

TOP of MIND

What Boomer Generation?

By Robert Morais and Debra Goodman

Barely a day passes without a new analysis of baby boomers. Stories run frequently in *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report* and *The New York Times*, not to mention *Brandweek*. Books on the subject crowd bookstores. Marketers have been drawing insights on the Boomer generation from the Yankelovich book, *Rocking the Ages*, from the moment it was published.

With so much focus on baby boomers, one would think that the generation is clearly understood. But when, as part of our work with this segment, we mined over 150 reports on boomers and reflected upon thousands of hours listening to them in focus groups, we came to a surprising conclusion: There is no boomer generation. More precisely, there is no single, uniform boomer generation that can be characterized by sweeping generalizations.

The basis for this sweeping generalization? A generation is defined, sociologically speaking, by shared history and values. Baby boomers were born between 1946 to 1964 and came of age over a period spanning the '50s through the early '80s. Can we equate the formative experiences of someone born, say, in 1950 with someone born in 1962? When the person born in 1950 was 19, the Vietnam War protest was raging, the civil rights movement was gaining steam and hippies at Woodstock were transforming America's idea of concert-going.

For the person born in 1962, who turned 19 in 1981, America was at peace, a newly elected Ronald Reagan was riding a wave of patriotism and Sid Vicious was a far cry from Joni Mitchell. Moreover, the later-born boomers grew up in the cultural quake of their older siblings; they experienced the societal aftershocks—and retrenchment—of their activist elders.

An article in *U.S. News & World Report*, "Is Generation a bad word?" suggested that emphasizing the differences among generations is a way of crafting a better story. Unfortunately, marketers that succumb to the broad boomer characterization will impair the growth of their brands. Can they assume that an icon like Jimi Hendrix holds the same significance to someone born in 1948 as to someone born in 1964? Should they believe that advertising expressing generational pride, exemplified by a multicolored VW New Beetle, would

appeal to someone who was 6 when the car was popular? Is it wise to attribute the experimentation and idealism of older boomers to younger boomers who, growing up in the '70s and '80s, may be more cautious about embracing a new product in the age of recalls?

To determine the best way to connect with boomers, we divided the demographic into two segments. A front-end boomer (born 1946-1954) was heavily influenced by the counter-cultural events that marked the 1960s. Rebellion, idealism and self-absorption are a major component of his/her generational character.

Conversely, a back-end boomer (born 1955-1964), coming of age in the more placid 1970s, may be more practical and balance seeking. We also recognize that gender, ethnicity, economic class and geography can impact acceptance of generationally targeted messages and images. With these distinctions in mind, we developed advertising principles appropriate to specific boomer segments. Along the way, we looked at advertisers that

got it right: Ads for the re-launched VW Bug correctly targeted front-end boomers with a "Flower Power" TV spot, while other executions connected with back-enders. A multi-faceted State Farm campaign with lines like, "We were there when you were a child of the '60s ... and when you became a parent of the '90s," shows their boomer segmentation smarts.

We also wondered if the 9/11 tragedy and subsequent events rendered generational marketing obsolete. We have concluded that immediate reactions galvanized boomers as one, to the same extent all generations were united. However, reports over the past year indicate that the fundamental attitudes that differentiate front-end and back-end boomers endured and these attitudes are still shaping their responses in a post-9/11 world.

The attention to baby boomers is not likely to abate soon. Marketers hoping to sell to them would be well advised to gain a deeper understanding of boomer segments as they try to capitalize on the cultural and historical road they have traveled. ■

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Robert Morais is eop-chief strategic officer and Debra Goodman is sup-media director at agency Carafello Diehl & Associates, Irvington, N.Y. You can reach them at (914) 674-3968, or via e-mail: morais@CDAmail.com and dgoodman@CDAmail.com.