

BOOM

Marketing to the Baby Boomer generation

Baby Boomers represent the largest generation in U.S. history. With their families raised and mortgages paid, Boomers tend to have disposable income and time, making them ideal consumers for high-end goods and services. Do you know how to reach them with your marketing messages?





INTRODUCTION

AS THE NAME IMPLIES, the Baby Boom generation represents the most prolific period of childbirth in the United States. Their parents, home from the World War II warfront and newly married, set about populating the nation at breakneck speed. **Nearly 80 million people were born between 1946 and 1964.**¹ From crowded elementary schools to depleted retirement funds, the generation's size has burdened institutional infrastructures for decades.² Because of their vast numbers, Baby Boomers possess a collective power that has greatly influenced how Americans live, work, socialize, and spend.³

Baby Boomers are largely identified with images of the 1960s. From that perspective, they are the generation of network television, political assassinations, The Beatles, the Vietnam War, moonwalks, Watergate, Woodstock, long hair, and the sexual revolution. Born into a post-World War II economic prosperity, Boomers enjoyed advantages over their parents in education, employment, and consumerism.⁴ Perhaps it was those privileges that filled Boomers with optimism—an unwavering confidence in the American promise that hard work pays off—and that gave them a sense that they were entitled.⁵

Entitled to consume, that is. Coming to age at a time when companies began mass marketing their wares on television, Boomers were enticed by a growing array of consumer goods. Increasingly, both spouses were working outside the home as couples aspired to make more money—and to buy more things—than their parents ever did.

Today, Boomers are either at or nearing retirement age. With their children raised and their mortgages paid, many have the disposable income that businesses covet. By understanding the history that influenced the way this generation ticks, companies can better tailor their marketing messages to attract these spenders—and their money.

CHANGE AGENTS

Thanks to the rebellious nature of this age group, the 1960s was a time of social reckoning. Unlike their “Silent Generation” parents, who refrained from voicing unpopular beliefs for fear of being considered subversive, Baby Boomers were not afraid to challenge cultural norms.⁶ They protested against war, racial and sexual discrimination, pollution, and political corruption.

Whereas the Silent Generation fought a war abroad to protect freedom, Baby Boomers waged war at home against the people and policies that limited that freedom.⁷

And they got used to seeing the results of their battles. Through their protests, Baby Boomers played a part in getting civil rights bills passed and wars ended. Thanks to their persistent willingness to rally for a cause, our country eventually outlawed discrimination against race, gender, religion, national origin, sexual preference, physical ability, and age. Boomers convinced businesses and individuals alike to stop polluting the earth and to start conserving it instead. It’s as if they awakened the nation’s consciousness—or, at the very least, restored its voice.

For the most part, Baby Boomers remain socially minded today, although their causes are contemporary. They may have traded marching on Washington for walking for a cure, but they’re still looking for ways to make a difference.⁸ Their utilitarian temperament reflects that, more than anything, Boomers still want to feel relevant.



GENERATION “EX”



UNFORTUNATELY, not all Boomer conflicts had happy endings. Baby Boom couples often married young; in the early 1970s, the average age for first-time brides was under twenty-one.⁹ When their marriages soured, Boomer couples were less likely to stay married than their parents.

One reason: during the seventies, all fifty states passed no-fault divorce laws, making it easier for couples to break up and lessening the social stigma associated with divorce. By the end of the decade, the nation’s divorce rate was twice as high as in 1950.¹⁰ That marital dissolve came with a price, as four out of 10 members of Generation X—the Boomer’s children—came from broken homes.¹¹

The divorce rate peaked in 1980, further suggesting that Boomers are largely responsible for the broken marriage phenomenon.

BOOMERS AT WORK

Eventually, Boomers went off to work. And, while the Industrial Revolution had drawn fathers outside the home to work, their eagerness to own the exciting new consumer products they saw advertised on television led *both* spouses to hold jobs.

That focus on material gain shapes many of the stereotypes used to describe working Boomers. For much of their careers they've been considered workaholics; indeed, in the 20 years following the Boomers' entrance in the workforce, the annual amount of time Americans spent at work increased an average of one full month.¹²

Hard working parents entrusted their school-aged children with keys to the front door and, in the process, produced a generation of so-called "latchkey kids" who let themselves into an unsupervised house. And when they did come home from putting in long hours at the office, Boomers often brought work home with them. They were, it appeared, absorbed in professional advancement—and the titles, status, and belongings that come along with it.¹³

But there's more than personal ambition driving Boomers to work hard. **Work is also a proving ground for many Boomers.** Whereas their fathers and grandfathers had shown their mettle by going off to war, the majority of Boomers would have to demonstrate their worthiness by succeeding at work.¹⁴ It's as if without a Great War to give their lives significance, Boomers sought to find relevance through work.

