



Selling Universal Design To Baby Boomers/ Aging In Place

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Selling Universal Design to Baby Boomers

Universal Design, originally developed for people with disabilities, has become a major player in the housing industry.

But there is still a stigma attached. If not for the disabled, Universal Design is for *old people* – and Baby Boomers (at least according to popular myth) eschew anything that smacks of ‘old’ or ‘senior.’ For them, UD is patronizing, condescending – as if we’re babies again and in need of playpens so we won’t hurt ourselves or get into much trouble.

As home builders, you know the truth: UD is a great blueprint (as a metaphor and in reality) for planned communities, individual units, and any combination thereof. However, a delicate touch is needed when marketing Universal Design to a healthy, vital demographic

ERGONOMICS. That’s not such a negative word to Baby Boomers. We’ve been the fodder for the ergonomic revolution. We almost feel as if we invented it. The concept resonates.

But an ‘ergonomically designed home’ sounds rather cheesy. Using the word sparingly (but using it) in any marketing/advertising collateral is a good idea. For example, ‘ergonomic’ works when describing kitchens, but not bathrooms. Everybody wants a simple-to-maneuver-in kitchen. It makes cooking and entertaining easier. But not too many healthy, active over-fifty folks want to hear about ergonomically designed bathrooms – until they’ve seen one.

LESS IS MORE

The way most Baby Boomers plan on designing their future is an important ethos to consider when selling Universal Design. Whether they know or not, a majority of Boomers would appreciate the benefits of UD. Here’s why:

"Baby Boomers think they never will get old," said Myril Axelrod, president of Marketing Directions Associates in New York. "This self-image will have a lot to do with their future housing choices...Boomers are not considering retirement housing. Instead, they call it next-stage housing." (Building for Boomers Is Seen as a Growth Market, John Handley, Chicago Tribune, 2004)

The first part of the above quote is a bit tongue-in-cheek. Unfortunately, advertising agencies often interpret this as ‘Baby Boomers want to be eighteen to twenty-five again.’

This is another misconception. That’s because most copywriters and creative directors are twenty or thirty-somethings, and see everything through their own eyes. They think Baby Boomers want to be *their* age. Advertising creatives have problems understanding that they are merely doing what comes naturally to them: marketing to themselves. If you have employed an agency, be diligent.

What Baby Boomers are really doing is redefining what it means to be the ages they are.

The second part of the quote, “Boomers...call it next-stage housing” rings true. If you analyze how Baby Boomers think about what they want in future housing, you can learn some valuable lessons.

Past generations tended to get excited about modern conveniences that would make their lives easier. They'd walk into a planned housing unit and exclaim, "Look! It's got this and this and this and this!" The more features, the better. The more 'planned,' the better. It was time to start a new life. Time to be rewarded for all the hard work, and relax.

Not so with Baby Boomers. We take most modern conveniences for granted. And **we don't want to start new lives, but continue the lives we already have.**

Baby Boomers will be anticipating a seamless transition. Instead of "Look! It has this and this and this," we'll be sniffing around for friendly, useful spaces. You'll want us to say, "Look! There's a perfect place for my pottery wheel," or "There are plenty of windows and sunlight. My house plants and indoor herb garden will do fine in here," or "Good. I can put up big, deep shelves for my books and CDs," or "Here's the perfect room for our side business on Ebay," or "Here's a place where I can soundproof a recording studio or entertainment center," or "This oversized back door is great because I can roll my bicycle in and out without squeezing and jerking it around - and the extra-wide hallway means there's plenty of room so I can just lean it against the wall and we won't bang into it every time we walk past it."

These will be the selling points. Less is more. Sound like Universal Design to you?

WE'VE BEEN SPOILED. WE'RE SKEPTICAL.

And we're a bit jaded when it comes to advertising. Everything is and will be a tough sell. With such a huge emotional and financial investment, convincing us that we should be lugging our lives into a retirement or semi-retirement community will be the toughest of sells.

The common terms used for such places is 'Planned or Active Adult Communities.' However, when presenting planned communities to the public, Baby Boomers will wince at the concept. You know it's planned, we know it's planned (What else could it be?) — but 'planned' may sound too restrictive to Boomers. We don't like the idea of anything 'planned.' We want to do it ourselves, construct our own lives. Let us sustain the illusion - or the partial illusion. Communities are not 'planned.' We do not want to live in prefab theme parks.

‘Next-Stage Housing’ sounds a bit stilted, but at least it’s on the right track.

Some sociology experts predict that semi-retirement and retirement communities will naturally develop *personalities* based on shared interests. These could be gardening,



motorcycles, vegetarianism, the arts, sports-related activities — even a community where the shared interest might be financial speculation.

A truly imaginative marketer will be able to envision for Baby Boomers almost anything in the spaces available. The residents will add the 'more': community gardening, mini-swap meets, fund-raising picnics/BBQs, extra space for RV parking — who knows. *Baby Boomers will continue to be a vibrant, creative bunch. Don't try to second-guess us.*

What 'Less is More' Really Means to Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers do love to read – often chewing on every single word in a brochure, print ad, or web site. They want to know *everything* about a product. But when all is said and done, they will sit back and wonder if this product or service will complement their lives and help create *more* choices.

Less is More means *more room for choices*. When it comes to housing, Universal Design is the perfect template for more choices.

