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Health care's next challenge: marketing to baby boomers

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Anthony Cirillo](#) Guest columnist

Baby boomers believe they belong to a market segment made up of exactly one person.

Or so says Blaine Branchik, a professor of marketing and advertising at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

His axiom sums up the difficulty in marketing to boomers, and it's especially applicable in health care.

There's a myth that the nation's 78 million boomers are keeping themselves in better shape than their elders. In reality, they could enter their golden years in worse shape than their parents. Every other boomer will have arthritis. Every third will be overweight. Every fourth will have diabetes. Six of 10 will have more than one chronic condition.

Health-care providers have good reason to expect a flood of patients as boomers age.

But a marketing strategy to reach them can't be based on one size fits all. Pick up the latest demographic study, and it will offer yet another categorization of the boomer population.

The Boomer Project, for example, has identified eight categories. Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc.'s new retirement survey features five. There are many more.

Health-care providers need to do their own research to determine which boomer segments will most affect their bottom line. Demographics are a start. With boomers, though, the emphasis should be on life stage.

What's a life stage? Boomers could be parents, retirees, caregivers, single, empty nesters, entrepreneurs, grandparents or some combination. Grandparents, in fact, are one of the largest and most powerful consumer segments.

Boomers want to feel younger, not necessarily look younger. They are comfortable in their skin. And their No. 1 fear is having a major illness and having to pay for it. That fear drives them to be more health conscious. Yet health-care organizations are paid to treat illness.

This seeming paradox can be addressed. Boomers are the "worried well" and will gladly pay for wellness. But a wellness program can't be piecemeal or half-hearted. Providers have run one-and-done programs for boomers in the workplace. Instead, they should set metrics around health-care expenditures, employee absenteeism and worker productivity, and track progress and equate it to an economic benefit for the employer. Part of the provider's fee should be at risk and tied

directly to whether the employer reduces its health-care expense.

A provider might want to change its model from sickness to wellness, but it still has to generate revenue in the here and now. So how do you market to boomers? You find out about them.

Health-care providers need to collect meaningful information about prospects. That is important to better tailor marketing efforts, understand the influence of customer segments to know where to invest marketing dollars, and help collect the information about what boomers are looking for from their provider.

The health-care marketing profession is home to many young, creative people. Yet boomers relate to boomers. Those under 35, while less expensive to hire, do not understand boomers. Not all boomers will be retiring; many will not be able to financially. They will still seek meaningful work. A smart health-care marketing team should hire them.

Providers should build long-term relationships and create tipping points so boomers will be motivated to choose their services.

Here are some ways to do that:

- Engagement. Boomers like one-to-one communication. They like to be considered important. So engage them.
- Cause marketing. Boomers are cause-oriented. Strategically adopt a cause that you own, not one you merely participate in. Causes affect philanthropy.
- Giving something away. Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston offers a free in-home assessment for post-surgical patients so that when they come home they will be able to recuperate in the best environment possible.
- Crafting the right message. Any good marketing campaign starts with the message. So what resonates with boomers? They make decisions based on the age they feel, rather than the age they are. They don't want to be 20, but they don't want to grow old. In advertising, that means models can be a bit younger but not too young.

Campaigns should be forward-looking, not nostalgic. Boomers are moving ahead, not looking behind.

Advertising should use humor instead of drama. Humor is powerful but difficult. Boomers span many years. Because of that, they have different values, outlooks and frames of reference.

Another key is to be positive, not negative. Boomer consumers have trained their brains to ignore negative images and messages.

Boomers like to feel empowered, so don't tell them what's good for them. Instead, give them the tools to understand why your service is better, and give them the opportunity to make their own choice. They want to connect the dots.

As people age, emotions, hunches, feelings, possibilities, probabilities and life experiences play a larger role. Boomers might linger over a compelling photograph if it conjures certain emotions. More is better. Tell a story. Use testimonials.

Boomers are still traditionalists. They may use technology, but they view it as something to augment the old way instead of replacing it. You need a mix of media to reach them.

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