

CHAPTER FOUR

Give Boomers Room for Choices

THE WAY MOST Baby Boomers plan on designing their futures is another important ethos to consider when fashioning or critiquing campaigns.

“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.”

—*Chicago Tribune*¹

The first part of the above quote is a bit tongue-in-cheek. Unfortunately, advertising agencies often interpret this kind of statement as “Baby Boomers want to be eighteen to twenty-five again.” This is another misconception—and a common projection. That’s because copywriters and creative directors see everything through their own eyes. They think Baby Boomers want to be *their* age. Again, advertising creatives have problems understanding that they are merely doing what comes naturally to them: marketing to themselves.

The second part of the quote, “*Boomers . . . call it next-stage hous-ing*” rings true. If you analyze how Baby Boomers think about what they want in this area, you can learn some valuable lessons and apply them to all products and services aimed at Baby Boomers.

Attracting Baby Boomers to planned communities has become a major headache for developers of housing, retirement communities, and realtors, and ultimately to advertisers. Boomers are now begin-

¹ Handley, John, “Building for Boomers is Seen as a Growth Market,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2004.

ning to scale down, and eventually will semi-retire or retire. What will we want and not want when it comes to a planned community?

Past generations tended to get excited about modern conveniences that would make their lives easier. They would 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. They wanted to be rewarded for all their hard work, and relax.

Not so with Baby Boomers. We take most modern conveniences for granted. 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 will want us to say, “Look! There’s a per-fect 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 have an entertainment center,” or “This oversized back door is great because I can get 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. For Planned Communities, less is more.

Baby Boomers have also been fodder for the ergonomic revolution. Developers take heed: it had better be easy to get around or you’ll lose us. For example, I love to run up and down the stairs. The problem is that I can’t run up and down narrow, small stairs anymore. Big, wide, easily negotiable stairs I can handle. I want to keep running, or at least happily skip, without tripping over myself too often.

Taking the Planning Out of Planned Communities

We are also a bit jaded when it comes to advertising. Everything is and will be a tough sell. *With such a huge emotional and financial invest-*

ment, convincing us that we should soon be lugging our lives into a retirement or semi-retirement community will be the toughest of sells.

The common term used for such places is “Planned Communities.” However, when presenting planned communities to the public, Baby Boomers could 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 a 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 Baby Boomer 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, even a community where the shared interest might be financial speculation.

Brent Green, author of *Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers*, believes that many 50-plus communities will become hotbeds for social activism. If we have a resurgence of our youthful activist days, it may be to pick up where we left off—revivifying proactive sensibilities Boomers had as teenagers and young adults, an idealistic fervor that “once gave us the greatest sense of engagement and meaning.”²

When developing or molding a community for Baby Boomers, start with the concept of “neutral.” Do not confuse this with “sameness.” For example, when designing an indoor community space, do not assume that it will be used mostly for Bingo. Fashion it with flexibility so that it may be used for almost anything. Think of a hand-crafts fair, a concert venue, a town meeting, or an internet-ready video conferencing center. The technical specifications must be able to handle all sorts of activities. Don’t think that a couple of electrical out-lets, a simple PA system, and a few racks of folding chairs will suffice.

The same holds true for community spaces outdoors. A truly imaginative site designer will be able to envision almost everything in the

² Brent Green, *Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers* (Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing, Inc., 2005)

spaces available—without designing it for anything in particular. Lawn bowling, shuffleboard, and checkers might not be the activities of choice for Boomers. Again, less is more. The residents will add the “more”: community gardening, mini-swap meets, fund-raising picnics, extra space for RV parking—who knows. *Baby Boomers will continue to be a vibrant, creative bunch. Don’t try to second-guess us.*

The only required feature you can count on will be easily accessible walking-jogging-bicycle trails. We’ve become health-conscious, and this won’t change. If a community is adjacent to a maintained trail, this may be a determining factor for many potential buyers. Certainly more so than a community gym, for high-quality personal exercise equipment has become easily affordable.

Here’s another big issue: rumblings in the community planning industry are confirming their biggest fears—a *large percentage of Baby Boomers will shun retirement communities, opting for mixed communities.* This is less a fear, and more a possible retooling of all non-retirement communities. Should developers and planners build units or houses and facilities for Baby Boomers in some, all, or most planned communities, and advertise them as such? My gut feeling is yes.

This group of Baby Boomers can be broken into two segments: first, the folks who have a fear of retirement and getting old and will avoid the stigma; second, Boomers who truly enjoy and get inspiration and sustenance from living in an eclectic culture. This latter segment could end up being a bigger chunk than most experts are predicting.

Selling Universal Design to Baby Boomers

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

For many (but not all) Baby Boomers there is still a stigma attached. If not for the disabled, Universal Design (UD) is for *old people*—and Baby Boomers, according to popular myth, eschew anything that smacks of “old” or “senior.” UD is patronizing and condescending— as if we’re babies again and in need of playpens so we won’t hurt our-selves or get into much trouble.

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 in any marketing/advertising collateral is a good idea. For example, *ergonomic* works when describing kitchens, but not bathrooms. Everybody wants a simple-to-manuever-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 used one.

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. And UD is a perfect example of "less is more" and the idea of a neutral empty space so Boomers can be creative and move their "lives" into a malleable unit.

Aging in Place

I've heard this term defined a few ways. The simplest definition: people 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—so they can still be near work, family, and friends.

A presentation I gave in the summer of 2006 in Phoenix at the National Association of Homebuilders' 50+ Housing Summit 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.” Most 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. 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.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, 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. Again, “less is more.”

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 percent said travel is their top unfulfilled ambition, and 45 percent 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 home buyer*. It will be easier to swap a residence with someone if living in an Active Adult Community.

What "Less Is More" Really Means to Baby Boomers

"Less means more" means room for choices. Remember this when analyzing campaigns for any product or service.

Baby Boomers do love to read, often chewing on every single word in a brochure or print ad. 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. They are not looking for a product to change their lives or give them a quick fix.

Less is more also means more control over the product. A good example of what I mean is included in the next chapter.

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