

# Ties That Bind: Connect Emotionally with Boomers and Reap Marketplace Rewards

**How to improve the odds that the boomers in your community will think of you first when they need healthcare.**

Seventy-six million baby boomers are marching toward retirement. Seventy-six million baby boomers are starting to feel the aches and pains of growing older. Seventy-six million opportunities exist for healthcare marketers if they know how to connect to this important generation.

In their book, *101 Easy Ways to Increase Business with Boomerplus Clients*, Richard Ross and Michael Sullivan lay out ways that financial professionals can better connect with and sell to boomers. It is not a far stretch to take what they say and apply it to healthcare.

Reaching boomers is all about connecting emotionally and developing relationships over time. In essence, boomers are a large affinity group you need to bond and build trust with so that when they need healthcare services, they will be inclined to look to you. Here's how:

## 1. Market Around Life Events

Ross and Sullivan talk about seizing marketing opportunities around significant life events. Here are a few: the last child moving out of the house, a career change, downsizing, the first grandchild, becoming a caregiver for an older loved one, divorce, retirement. What is the health tie-in to these events? Sometimes it's obvious. Negative life events carry significant stress and emotional anguish. You might stage lectures to educate people about these issues and how to cope with each significant event. That could lead to a natural tie-in to your behavioral and mental health services.

Some life events are not so obvious, but still represent opportunities. Retirement opens up a new world to people. Some view it as an opportunity for endless exploration; others dread the thought. Consider holding a series of lectures on retirement issues — how to prepare emotionally and financially, volunteer opportunities in the community, second-career opportunities. Tie all of these to a boomer affinity group, and start collecting data on this group. Over time, you will have a valuable database you can use to connect emotionally with individuals.

Boomers love grandparenting. Connect with the grandchildren in some way that involves the grandparent, and you will have strong bonds that have implications across service lines. Maybe the Teddy Bear Clinic you have been sponsoring is now held around Grandparents Day in September and coordinated



with an event for grandparents.

Grandparents are often the babysitters, and they might need to take a grandchild to the ED one day.

Here's a retail example. Home Depot holds entrepreneurial workshops in their stores to help people who are thinking about opening a business learn the ropes. Many people opt to become self-employed after a downsizing or open a business after retirement; doing so becomes their priority. Home Depot found a way to intersect with that priority. Next time a workshop attendee is driving to his or her local big-box home improvement store, all things being equal, who has the tipping point that will get the business? Exactly!

## 2. Audit Your Physical Environment

Does your physical environment cater to your boomer customer? Are air-conditioning and heating vents placed so they do not blow on people? Are seating areas free from window glare? Are chairs comfortable but not so deep that people sink into them and have trouble getting up? Are private conference rooms for patient consultation readily available in all areas?

Financial professionals are taught to arrange their offices so as not to distract potential clients in any way and to bond them closer to the seller. They are taught to have family pictures in abundance, display patriotic symbols, and do other things to show they are like their clients.

## 3. Focus on the People

Building trust is the key to selling to the boomer market. Instead of focusing on products, focus on their lives, and let the needs come out in a natural way. That means painstakingly finding out about them.

A novel approach to setting up your affinity group might be to offer free half-hour consultations in members' homes to find out what their needs are and what they would like to get out of your program. As numbers grow and personal visits become unmanageable, you might consider holding receptions that bring more people together, or using volunteers to detail members. At this stage, it's all about listening and not at all about selling.

Once you have this information, act on it in ways that are meaningful to your members. For example, if a member

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# The Leadership Retreat Was a Success. Now What?

Retreats typically have different dynamics from regular board, medical staff, and management meetings. They provide a setting and time for reflection, discussion, and interaction among the organization's leaders. Many organizations find retreats to be so valuable that they are a regular, often annual, event.

On one level, the retreat can be considered successful if there are no logistical problems and attendees enjoy themselves. Although these are important considerations, the greater payback comes when an organization builds on ideas and momentum generated at the retreat.

The following seven steps offer a checklist for systematic follow-up to maximize the value of a retreat.

1. **Review any notes** from the retreat as soon afterward as possible. Some points might not have gotten onto the flipcharts, while other points may need to be clarified or expanded upon.
2. **Thank all participants.** The CEO, board chair, or convener of the retreat should send a note or thank each participant in person.
3. **Address any open issues**, such as an unanswered question or missing piece of data, promptly.
4. **Report on the retreat** at the next board (or medical executive, or management) meeting. This will keep key people informed and may prompt additional comments or questions.
5. **Use the findings.** Make sure that output from the retreat — comments on the organization's vision or scores from ranking of objectives, for instance — becomes input to the appropriate governance, medical staff, or management process.
6. **Solicit feedback.** Evaluation forms filled out at the conclusion of a retreat, when participants have their minds on the golf course or return trip, might not provide the kind of thoughtful response that will improve subsequent retreats.
7. **Make notes** about what went right and what went wrong. Turn this year's hindsight into next year's foresight, and begin building the foundation for an even better retreat next year!

## Resources for Retreat Planning

Lifton, J. 2002. "Holding a Successful Retreat." *Strategic Health Care Marketing* August.

Kane, C.M. 2006. "The Top 10 Myths about Leadership Retreats." *HealthLeaders News* Jan. 24. Available online at [www.healthleadersmedia.com](http://www.healthleadersmedia.com).

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mentions that she collects beanie babies, consider enclosing something related to that when you send her her annual birthday card with a reminder to schedule routine exams and tests.

## 4. Sell to the Age They Think They Are

The phrase "young at heart" has real meaning as people grow older. Boomers may be 60, but they will tell you they feel and act like 45. That means adjusting campaigns and messages accordingly.

You also need to be aware that as people age, they become more right-brain dominant. Instead of seeing things as black or white, they now see in shades of gray. Facts and logic do not always work. Hunches and feelings, possibilities and probabilities, life experiences and emotions — all of these serve as filters that your messages pass through. Play to these things, provide alternatives for the audience, then stand back and let them make up their minds.

Provide people with anchors, things they are familiar with and can relate to in your messaging. If you are explaining a virtual colonoscopy, you might describe it as a CT scan or an MRI that can look inside organs. Those are technologies they know. Or you can describe a virtual colonoscopy in terms of a video game — their grandkids play those!

## 5. Add and Then Market Appropriate Services

As already noted, boomers do not want to be thought of as old. In fact, look for the term *senior citizen* to disappear from the vocabulary. Is it any surprise that cosmetic surgery and dermatology are some of the fastest-growing medical specialties or that reality TV shows that make people over are so popular?

Respond to what the marketplace will demand. Is cosmetic surgery one of your service lines? Do you offer holistic treatment choices? Do you provide informational resources to keep the boomers informed of the latest treatment and techniques in their areas of interest? Research and listen to what the boomers want.

Boomers are driving and will continue to drive the push to consumer-directed healthcare. That means you have to earn each and every boomer customer. That takes a long time. That is why you need to reach them early, get to know them, and tie yourself to them emotionally. When they are ready to choose health services, you will be well positioned to "find the gold in gray." 🌀

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