

Baby Boomers

Redefining the Way We Live from Birth to Death

With more than 76 million of them in our country, Baby Boomers are a powerful and important consumer base, not only because of their sheer numbers but also as a result of their independent attitude. This outlook has earned them a special place in history and has helped them become trailblazers in all aspects of American culture. As they get older, they are planning for retirement, long-term care, and end of life issues. Marketers and advertisers need to devise messages that resonate with this large demographic. It is critical for anyone who views boomers as a target audience to understand how they view aging and the standards they demand concerning the quality of the second phase of their lives.

On January 30, Solomon McCown & Company (SM&) hosted a panel to discuss the impact boomers will have on real estate, healthcare and community development, as well as a look back on the contributions they have made to our society beginning with changes in maternity care. This was the ninth in our award-winning "SM& Presents" panel series that examines topical—often provocative—communications issues. Moderated by Martha Bebinger, reporter and producer for WBUR, the conversation featured distinguished experts on birth, aging, real estate development and healthcare: Tina Cassidy, Author of *Birth: The Surprising History of How We Are Born* and SM& vice president; Len Fishman, president & CEO of Hebrew SeniorLife; Pamela Goodman, president of Beacon Communities Development LLC; Joanne Handy, president & CEO of Visiting Nurse Association of Boston; and Dr. Jeffrey Levin-Scherz, Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. The audience represented more than 100 corporations, mission-focused and healthcare organizations, law firms and the media.

Historical Impact of Baby Boomers

Boomers have characteristically questioned authority, and one can look to the events of the 1960s as a strong example of boomers changing the American perspective around war, politics, technology and social issues. Their independence and unique viewpoint has set the standards for many aspects of our culture.

As their moniker suggests, boomers represent an unusual spike in the birth rate between 1946 and 1964. Tina Cassidy said when this large demographic started to have children of their own, they called for changes in the way maternity care was delivered. Female boomers started the natural child birth movement, a divergence from their mothers' generation who were given drugs during labor as normal practice. The boomers' gravitation toward natural maternity practices helped spawn the home birth movement, another example of their resistance to establishment and authority.

Hospitals across the country were forced to reevaluate how they offered maternity services after they saw a drop in maternity patients. To respond to the preferences of boomers,

hospitals transformed their clinical birthing environments into warmer, friendlier settings and stopped the use of certain drug injections. These changes influenced the way current maternity care is approached and many of them are still in practice. “That legacy remains today and I think we have that to be thankful for,” Cassidy said.

Len Fishman pointed out that boomers also helped the assisted living movement, which provided an alternative to nursing homes. Many boomers are also part of the “sandwich generation,” taking on the burdens of caring for ill and aging parents while raising their own families, he said. Their experiences as both caregivers and those who receive care will have a significant impact on the way healthcare services are administered.

This historical background is important to understand as the first wave of boomers retire and start planning for the second phase of life. They will again challenge the standards of care, and their desire to age in place will influence healthcare and community development.

Boomers and Healthcare

While boomers may be the largest, most educated and wealthiest generation in American history, there are significant wealth disparities among them, Fishman said. As a result, the effects on healthcare and boomers accessing care will be affected and could lead to this demographic being more unhealthy than previous generations, but at the same time, living longer than ever before. “Social security gets a lot of attention, but it’s really Medicare and Medicaid that are going to be stressed enormously by the aging population,” he said.

In fact, society’s definitions around age have changed because of boomers’ sustained activity levels. “When you talk about...being 72, to me that is middle age,” Fishman said. “Truly, 72—it just is not what 72 used to be like.”

As a result, boomers demand that their healthcare keep pace and allow for them to remain active. While it wasn’t unusual for people in their 60s to be in nursing homes 20 years ago, the expectations are much different, said Dr. Jeffrey Levin-Scherz. Boomers expect to be healthier and demand their activity levels to extend far later into their lives. They want medicines with no side effects; they want cutting-edge surgeries but with shorter hospital stays; and they want choice within their healthcare system, he said.

With the enormous primary care physician shortage, in addition to only 7,000 geriatricians in the country, boomers’ sheer numbers create an overwhelming demand for healthcare services.