Their desire to change the world did not end when they got jobs; it was simply redirected. At work, Boomers took their suddenly repressed urge to protest and drove most of the policies, procedures, and regulations prevalent in business organizations today. Indeed, Boomers have been the most influential work generation in history—and undoubtedly will be for years to come.¹⁵



ONE BOOM? OR TWO?

THE SHEER SIZE of the Baby Boomer generation has prompted some researchers to subdivide its members into multiple cohorts. One popular approach is to classify Boomers born before 1956 as *older boomers*, and the rest as *younger boomers*.¹⁶

Along this line of reasoning, older boomers—those who grew up during the Vietnam War and amid the civil rights movement—are thought to care deeply about social justice and making a difference in the world. On the other hand, younger boomers—who experienced *Reaganomics* and the arrival of personal computers—are supposedly more interested in making money and improving their own situations.

The theoretical dichotomy between waves of Boomers suggests that generational stereotypes must be further defined by chronological age. For example, describing Boomers as workaholics is erroneous because many are retiring or transitioning to less demanding work.

To determine if there are significant behavioral differences among the first and second halves of the Boomer generation, researchers Timothy Reizenwitz and Rajesh Iyer empirically studied the relationship between the two age groups.¹⁷

Reizenwitz and Iyer examined various behavioral characteristics of Boomers, including Internet use, cultural activities, fashion interests, and work ethic. As it turns out, they found many more similarities than differences between older and younger Boomers.

In fact, of all the variables that Reizenwitz and Iyer compared, only one produced a significant difference between the two age groups: cognitive age. Simply put, **Boomers tend to think of themselves as younger than they really are.** That makes it nearly impossible to segment Boomers by chronological age. Therefore, the best we can do is generalize the Baby Boom generation as a whole.

BOOMERS MAY BE AGING — *but don't* — TELL THEM

SIXTY IS THE NEW 30

As a group, Baby Boomers are aging. However, many are trying hard to postpone the aging process; they go to great lengths to look and feel young. Therefore, Boomers certainly don't want advertisers reminding them that they are getting old.

Advertisers should refrain from using words referring to aging in their marketing messages, such as seniors, retirement, elderly, Golden Years, or mature.

Use phrases that reference their current life stage, not their age. For example, the term *Empty Nesters* invokes a positive connotation. It reflects that children are leaving home for college or marriage; and while that might happen when parents age, it represents a positive new phase for many Boomers.¹⁸

Of course, the term Baby Boomers is the best option. Indeed, most Boomers take pride in their generation's contributions to the world. Without mentioning age, the label conjures up images of Boomers advocating for peace and fairness and environmentalism. In short, it represents relevance.

RELEVANCE MATTERS



Perhaps the greatest inducement companies can offer Boomers to get their business is to assure them they are still relevant. Whether they were protesting in the streets or affecting change at work as young adults, Boomers set out to make a difference.

Their desire to be relevant is not diminishing—if anything, it’s getting stronger.

Boomers continue to look for ways to meaningfully contribute at work—either through their personal productivity or by helping to mentor the next generations of employees—and in their communities.¹⁹

Marketing messages should remind Boomers of their relevance by conveying meanings such as “We need you,” and “Your business is important to us.”²⁰

ADVERTISING METHODS

Traditional advertising media remain effective ways to communicate with older Boomers (i.e., newspaper, billboards, television, talk radio, direct mail, hardcopy collateral). Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends are effective, as are endorsements from trusted celebrities.

At the same time, most Boomers have embraced the convenience of the Internet. Online usage among Boomers is now over 70 percent.²¹

When developing websites that Boomers will visit, designers should include easy navigation and large fonts. Those features do more than reduce confusion and help with failing eyesight; Boomers like things quick and efficient, so information presented prominently in categories and lists are especially appealing to them. And information provided should be relevant.

As a generation with increasing leisure time on their hands, Boomers enjoy connecting—and reconnecting—with friends and family on social media. Advertisers should promote posts that link to the informative content that Boomers crave.

While Boomers use mobile devices, few use all the options available on smart phones. Many still only use cell phones for telephone calls.²² But Boomers are discovering the benefits from learning mobile technology, such as being able to see their grandchildren on their phones as they chat with them. Advertisers who show Boomers how to use technology in those ways could gain wider audiences.



SUMMING UP

In size alone, Baby Boomers represent a collective power that continuously influences how Americans consume. In their youth, Boomers challenged the cultural norms that limited access to civil rights. They protested wars, discrimination, pollution, and political corruption. They became the voice of the country's consciousness—and made meaningful and lasting change happen.

Boomers are a hardworking generation, driven in large part to be active consumers. But, more importantly, Boomers strive to make their marks in the world through work.

When marketing to this generation, advertisers must convey that Boomers are as relevant today as they were in the past. Messages should assure Boomers that they are important—to the world and to the advertiser's success.

FOOTNOTES

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When it comes to designing a brand, people usually know what they like - and what they dislike. However, few know what actually works.

Our job at The Creative Block is to design and implement branding that looks great while meeting your marketing expectations. Or, put another way, to know what you like and to know what works.

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