

Matt Thornhill

Throwing the Pitch Toward a Different Target

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Matt Thornhill, left, and John Martin wrote a book on marketing to the baby boom generation.
(Photo by Don Long -- Richmond Times-dispatch)

Matt Thornhill, 47, is president of the Boomer Project, a marketing research and consulting company in [Richmond](#), and author of "Boomer Consumer: Ten New Rules for Marketing to America's Largest, Wealthiest and Most Influential Group."

Q Whom do you call "old"?

A The boomers, now between the ages of 40 and 60, more or less -- they actually see themselves as in early- to middle-, middle-age. We ask in a national survey, at what age do you reach middle age, and at what age does "old age" begin? And boomers told us that middle age starts at 48 and old age starts in your mid-70s.

So that means 61 isn't "old" to them. "Old" is still 15 years off into the future. So the definition has certainly changed, because 60 used to be "old."

How is it different marketing to boomers?

Boomers at this stage of life are no longer young adults. A boomer at 47 or 54 or whatever, we ask, "How old do you feel?" And they usually say they feel 15 years younger than they are. So you tell that to a marketer and they say, "That's why I continue to target young adults, because that 54-year-old boomer feels 39 or 40. So they can relate to that message I have out there for young adults."

We say no, they may feel that age, but that's not where they are in their lives. That's not where they are in what's important to them. They're a completely different person at age 54 than they were at age 34. Once consumers hit about 50 and beyond, they become less interested in *becoming* someone and more interested in *being* someone. In other words, they are less interested in getting more stuff and more interested in having more experiences.

So you think about it from a marketing standpoint. A 26-year-old goes out and buys a [BMW](#). Who are they buying that BMW for? It tends to be more for their friends, their co-workers, their peers. It's more of an outward statement of who they are because their behavior as a consumer at that stage of life is much more socially driven and outwardly driven.

A 56-year-old goes and buys a BMW. Who are they buying it for? Themselves. They're less concerned about what others think about it. It's more about self-fulfillment and self-respect and self-actualization.

So is "60 the new 40"?

That's not accurate. Boomers are making 60 the *new60*. They're going to change what it means to be a 60-year-old. Boomers at 60 have no interest in being 40 anymore. But they're going to do 60 differently than their parents did. And they have done everything differently than the way their parents did.

Boomers look at the way their parents did retirement and say, "Nah, that's not going to work for me." You know, "I'm not going to marginalize myself to the sideline of society and life by joining up with [Jerry Seinfeld](#)'s parents at the condo committee down in Boca Vista." They see that as stepping aside and standing by.

What industries and services will boomers be focusing on going forward?

It's not that they're going to be searching for the fountain of youth. We're going to search for the fountain of vitality. We see boomers pursuing, spending money, investing and spending time in five areas of vitality: Financial vitality. Physical vitality -- which includes their health, their fitness, their appearance -- mental vitality, social vitality and spiritual vitality.

Those are the five key areas. You can think of businesses and marketers that surround those areas, and it's a phenomenal number of businesses.