platforms to reach young people and convey messages in ways designed for specific outlets. These messages and traditional promotional materials

could emphasize benefits such as job variety and educational perks.

Mobilizing veterans and active-duty members in an organized way to tell their stories through video recordings could aid recruiting efforts (Margulies & Blankshain, 2022). They could share what their time in service meant to them and their families and describe the successes they experienced. Using digitized media would allow for the widespread dissemination of such firsthand accounts.

Impact to NCO Professional Development

A military recruitment rebranding would also positively impact NCO professional development.

Such a makeover would help NCOs with boots on the ground in Army Recruiting Command and NCOs who are not recruiters. Shared success stories from serving junior enlisted specialists or NCOs combined with a marketing campaign geared toward relevance and value in their lives and careers could be a win-win for all.

Under the Army's new Soldier Referral Program, all Soldiers are eligible to earn the Army Recruiting Ribbon for referring someone who both enlists and ships to Army Initial Military Training (IMT). The ribbon provides promotion points for those in grades E-4 to E-5 who seek promotion

to sergeant and staff sergeant (U.S. Army Human Resources Command, 2023). These young service members can develop marketing skills geared toward civilians and stakeholders to help them as they grow in rank and responsibility. It can also help them create post-service success.

Conclusion

The Army's recruiting issues may return if the organization doesn't change its campaign strategies. Rebranding to showcase relevance and success for young people would increase recruiting numbers. Veterans and current servicemembers are the positive voices needed to inspire the next generation to serve our great Army and find success. ■



Rebranding for military recruiting could positively impact NCO professional development. All Soldiers who refer someone to join service and ship to Initial Military Training (IMT) can receive the Army Recruiting Ribbon. (Courtesy photo by Fox Co. RSP, Illinois NG)

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