In the next article I'll talk about my presentation at The National Association of Homebuilders 50+ Housing Symposium last April in Phoenix. What was one of their major concerns? The concept of “aging in place.”

Aging In Place

John Migliaccio (Maturity Mark Services,) and I conducted a session at *The National Association of Homebuilders 50+ Housing Symposium* in 2006. While we talked about all sorts of subjects related to marketing and advertising, the one on most people's minds was “aging in place.”

I've heard this term defined a few ways. The simplest definition: Baby Boomers staying put in their condos or houses for the rest of their lives. Others refer to “aging in place” as remodeling current residences with Universal Design as the blueprint. Still others use the term to describe Baby Boomers moving into condos or active adult communities not far from where they are now – this so they can still be near work, family, friends.

My NAHB presentation had a large section dedicated to the ‘problem’ of aging in place. It's a problem, of course, for AACs. How do you convince Baby Boomers to consider your offerings – whether your community is across the country or across town?

The first slide in the aging in place section was titled, “Let's talk about your competition.” I tossed up logos from Del Webb, Robson, Meritage, and a few others – along with one of a real estate salesman outside a house with a ‘for sale’ sign on it. I shook my head. “These are not your competitors,” I said, “This is.” A new slide popped up that read ‘Home Sweet Home.’ Many in the audience nodded.



Then I talked about Margit Novack's Moving Solutions® - a company specializing in transporting the parents of Boomers who are in their 70s-90s to assisted care living facilities. Moving Solutions does everything: meets with the mother or father or both, packs everything, unpacks everything, and sets up the new residence so all he/she has to do is walk in the front door.

To Margit's surprise, a big chunk of her business is now Baby Boomers wanting her franchised companies to move *them*: A Moving Solutions representative discusses where everything should go in the new residence, the client take a vacation for a few days – and enters the new house or condo with everything unpacked, put away, and set up.

There is a sociological ethos here – one I talked about in the previous article *Selling Universal Design to Baby Boomers* (see link below). Many Baby Boomers **do not want to start new lives, but continue the lives they already have**. This is because a large percentage of Boomers have been and still are leading non-linear lives – so 'starting a new life' doesn't have much meaning to them. According to Matt Thornhill of The Boomer Project, Boomers often reinvent themselves every five years. Continuing your life means continuous change – even if you live in the same place.

When deciding to change location, the ethos of many Baby Boomers is this: Move *my life* over here. It's not 'move me to a new life.'

I've yet to see any AACs grasping this ethos. Marketing and advertising copy needs to be retooled or tweaked. Boomers are a diverse, unwieldy group. No one message speaks to all. My advice to the attendees was to think about this powerful but overlooked ethos and work it into existing marketing materials.

While I wasn't about to create copy out of thin air, I tossed out a handful of marketing ideas. Here were two:

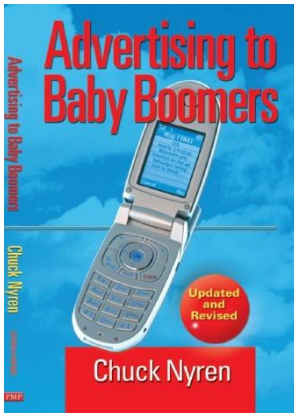
1) Floor Plans seem to be merely an afterthought on most AAC web sites. I would bump up their visibility. You could produce an interactive, three-dimensional tour of the interior. Include measurement rollovers for every nook and cranny in every room and hallway. Don't forget the garage. Show windows, electrical outlets, and any other features. This will make it easy for mouse-wielding Baby Boomers to virtually fill in the spaces with their 'lives.' Will this or that fit here? Which room would be best for a bedroom – which for an office? Will my desk fit under the window? Will our bikes fit in the hallway by the back door – or will we need to keep them in the garage? These web site visitors will become actively involved – asking questions and finding answers. It's impossible to superimpose a life over a skimpy, two-dimensional abstract.

2) In a 2005 Pulte/Del Webb Baby Boomers Study, 64% said travel is their top unfulfilled ambition, and 45% said that travel will be their #1 expenditure in the future. How can AACs take advantage of this? One of the fastest growing internet business models is the non-linear vacation house swap. This is where someone in Florida offers his/her residence for a month, stays a month in a residence in England – while the owner of the residence in England stays in Italy, etc. Your AAC could partner with one of these



businesses, making your offering more attractive to a potential buyer. For example, these extras: easy listings on the house swap site, all amenities included during a swap (golf, swimming pools, workout facilities, etc), a ‘welcome package’ of information and discounts in the local area for the vacationers. Remember this: *what you’re really doing is selling this service to the potential buyer*. It will be easier to swap a residence if living in an Active Adult Community.

Recap: When fashioning marketing and advertising collateral for Active Adult Communities, don’t ignore the ‘move my life here’ ethos of many Baby Boomers.



Chuck Nyren is an award-winning advertising video producer and creative strategist, consultant, and copywriter focusing on Baby Boomer demography, sociology and culture. Portions of these articles were excerpted from his book [Advertising to Baby Boomers](#) (©2005, 2007 Paramount Books, ISBN: 0976697319).

[Kindle Edition](#)

Advertising to Baby Boomers has been selected as a classroom resource by **The Advertising Educational Foundation**.

[An Interactive Guide: Advertising to Baby Boomers](#)

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