

# Soapbox



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## Boomer factoids are barriers to business success

### Will companies pay a price in the coming years for relying on current predictions and conclusions about aging Baby Boomers? This marketing consultant sounds a warning

by G. Richard Ambrosius, MA

When talking about Russia in a 1939 radio address, Sir Winston Churchill said, "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." This is also a good description of the future impact of the Baby Boom, in spite of the growing horde of *Boomer experts* offering such definitive conclusions as:

- Boomers will be teenagers forever—*age 60 is the new 30*.
- Boomers will be a drain on the economy and overwhelm the healthcare systems.
- Boomers will reinvent retirement.
- Boomers will not tolerate stereotypes.

These statements capture the *factoids* that have become accepted as characteristic of Boomers. (A factoid refers to unverified or inaccurate information presented in the press as factual, often as part of a publicity effort, then accepted as true because of frequent repetition.) Current discussions about Boomer marketing more often resemble a diversion by those struggling to hang on to models that served them with yesterday's youth markets, rather than insightful assistance about a unique consumer majority.

For years I have pointed out the paradox of the images and icons used to portray Boomers (Woodstock, drugs, war protests, acid rock music, etc.). As a leading-edge Baby Boomer, I didn't protest the Vietnam War, but I did fight in it. I liked some Beatles tunes, but never cared for the Rolling Stones. In the 1960s, I enjoyed folk music and ballads over hard rock; I didn't smoke pot or use drugs. And while I did drive a Volkswagen, it wasn't a bus. My point: There are as many Boomers who are the antithesis of the stereotypes, as there are those who mirror them.

## Clouded views

In essence, Baby Boomers are several generations. Even though they will eventually share common later-life values, these adults view reality through vastly different experiential lenses.

"[A]ll people see the world not as it is, but as they are," writes Stephen Covey in his best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The so-called Boomer characteristics, as well as the prophecies of how these individuals will approach life's second half, too often represent aging seen through young eyes clouded by stereotypes, myths and misconceptions. For example:

**Baby Boomers will be teenagers forever—age 60 is the new 30.** Myopic, overly simplistic and wrong, this factoid ignores developmental psychology research and condemns 78 million adults to terminal narcissism. It is at worst ageist, and at best replaces one stereotype with another. Although today's older adults increasingly look forward to an active later life, and are the healthiest, wealthiest and best educated elders in history, these trends do not mean they are maturing any differently than their parents and grandparents.

The current image of older people as a *problem*—unproductive adults declining in health and increasing in dependency—demeans this population. Representing older adults in this way also marginalizes life's second half. But to replace that image with one of Skydiving Granny or the lifelong teenager ignores the central human need to find meaning, integrity and purpose in later life.

**Baby Boomers will be a drain on the economy and overwhelm the healthcare systems.** This is one of the most common and negative factoids touted by politicians looking to stroke a

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growing special interest group of *seniors* or, more appropriately, the publicly funded organizations serving them. Yes, this scenario could happen. But this perspective looks at tomorrow through yesterday's lens, forgetting that everything has changed.

To plan for the first era in which our population is more senior than junior based on current models and past experience is like driving using only the rearview mirror: risky and foolhardy, to say the least. With the growing emphasis on health and well-being, complemented by increasingly sophisticated healthcare services, telemedicine and health promotion, we could see an outcome just the opposite of this factoid. As English novelist George Meredith once said, "[T]he future, not yet having been born, we should refrain from baptizing it."

**Baby Boomers will reinvent retirement.**

This statement gives too much credit to Boomers for a revolution already underway. Leading-edge Baby Boomers just started turning 60, and most of them will not retire fully until well into their 70's, or older—if by then we still refer to this stage of life as *retirement*. In reality, the very concept of retirement is outdated.

Just as the Eisenhower generation led the protests of the 1960s—Abbie Hoffman, Jane Fonda, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the like were not Boomers—it also began reinventing the concept of retirement almost a decade ago. Rather than accepting systems designed to cater to and care for them, this cohort started demanding more opportunities for health and well-being services, and for pursuing lifelong growth and fulfillment. One sign is the growing desire for programs and services to support healthy aging. The number of professionals who attend the ICAA's annual Active Aging Conference is

doubling every year, according to Colin Milner, the organization's CEO.

Today, Boomers exercise more, eat better and smoke less than their predecessors, indicating that they will likely continue the renaissance.

**Baby Boomers will not tolerate aging stereotypes.** If this factoid were true, misguided media stories and advertisements targeting Boomers would not exist. In fact, a majority of these efforts are either created or approved by Boomers, who are both victims *and* perpetrators of aging stereotypes. Also, if this statement were true, the 2005 White House Conference on Aging delegates (a large percentage of whom were Boomers) would have identified ageism and aging stereotypes as a major issue. Delegates did not even address this topic at the event.

Since Baby Boomers outnumber any other 18-year age cohort, they will inevitably grow to hate how older people are stereotyped, just as a growing number of today's 70 and 80 year-olds dislike how they are referred to and portrayed.

In the end, marketing workshops that delve into purported Boomer attitudes and behaviors could keep consultants and companies busy for the next 10 years. But these workshops would have little impact on the bottom line if they continued to be grounded in factoids.

**Marketplace realities**

So what can businesses do to plan for success in serving the unprecedented consumer majority of age 45-plus adults? They must accept the following realities:

- No one buys anything or uses a service solely because of their age.

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Rather, individuals purchase services to satisfy wants, address needs and enjoy experiences. To gain the attention of Boomers, stories must connect with their values, rather than perpetuating factoids and stereotypes.

- The 65-and-older age group will grow 78% between 2010 and 2030, while the total population will increase just 18%, according to the US Census Bureau. Furthermore, “age 40 plus adults already comprise a New Consumer Majority of middle age and older adults, a historical first,” writes David B. Wolfe, author of *Ageless Marketing*.
- Few advertising agencies, consultants and businesses understand later-life values and how to connect with them. By accepting Boomer factoids that have their roots in aging stereotypes, companies will continue to waste billions using the wrong words and messages.

Researchers are just now documenting the problems caused by negative aging stereotypes. In the last 3 decades, we have replaced purpose with pills;

productive lives with retirement packages; personal significance with shallow volunteer opportunities; and meaningful community involvement with mindless activities.

Personally, I try to avoid using the term *Boomer marketing*, because it makes no more sense than *senior marketing*; I prefer *developmental, inclusionary or ageless marketing* instead. For that matter, I’m not particularly crazy about *elderly, retirement, senior citizen, Baby Boomer, Gen X’er*, or any other generational labels or typologies. While some people buy products because of the label, they are unlikely to rally around a generational label. While senior/Boomer typologies have made research companies and ad agencies a lot of money, they exacerbate our misunderstanding of a values-centered age cohort of older adults, rather than improving the effectiveness of business communications.

New rules and tools are needed to insure success in a market dominated by middle-aged and older adults. It is time

to view the market through a new lens. When it comes to meeting the needs of the New Consumer Majority, the youth lens of yesterday provides a distorted image of reality. The tools needed to grind a new lens for future success are readily available to those with the vision to use them. ☺

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### What’s your opinion?

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Do you believe that adage will hold true for the aging of the Baby Boomers? Or do you think the almost 88 million Americans and Canadians born between 1946 and 1964 will transform the experience of aging in ways we can only begin to imagine? We invite you to send us your opinion.

Contribute an article to “Soapbox” by mail, fax or email to:

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