

How to Reach Z

MSG Darrin Colwell

U.S Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Dees

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### How to Reach Z

The United States Army is in the midst of an identity crisis. The organization has been in existence for over 243 years with General George Washington serving as both the first Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and as the first recruiter (Mountvernon.org, 2019). The difficulties that Washington faced are not so much different from what the challenge is today: inspiring young people to aspire to a greater calling. The United States Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) failed to achieve its fiscal year (FY) 18 mission, missing the mark by around 6,500 recruits (Dickstein, 2018). This current state of affairs has prompted the Secretary of the Army Mark Esper to make this declaration to current and former members of the U.S. Army - tell your Army Story (Myers, 2018). If USAREC continues to fail to fill the ranks there will be rippling national security implications, so in order to correct this the Army Marketing Research Group (AMRG) must find the words, images, and sense of calling that connect with America's youth.

### **Army of One**

The U.S. Navy, Marines, and Air Force all reached their FY18 recruiting missions leaving only the Army on the field of failure. The Navy achieved its recruiting mission in May, four months ahead of schedule (Faram, 2018). The Marines have just one promise for prospective recruits: the misery of boot camp for a chance to become a Marine (Snow, 2018). While the Air Force has continued to achieve its recruiting goals as it rebuilds after the devastating drawdown of 2015; with Air Force leadership proclaiming 2016 as a historic year when it achieved the most accessions since the Vietnam era (Losey, 2018). So then why is the Army failing?

### **Operation Leadership**

AMRG which is ultimately responsible for managing the U.S. Army brand initiatives aimed at recruitment has failed to produce a desired return on investment (ROI) and wasted money in the process (WARC, 2018). WARC (2018) addressed a report from the U.S. Army Audit Agency (AAA) to the military chiefs that cited 20 out of 23 programs had failed to “generate a positive impact”. AAA attested that these program failures were due to AMRG’s failure of adequately evaluating performance, an inability to identify and discontinue projects that are not cost-effective, and an absence of specific objectives or direction. In FY16 alone, the internal AAA audit concluded that AMRG wasted tens of millions of dollars on marketing initiatives (WARC, 2018). AMRG contested the findings in the AAA report and stated that the AAA findings demonstrated a “lack of marketing understanding or criteria for performance assessment” (Coffee, 2018).

AMRG’s problems were compounded in March 2018, when it relieved its director of marketing, a 20 year employee, over allegations of inappropriate conduct with a McCann Worldgroup account executive. This has called into question the legitimacy of the agency’s proposals and their products (Panzino, 2018). The McCann Worldgroup, which had serviced the U.S. Army marketing account for the last 13 years, lost the account in November 2018 to Omnicom. Omnicom, the new civilian marketing contractor will now provide this service for the next decade at a cost of \$4 billion (Beer, 2018).

The landscape of advertising will change over the course of the next decade from what AMRG has relied upon in the past such as direct mail, print, radio, and television towards online interaction and social profile construction to reach the target market with tailored messages that resonate with them. AMRG is a laggard in the digital advertising atmosphere. In order to bridge

this gap AMRG must employ foresighted leadership to reach the target market with specified and relevant content on the platforms frequented by the target market. Recent history has shown that AMRG is not capable of this transition either in developing content or in steady leadership. It could end up relying upon the \$4 billion invested in Omnicom to deliver both the content and the leadership.

### **Soldiers tell the Army Story**

The target market today consists of Millennials, which garner the most attention, but it is primarily composed of Generation Z. The U.S. Army target market window remains constant, 17-24 year olds. Each of these generations are digitally savvy and devour screen content. However, the Millennials are aging out of the target market. The Millennial is generationally categorized as born from 1981-1996 giving them an age today of 23-38. Sitting in the cross hairs is Generation Z whose period is from 1997-2012, aged at 7-22 as the now and the future recruits (Dimock, 2019). There are significant differences when appealing to each of these segments. The focus has to be on the future, Generation Z.

The approach in reaching Generation Z combines authenticity, time, and platform distribution. The average attention span for Generation Z is only eight seconds while they also juggle five screens simultaneously, so it is a challenge to connect with them (Patel, 2017). This is where authenticity can be a difference maker. Patel (2017) addressed a report by Google that indicated 70% of Generation Z YouTube subscribers found their favorite YouTube influencer to be more relevant than other traditional celebrities. A key factor is that influencers appear to be authentic and the unpolished content they produce outperforms the Photoshop content created by brands as it appears manufactured and fake. While influencer marketing or celebrity endorsements are nothing new, what has changed is the perception and value. Generation Z sees

influencers as role models, movement leaders and educators (Patel, 2017). In order for AMRG to develop this segment, the individuals chosen to represent the Army campaign must radiate the Army Values.

Currently, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Arlondo Sutton of the Atlanta Army Recruiting Battalion has created some buzz with his rapping recruiting videos. SFC Sutton is communicating with the target market about the benefits of enlistment through music videos that he makes and distributes through social media platforms frequented by the target market. His video “Enlisted” – which features the other recruiters in his station has been viewed more than 1.2 million times since its 24 September 2018 release (Lopez, 2018). Lopez (2018) details that SFC Sutton’s recruiting station over the last 10 months has seen a significant increase, 25 percent, in enlistments and has emerged as the top station in Georgia, with Sutton attributing this success to the videos. His message is clear and portrays the U.S. Army professionally. These are the ingredients for success and the market is responding.

AMRG and Omnicom have to understand the differences between generations and what appeals to them in order to effectively engage them. A new tool available allows for intelligent consumer targeting. The new technology is not only focused on demographics or behaviors but is a combination of factors known as BEM -- behaviors, emotions and moments. This technology can identify those moving into consideration of entering the market for enlistment and send tailored messaging to them. This occurs by “combining programmatic buying with new data sources and triggers including conversation scrapes, content emotion analysis and real-world factors” (Medal, 2017). Another venue that is growing is virtual reality, augmented reality and artificial intelligence that all present unique opportunities for AMRG to engage the market in.

### **Conclusion**

If USAREC continues to fail to fill the ranks there will be rippling national security implications, so in order to correct this the AMRG must find the words, images, and sense of calling that connect with America's youth. The ROI is there and the data supports a deeper dive into the digital marketing tools designed to deliver targeted messaging, which should be the primary focus of Omnicom. USAREC and AMRG leadership must engage current and former Soldiers to tell their Army Story, these testimonials will establish the connection that is lost.

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