



Five Questions: Brent Green, author, *Marketing to Leading-edge Baby Boomers: Perceptions, Principles, Practices, Predictions*

1) *How is marketing to baby boomers different from marketing to the public in general?*

First, let's define "baby boomers."

The baby boom generation is composed of Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Post-world War II parents procreated 76 million times during this span (call it pent-up demand), and immigration has expanded the cohort by six to eight million since the end of the boom.

Those born between 1946 and 1955 are called *leading-edge boomers*; those born during the second half are referred to as *late- or trailing-edge boomers*. *Generation Jones* is a new designation gaining popularity to describe the second half of the boom.

Pundits agree that two sociologically distinct generations have been enveloped in this nineteen-year package. The leading-edge boomers are different from their younger brothers and sisters in some fundamental ways.

Members of the older group shared teenage encounters with the galvanizing experiences of the Vietnam War era and the "cultural revolution," including modern feminism, civil rights, and environmentalism. Leading-edge boomers vividly remember the assassinations of JFK, RFK and MLK, as well as the debut of Four Lads from Liverpool on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

The rest of my comments will focus on the leading-edge boomers because they are nearest to retirement, with bountiful implications for the housing, health, and hospitality industries, to name a few.

Marketing to a generational cohort, as opposed to a demographic or lifestyle segment, draws validity from an observation developed by a German psychologist: a *zeitgeist*. This simply means a shared sense of a time, particularly the impressionable years surrounding early adulthood.

Leading-edge boomers shared an intense and captivating coming-of-age period, and this has created many common values. Unique generational values and shared life experiences create fertile opportunities for message construction, offer strategies, and product positioning.

2) *How much influence do boomers have in terms of numbers and disposable income?*

Every eight seconds, another boomer turns 50. That's ten- to twelve-thousand per day and four million per year. Of every three adults over 21 in the U.S., one person is a boomer.

Furthermore, America is getting older every month. We can count on one-third of the U.S. population being over 50 by 2010. By 2020, one in five Americans will be over 65.

Businesses not planning to target over-50 markets are limiting growth as youth markets shrink by comparison.

It's also about the money.

Today, 50+ American adults represent 38% of the population, and that group will explode to 47% by 2020. According to data collected by the U.S. Census and Federal Reserve, the 78 million Americans who were 50 or older as of 2001 controlled \$28 trillion, or 67% of the country's wealth.

BRENT GREEN & ASSOCIATES, INC

(303) 743-0140 + <http://www.bgassociates.com>



In 2000, households with someone in the 55-to-64 age group had a median net worth of \$112,048 — about fifteen times the \$7,240 reported for under-35 adults. Annually, boomers spend around \$2 trillion on goods and services, and by 2010, they will outspend younger adults by \$1 trillion.

A huge generation guarantees attractive and sizeable market segments for all comers, whether business-to-consumer or business-to-business. A generation accustomed to experimentation and a surfeit of brand choices since infancy obliterates the myth that brand experimentation hardens with age.

3) *What are some of the common misperceptions marketers have about the baby boom generation?*

Segmentation is still based on descriptive generalizations. The boomer generation is not a homogeneous market.

For example, it's common to portray the typical boomer as someone who grew up in a professional, white collar, and economically healthy family. However, according to U.S. Census data, approximately 57 million boomers, or roughly 70 percent of the generation, came from poor, working-class, or family-business backgrounds.

Nearly one-third of the generation is not prosperous today, or even marginally comfortable; *25 million boomers are broke*. This is gloomy news, but people without liquid assets still consume a superfluity of products and services designed to address their economic handicaps.

Finally, a pervasive youth-demo fixation in contemporary marketing appears to be driven by the *old brand-habit theory* instead of quantifiable evidence. (This theory holds that brand loyalty hardens with age, and you can't teach old dogs new tricks.)

A recent study by AARP, the advocacy group for 50+ adults, discovered that the majority of people over 50 aren't overly brand loyal. Brand devotion varies more by category than age.

