

A Window to the Boomer's Soul

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Despite whatever form they may ultimately take, market researchers are typically asking a set of questions from the same deck over and over as they probe the evolving mass psyche of consumers. Typical among these: *What do they want? What do they buy? What makes them unhappy? What makes them glad? How do they talk to each other? What do they say?*

What if you had a machine that could look into their hearts and minds and tell you what goes on in there?

You do. It's sitting right on your desk top. The dramatic rise of interactive consumer online services has turned your PC into an amazing tool for observation at the closest level. Let's look at one in particular, America Online [AOL], the fastest growing of the three main services despite the earlier start of competitors CompuServe and Prodigy. Almost half of their 3.5 million subscribers are boomers, which should come as no big surprise, since 35-year-old CEO Steve Case made the boomer cut and has created a very boomer-friendly place.

In addition to a chat room and a Baby Boomer Library, the "Baby Boomers" file in Clubs & Interests on the main menu lists seven bulletin boards, one of which is Baby Boomer Issues. There are presently 49 categories of issues that have been created and messaged in by AOL users themselves rather than AOL. The significance of this is that neither the topics, nor their self-categorization has been imposed on users by the service provider. Rather, these issues have bubbled up from the boomers themselves as they communicate with each other about the important concerns of their lives.

Family and relationship issues dominate the landscape. New lifestage issues are starting to emerge, with aging parents eliciting a high proportion of commentary. Particularly interesting is that for this generation, more exposed to drugs than any other generation from polio vaccines and antibiotics to marijuana and speed, drugs continue to play a significant role in their lives, only now they are more focused on managing them rather than acquiring them.

Another 60's throwback, activism, still commands a lot of attention for boomers. And there are surprises in the file, such as "Hate my breasts." Despite the relatively low number of postings, Bali, Playtex, and Maidenform should find the commentary useful and of almost startling candor. But more than anything else, boomers are in the middle of child raising or making decisions about not having children and, cumulatively, children are the single most important issue on their minds.

Your exploration of the boomer world view need not be limited to the Baby Boomer file. Other affinity groups within Clubs & Interests with substantial boomer populations offer valuable insight. Diversity marketers take note—a recent age check in Women's Space within the Gay & Lesbian file showed that most women online were boomers. There is also NetNoir for African Americans and a Military & Vets Forum.

In addition to bulletin boards, marketers also have many online tools to choose from when learning what is going on in the boomer mind. The most controversial and yet most interactive of these tools are chat rooms, held either by appointment or ad hoc, on many commercial online services as well as the Internet. Unlike bulletin boards, these chat rooms provide an opportunity to listen in on the thinking of boomers. Additionally, chat rooms can be actively managed. Marketers can create an appointment with customers to hold an online discussion on current or new products. Chat rooms provide relatively cheap access to customer feedback, in effect an online focus group. Quantitative research is also making its way into cyberspace as market researchers post questionnaires to the Internet. Responses to an online questionnaire can be tabulated much faster than the traditional mail or telephone survey techniques with continuous updates of the results as new individuals respond.

A couple of caveats need to be kept in mind as you research boomers or other markets online. First, as with all qualitative research, the information you gather or overhear should be used as directional only, confirming or adding depth to previous research. What you "hear" or read can also be used to form hypotheses for traditional focus group testing. Second, when using online market research try to understand who is saying what.

The universe of subscribers to online services is exploding. Online information, once the secret, guarded domain of special librarians and scientists, is now routinely available even to children. You can find skateboarding grandparents, astrologers with an MBA, as well as boomers changing careers. There is a place for everyone. The only people you will not find are those individuals who, for whatever reason, continue to avoid technology. This attitude toward technology cuts across demographics, so don't assume the online world is all teenage hackers, because you are begging for an angry e-mail from among the 25,000 people logging in to SeniorNet (www.seniornet.com).

In summary, when you begin using online market research tools, remember the following:

- Try to understand who is saying what and why.
- Use your findings to confirm or deepen earlier research.
- Remember, there is a bias towards individuals who have an affinity for technology, so if you have a product that is technology based, gathering evidence online probably makes a lot of sense.