

Viva the Vital

With Boomers, What Matters Most is What Matters to Me

By Matt Thornhill

In addition to contributing articles to this series, my business partners and I also write for our blog about our book, *Boomer Consumer* (boomerconsumer.com). One recent posting about companies marketing to boomers brought several emails from a “GrammyCarol” somewhere in cyberspace. To put it mildly (and she didn’t), she felt most companies missed her by a country mile:

“I can tell you, because I know for SURE what is the death of marketing for Boomers.

“It’s when any company or product which claims to be ‘for boomers’ will mix me in the same group as people 14 years younger than me. A Boomer at 48 is very different from a Boomer at 62.

“I’m 62 and graduated from HS in 1965. I graduated college in 1969. I could care less what most people in their late 40’s are doing now days, but companies which pander to me are usually trying to pander to women in their late 40’s also. Big mistake.

“If I read another magazine or Web site ‘for boomers’ which tries to tell us what to do with our ‘parents,’ for example, I’m going to scream. Parents??? I’m 62 and working myself into a hole just trying to take care of my husband and myself. My parents have been dead for years!

“In other words, the LEADING EDGE of us boomers is ME. I’m the ‘Class of 1965,’ and if you’re not talking to ME, then you’re missing the boat. If you are trying to also talk to me AND some bunch of little girls in their late 40’s? Get lost.

“I simply don’t care about all the issues a young, active, still-has-teens-at-home mom of 48 has. I want to talk about my concerns. Death, mobility, health issues, how to access the ‘system’ at my age.”

The three additional emails from GrammyCarol covered more “boomer” topics she felt were wrong for her. She doesn’t want to know how to grow retirement savings (“I’m spending it, not saving for it. Tell me about reverse mortgages.”). Ditto on memory exercises (“Brain health? How about general health at age 62?”). She wants to learn more about actively caring for her older husband. And she wants marketers to know she’s still buying products and services, just not from ones that “are missing the boat and lumping all eighteen years of us together.”

In all of this, GrammyCarol is right.

At age 62 she is in a completely different place than a mid-40’s Boomer (the youngest Boomers are only now turning age 44). But all generations are, by definition, about 20 years from start to finish. GrammyCarol just happened to be on the front edge. The

typical boomer today is 52. Not at the end, but not still at the starting gate. Firmly in “midlife.”

It is difficult to design any single product, service or even media vehicle - Web site, magazine, TV show - that appeals to a typical 52-year-old, much less a typical boomer. That's because there are 52-year-olds with kids in elementary school and there are 52-year-olds with grandkids.

Truth be told, being a “boomer” doesn't really have much significance. It's just a demographer's label, not an affinity group. Generational labels, and even age, don't matter for most people when making connections with others. Connections are usually made with people at similar life stages, or living similar life styles, or with similar interests and hobbies.

Unwittingly, GrammyCarol's emails reveal one generational trait that does cut across many boomers, which is that the underlying question fueling her is, “What's in this for me?” She's interested in topics relevant to her life right now.

Many boomers developed a heightened sense of “self” to deal with their sheer numbers. Rare is the boomer who was an only child, so from the early days of vying for attention among siblings, boomer children had to identify, develop, and articulate their individuality. Finding themselves in classrooms with 35 or more students, in schools with large populations, young boomers had to obey the rules and conform, while sorting out what they could think or feel or do to be unique as individuals.

Another factor was Dr. Spock. Not the boomer icon with pointed ears, but the pediatrician with new ideas about raising kids: nurture the child's physical and mental well-being. Make the child the center of the home. With that start, it's no wonder many boomers remain self-centered today.

Companies and organizations that understand this boomer trait of wondering “What's in this for me?” are the ones that will most likely appeal to GrammyCarol and the rest of the boomer cohort. They will be the ones that matter most to boomers.