“There will be substantial new demands on the healthcare system, which is—especially on the primary care front—a little bit fragile,” Dr. Levin-Scherz said.

In today’s technological age, people can access information in a matter of seconds with only a few clicks at their computer. Dr. Levin-Scherz said that just as consumers have grown accustomed to checking their bank accounts and investment portfolios regularly, patients should have access to feedback about their healthcare conditions.

Healthcare is not only a priority for boomers, but a concern for their family members and adult children. Nine out of 10 Americans aged 60 and older wish to remain in their own homes and communities as they age, according to an AARP study. This shift, very similar to boomers bringing maternity back into the home, will require that families, and communities for that matter, plan for this desire to “age in place.”

Currently, 25 percent of employees have care-giving responsibilities, sparking a workplace concern of how to deal with and alleviate caregiver stress, said Joanne Handy. The demands on paid caregivers and few opportunities for career growth have turned people away from pursuing it as a profession so there needs to be more incentives for people to join the field, she said.

Tougher immigration laws will hurt the care-giving population, Handy and Fishman agreed.

“Immigration is probably the most critical factor here—that is where the workforce is coming from for direct-line caregivers and many of them are coming from countries that have a better ethic about caring for frail elders than we have,” he said.

Statistics show that 66 percent of patients pass away in a hospital, while 33 percent die at home, but that ratio is going to change rapidly, Handy said. People choosing to die in an institution will be scaled back to 25 percent in the future. The demand of private care and hospice care is on the rise, but that can add a financial burden to an already emotional one.

“I think the people in this room know that at least at this time, and definitely in our economy for the foreseeable future, the ability to support [caregiver stress] with actual formal services is all private. It all comes out of your pocket,” Handy said.

Boomers have been known to customize their experiences to suit their needs, and Handy projected that they would do the same with death.

“I predict that there is a segment of boomers who will be into designer deaths where you can really create your own experience,” she said.

Real Estate and Community Development

The preference of boomers to age in place is already having an effect on the real estate market and community development. In the late 1980s, there was an increase in new home and condominium construction, said Pam Goodman. By the early 1990s, there was an increase in senior-only developments.

Boomers are a driving force in the real estate market, and they represent a diverse group of needs, Goodman said. Today there are fewer affordable housing units that are being developed as compared to 20 years ago, and those units are in need of repair and renovation. With the wealth disparities among boomers, some will have a difficult time getting by, and the full extent of the burden on government resources is not quite known yet.

According to Goodman, today people between the ages of 50 to 78 want to have “engaged lifestyles ... where there is academic, cultural, or political stuff going on so they can be active in their community.”

This is drawing boomers to settings such as the one created by Beacon Communities Development near Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts, allowing them to live in a diverse community where there are many cultural and academic resources and offerings, she said. For the same reasons, there are many retirement communities that are being developed in urban settings instead of in the suburbs, Fishman added.

Communicating with Boomers

Marketing to boomers can be difficult and old tactics aren't as effective as they once were. A *New York Times* article by Charles Duhigg (“Six Decades at the Center of Attention, and Counting” January 6, 2008) reported that older adults don't believe that they fall into an easily identifiable category with similar needs. Blaine Branchik, an associate professor at Quinnipiac University, said in the article:

“Seniors, particularly baby boomers, each believe they belong to a market segment made up of exactly one person. Many believe the only thing they have in common is that they are all so unique that they have nothing in common.”

Goodman said, “What has been challenging for us and really sort of stretching us is how do you market?”

In her experience traditional marketing, such as newspaper advertisements, is not working to reach boomers, so her firm is exploring viral marketing and social networking tools as possible solutions.

“In normal markets maybe it's three or four times you have to touch the buyer. In this market we're finding that it's 12 to 15. ... Those are things we need to adjust to because it is just really different,” she said.

“Trying to segment boomers into cookie-cutter profiles isn't an effective strategy in communicating with them,” said Cassidy. “Boomers want choices and they want their individual needs met, and as history shows, the impact of their choices will affect us all.”

For more information on messaging, branding and other communications issues, please contact Helene Solomon at hsolomon@solomonmccown.com or visit www.solomonmccown.com.