



## **LEADING-EDGE VS TRAILING-EDGE BOOMERS**

### **Questions & Answers from Brent Green, author of *Marketing to Leading-edge Baby Boomers: Perceptions, Principles, Practices, Predictions***

Sociologists typically divide the boomers into two segments: leading edge and trailing edge, each carrying a different portfolio of attitudes and interests. Brent Green, president of Brent Green & Associates Inc., a full-service, direct-marketing firm based in Denver, Colorado, reports on those differences in his book, *Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers: Perceptions, Principles, Practices, Predictions*. A leading-edge boomer, himself, Green discusses some of the distinctions within the boomer ranks.

#### ***How do leading-edge boomers differ from trailing-edge boomers, demographically and culturally?***

Leading-edge boomers were born between 1946 and 1955, while trailing-edge boomers were born between 1956 and 1964. The two sub-generations or cohorts differ in some fundamental ways.

Members of the older group shared teenage encounters with the galvanizing experiences of Vietnam and the “cultural revolution,” including modern feminism, civil rights, and environmentalism. They came of age when pugnacious social and cultural forces crashed in on the Eisenhower era and President John Kennedy’s Camelot. They are most often associated with the protest movements of the sixties, as well as over-publicized experimentation with sex and drugs.

Trailing-edge boomers entered college and started careers after the Vietnam War ended in early 1975, and most experienced a more peaceful, less culturally chaotic period. They began their young adult lives with ebullient expectations – a sense that “the world is my oyster” – but then they confronted sky-high interest rates, malaise during the Carter administration, and, because of their numbers, extreme economic competition. They were offered a plethora of credit cards from puberty onward; accordingly, many have accumulated enormous consumer debts. Many have had greater difficulty launching careers and creating long-term financial stability.

Cultural influences are also different between these groups. For example, older boomers rallied behind “Make Love, Not War,” while younger boomers chanted “No Nukes.” Older boomers displayed political engagement with the peace symbol; younger boomers wore POW bracelets. A significant defining event in the lives of older boomers was, of course, *Woodstock*. Younger boomers gathered at *Live Aid*. Older boomers often point to Bob Dylan as their poet and bard. Trailing-edge boomers embrace Bruce Springsteen.

#### ***How does a marketer adjust strategies to accommodate the differences between them?***

Marketers simply must understand the differences in life stage, although wide variability can exist within either cohort.

Leading-edge boomers are more likely today to be empty nesters. Many have lost one or both parents; and their careers are starting to slow down. They are thinking more actively



about the next stage of life, whether this means retirement or starting a new career, moving to a new location or pursuing unrequited dreams.

Younger boomers are at the pinnacle of their career trajectories right now. Their children are still in school and living at home; and they are confronting serious concerns about retirement. They are still paying home mortgages, and many are struggling with large debts. They are just beginning to take on increasing responsibilities for their aging parents.

Marketing requires generalizations. Executives need to make assumptions about the major life events and challenges that are preponderant and relevant. For example, are prospects worried about paying for college education? (Trailing-edge) Is their biggest concern how to supervise quality care for institutionalized parents with rapidly failing health? (Leading-edge) Is a sojourn to Europe likely to become a new traveling way of life (Leading-edge) or just a precious respite from a hard-driving career? (Trailing-edge)

### ***Are there any clear similarities between the segments?***

Leading-edge boomers are impassioned idealists and social activists. Their younger siblings share idealism in many areas, but trailing-edge boomers are more pragmatic – some would say, realistic. Nevertheless, both cohorts share many values. Both famously distrust large institutions and government and both value personal freedom and individual self-expression.

Trailing-edge boomers may have been too young to recall much about the sixties, but they were old enough to be influenced by the detritus left from civil rights, Vietnam and Watergate. Further, because of the long-term impact of many social movements that dominated the sixties, both groups firmly respect racial and cultural diversity, believe in safeguarding the environment, honor religious pluralism, insist upon equality between the sexes, and seek personal expression and liberty as central to the American experience.

### ***Is there any validity in targeting them as one segment?***

There is greater commonality among boomers of all ages than there are differences between boomers and younger or older generations. Boomer values and purchasing decisions are often similar, particularly about such product categories as automobiles, furnishings and travel. Marketing messages that address broader values and themes can reach across the generational spectrum. These common values include personal development, psychological growth, health and wellness, environmental sustainability, social responsibility, egalitarian principles, and making a difference or creating a legacy.

### ***Which industries stand to benefit most from leading-edge boomers and from trailing-edge boomers?***

Leading-edge boomers are obviously closer to retirement – or at least closer to slowing down their careers, voluntarily or not – so some of the most promising industries include health care, financial planning, travel and tourism, and retirement housing. They're in the market for downsized primary or second homes, long-term care insurance, personal growth experiences, and education about entrepreneurship. They're also insatiable grandparents.



Trailing-edge boomers are still mostly in their forties, so their focus is on such areas as education for their children, further career development, learning how to master new productivity technologies, and family vacations. They're in the market for sophisticated home theaters, spa vacations, the latest communication devices, and educational experiences for their adolescent children.

### **What should marketers bear in mind when pitching to leading-edge vs. trailing-edge?**

The validity of generational marketing as a segmentation approach begins with an interesting theory by German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893-1947). As Mannheim observed, social and cultural events during the impressionable years of adolescence can foment and solidify a generation and its shared outlook, thus shaping subsequent life experiences with a collective consciousness.

The *zeitgeist* phenomenon—that is, the shared feeling for an era and the unique spirit of a generation—is not equally magnified for every generation. Those who become young adults during a more quiescent period are less likely to experience as strong a sense of generational connectivity, ergo the term “lost generation.”

The coming-of-age era for leading-edge boomers—those fragile years that fell roughly between San Francisco's Summer of Love in 1967 and the end of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War during January 1975—continues to mobilize and motivate this cohort today. These boomers respond to messages that call to their idealism, their desire for constructive change, and their struggle to answer a universal question: “Is there something more?”

While trailing-edge boomers may have had a taste of Watergate, they came of age during a calmer time. Some observers have tagged this group as being in a constant state of yearning for something more. Because of the influences of high inflation and career lassitude in their early careers, they tend to be more focused on material values than their older brothers and sisters. Becoming financially well off, as opposed to being psychically well off, has greater priority. Studies show that they score higher on concerns about job stability and financial success than their older siblings. They're more pragmatic and focused. They respond to messages that offer practical solutions to economic problems, that promise competitive advantages, and that deliver escape from ever-present stress.

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