



## BABY BOOMERS: Redefining What It Means to Grow Old

By Leila Rach, Ed. D.

Too often hospitality industry professionals forget or ignore the fact that the basics count when trying to win or maintain the loyalty of customers. In an effort to capture market share, managers and executives demand innovation, expansion, or upgrades, while dismissing the details in a grail-like search for products and service that “wow” or can be marketed as new and unique. Too often a marketing campaign features “improved” programs and promises when the original elements were never delivered. Moreover, such efforts usually ignore the service commandment, “know your customer.”

With a nod to the great retailer Marshall Field, I think it is time to reconsider a philosophy that embraces fundamental business principles first and then seeks to innovate. For whatever reason, many sales and marketing professionals believe it is too simple to adhere to the old saying “give the customer what she (or he) wants.” To succeed in such an effort requires a basic understanding of the loyal customer for whom programs that meet their needs and expectations are designed, and for whom campaigns and products are developed.

In support of this endeavor my column will examine consumer issues of a demographic (generational, multi-cultural, gender) or economic (affluent) nature and strive to provide useful, timely and relevant information to assist hospitality sales and marketing executives in maintaining focus on business fundamentals and delivering an experience that supports loyalty.

**B**usiness Simple Rule #1: consumers refuse to follow tradition. Case in point—the Baby Boomer Generation has grown up but has not accepted the fact that they are growing old. On January 1, 2006 at 12:01 a.m., the first of 77 million Baby Boomers turns 60. This represents another milestone for the groundbreaking generation that has been the focus of every industry for the past four decades. And just as they have rewritten every life stage and decade they have faced, so they will redefine what it means to be in the seventh decade of life.

Need proof? Consider that 20 years ago as boomers entered their 40's, their eyes started to weaken and subsequently reading became a challenging activity for millions. For generations since Ben Franklin, this meant wearing bifocal glasses with a tell-tale

line. But for boomers, lines in glasses screamed that the person wearing them is getting old. And no self-respecting boomer was about to allow the realities of life to define them, so business responded by accommodating the demand to see but not to tell with the invention of progressive or no-line bifocals. The lesson? Boomers understand that nature cannot be stopped but it can be fooled. No one need know or see the outward signs of aging. In the same manner boomers have embraced dietary and nutritional supplements that prevent certain aspects of aging. Among the most popular are glucosamine for weekend sports buffs who want to keep their joints limber and ginkgo biloba for mental clarity.

Today no boomer is under the age of 40 and nearly 33 million are 50-plus! The Census Bureau reports that more than four out of every ten U.S. households are boomer households. They spend more than \$2 tril-

lion dollars per year according to the 2002 Bureau of Labor Statistics. Thirty percent have at least a bachelor's degree, nearly 70 percent work full-time and more than 70 percent of boomer households report two incomes. A recent study by AARP indicated 80 percent do not intend to retire. This should come as no surprise as boomers have always lived to work and would not suddenly change their structural make-up. Many cannot afford to retire as they have too much debt, too little savings, and limited access to healthcare. Many will work shorter hours or a job that offers flex hours and days. Some will start anew at a job that gives them intrinsic and monetary rewards. So rather than retire, boomers are likely to “workless.” To retire means to withdraw, to live a life that is more secluded and private. Does that describe your boomer customer? Most likely not. This is a generation that has been fawned over, lusted after, and pampered like

no other before it. A multitude of products were invented just for them, to fit their desire for independence and mobility—Ford Mustang and transistor radios—to express their individuality—bell-bottoms and Virginia Slims. This is not a generation that will accept being defined by tradition, the limitations of age, nor a slower, less involved rhythm of life.

The present reality for boomers in their 50's is that they are leading a fast-paced lifestyle with an expectation for choices that will feed their thirst for experiences, knowledge, and personal revitalization.

They will redefine what it means to be 60 plus, so my advice is to get ready now. Don't wait because it will be too late! Reconsider your approach!

- Ban the use of the term “Ma’am.” As a boomer woman said to me “Ma’am” is my mother! And a boomer man informed me that “Sir” was his father. Train employees to use different non-ageist language when greeting or assisting boomers. Words should reflect their concept, not yours. You may think those words are a form of courtesy. Yet your customers hear terms that conflict with their sense of self.
- Never portray boomers as old. Marketing should depict individuals in their 40's, 50's and 60's in active, vital situations, as real people enjoying your products and services. Marketing should include boomers having fun, being romantic (they're not dead!), in the game, not spectators watching from the sidelines but part of the experience.
- Don't ignore boomers. Since the seventies or eighties, the coveted marketing demographic has been adults aged 18-49. Well, if your company buys into this, say good-bye to many boomers, as they will not be relegated to the has-been segment. Boomers expect to be catered to, to be asked for their opinion, and to be listened to.
- Discounts should have nothing to do with age. Do you offer a senior discount? Wonderful, but the era of the senior discount has limited shelf life. Simply because this worked with other generations does not mean it will work with boomers. Do they want discounts? Of course, but not based on their age. They would far prefer discounts based on loyalty or recognition or as a statement that the company wants to thank them



or reward them.

- Love is all around. Turning 60 is like turning 40 two generations ago. Like falling in love, boomers believe that life still holds endless possibilities whether they are 40 or 60. An AARP/Roper study in 2004 asked boomers who were 47 how old they felt and 63 percent of respondents indicated they felt seven years younger. Nearly 20 percent of all boomers are members of health clubs, choosing exercise to feel better according to a 2003 IHRSA/*American Sports Data Health Club Trend Report*.

Universal design is an approach to the design of products, services, and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_Design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Design)). Think of it as a way to keep boomers in the mainstream for decades to come. The hospitality industry should consider using universal design to improve the usability of maps, menus, and kiosks by simplifying the design through the use of larger fonts, more icons, less text, and clearer instructions. The sports industry recognized the need to redesign equipment before boomers were no longer in the game and in doing so improved the functionality and style of golf clubs (Big Bertha), tennis rackets (Prince Oversized), and ski boots (soft design). A font designed in the 1990's called Clearview has been adopted by the U.S. government

for use on road signs. It has proven to be easier to read from greater distances.

Choice, choice, choice is the mantra of the boomer. Let them choose, give them options, not packages. Create experiences, not tours.

Adopt a new mantra—change before they do. This means asking which of your current products and services will be obsolete as a result of the changing life stage of your loyal guests. They will not be ignored or forced into the slow lane of life. And to maintain their position as key consumers, they will redefine the concept of roughing it by demanding experiences that allow them to come into contact with nature or test their skill while still having the finer things in life available. Boomers will not be defined or categorized by accepting activities that are traditionally offered to older people. Think about bingo, a sedentary, narrow entertainment, or early-bird specials, or any offer that indicates that after a certain evening hour, only the young qualify. Offering boomers what resonated with their parents is an automatic turn-off. They expect active, enticing engagement that reflects their image of vitality. They expect that your marketing and sales promotions will relate to their reality and demonstrate an authentic, energetic, and involved persona. The bottom line is boomers expect. The question is—are you and your company ready to deliver? ■