4) *What are the boomers looking for in a sales pitch?*

Boomers resonate with marketing messages that help them process their lives. Although they still maintain youthful idealism and verve in many ways, they are now middle-aged adults with middle-aged value frameworks.

For example, the quest for self-discovery and self-actualization are fundamental mid-life issues. Boomers are increasingly seeking paths toward self-expression, while advancing agendas focused on balance, core values, and psychological self-reliance. People who arrive at this stage of development become more concerned about relevance and legacies, less concerned about acquisition for purely material satisfaction.

When boomers were young, marketers sold them tailored products — tangible goods such as bell-bottom jeans. Companies then expanded products with services such as the increasing conveniences offered by fast-service restaurants. Today, the newest source of value creation is experiences: promotions, events, and shopping environments designed to engage boomers in a personal and profound way.

The key to marketing with experiences is to position brands as a reflection of unique psychological encounters. Experiences create memories, rich with sensations and personal engagement. Boomers are experience seekers, especially today in mid-life. As I've demonstrated on a number of occasions for our clients, *even direct mail can be more experiential*.

BRENT GREEN & ASSOCIATES, INC

(303) 743-0140 + <http://www.bgassociates.com>



Finally, aging is often associated with the values of comfort, predictability, and routine, but healthy boomers defy these generalizations. Many head in the opposite direction and embrace unabashed experimentation as a pre-retirement lifestyle.

Experimental behavior could manifest itself in a number of new ways. That's why the adventure travel and edutainment trends are gaining momentum in the early years of the new century.

5) *Are there any topics or approaches to avoid when pitching to this segment?*

Too often marketers fall prey to boomer stereotypes. You've probably seen a few boomer advertising clichés: hippies and Earth mamas; wistful nostalgia about the sixties, ad infinitum; and SUV-driving, cell-phone-yakking yuppies who appear inane and egoistic

For example, a global electronics manufacturer launched a colossally expensive TV campaign last year. The flashy flourish, featuring a boomer's global orbit in the International Space Station, makes its hero appear narcissistic and irresponsible. The underlying message, wherein the protagonist proposes to disinherit his children in the name of self-gratification, is a subtle putdown, veiled in cinematic beauty and boomer nostalgia.

A marketing campaign this year by a multinational pharmaceutical company demonstrates another typical error. The TV spot rivets attention with its classic rock music bed by *Queen*. But as boomers gyrate to the nostalgic beat while celebrating their erectile-dysfunction medication, they appear overweight and disheveled.

These ads are the products of the most high-profile, respected advertising agencies in the world.

Opportunity lies in creating advertising that compliments rather than criticizes — messages that elevate rather than denunciate.

Boomers also do not like association with aging metaphors. Many view themselves younger than the calendar, some by as much as twelve years or more. Thus, it's important to depict boomers in marketing from an aspirational perspective — as active, energetic, and engaged.

Brent Green Biography

Since 1986, Brent Green has owned a full-service direct marketing-consulting company, based in Denver, Colorado.

Over fifty regional, national, and international awards acknowledge his creative and commercial accomplishments, including the DMA's *International Gold Echo Award*. In 2000, The Rocky Mountain Direct Marketing Association selected him as *Direct Marketer of the Year*.

Brent Green is a nationally recognized marketing expert and author of *Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers: Perceptions, Principles, Practices, Predictions*.

He has been a sought-after keynote speaker about Boomers and has had numerous interviews with news media such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *CNN Headline News*, *US News & World Report*, *Business Week*, and *The New York Times*.

Brent is on the Leadership Council of the *Business Forum on Aging* for the American Society on Aging. He also founded and is executive director of the *Foundation for American Boomers*.

Copyright 2005, Brent Green & Associates, Inc. All rights reserved

BRENT GREEN & ASSOCIATES, INC

(303) 743-0140 + <http://www.bgassociates.com>