

How to Ride the Coming Wave of Boomers
...And Attract the Biggest-Spending Travelers the World Has Ever Seen

By Clark Norton

Introduction – Travel Marketing to Boomers	Page 2
Boomers Want to Be Treated Like the Youth We Still Imagine Ourselves to Be	Page 3
Boomers Want Creature Comforts – Even in the Wilds	Page 4
Boomers Want Something Unique	Page 5
Boomers Want Value – And Are Willing to Pay Top Dollar for It	Page 7
Boomers Love the Internet, But Continue to Value Print	Page 8
Don't Keep Boomers Waiting	Page 9
Win Boomers' Trust, Win Our Loyalty	Page 10
Contact Clark Norton	Page 11

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Dear Travel Professional,

The nearly 80 million American baby boomers – those of us born between 1946 and 1964 – have led the way in transforming the modern global travel industry since we first started backpacking around Europe in the late 1960s. Clutching our dog-eared copies of “Europe on \$5 a Day,” we acquired a thirst for travel that many of us have never whetted – even as “\$5 a Day” has become ancient history.

That’s why today’s baby boomers are still ready to travel – and ready to spend our money on going places and doing things...*now*.

Boomers control more than two-thirds of all the disposable income in the United States. And according to an AARP survey, more baby boomers picked “travel” than any other answer when asked what they would most like to spend *more* of their money on -- beating out, among other things, shoring up their health or finances.

Leading-edge boomers -- born between 1946 and 1955 – are a particularly ripe market. Along with seniors, these leading-edge boomers -- many now at or nearing retirement age -- account for four out of every five dollars spent on luxury travel today.

Travel-related businesses and organizations that don’t pursue this affluent market – or don’t know how to attract boomers – are going to face a baby-boomer wipeout as this on-the-go generation’s wave of travelers washes over shores here and abroad.

Alternatively -- whether you run a tour company, visitors’ bureau, hotel, resort, cruise line or other travel-related business -- you can prosper wildly over the next several decades. But only *if* you can successfully ride that coming wave.

The key to success is to understand the unique baby-boomer mentality – and specifically boomer attitudes toward travel.

Partly because we boomers grew up in an age of relative affluence along with the vast cultural changes of the 1960s and ‘70s, we don’t think like the generations that preceded us or those that have come after. In many ways, we’re a transitional generation between those who lived through the deprivations of the Depression and World War II and those who have grown up in the digital age amid periods of economic uncertainty.

Not all boomers think alike. But the similarities in attitudes toward travel – especially among affluent boomers, the prime market you’ll want to target -- are too striking to ignore. It’s essential to recognize these similarities if you want to win boomers’ business and loyalty.

I’ll point to one eye-catching finding from my own extensive surveys of baby-boomer travel attitudes, based on detailed questionnaires and interviews with a broad spectrum of my contemporaries – including both frequent and infrequent travelers.

When asked whether they consider travel to be “a necessity as part of a well-rounded life”; a “luxury only for when I have extra cash”; or “generally a pain -- not worth it anymore”, nearly three-fourths of them answered: “a necessity.” That’s a pretty remarkable statistic -- but then, the baby boomers have been a pretty remarkable generation, if we do say so ourselves (and we do, repeatedly!).

Here are seven Profit-Surging Rules that you can rely on as you market to boomer travelers. They’ll attract the wave of traveling boomers to your destinations, lodgings, tours and cruises -- and assure that you don’t suffer a baby-boomer wipeout.

1. Boomers Want to Be Treated Like the Youth We Still Imagine Ourselves To Be

Depending on your own age, you may think baby boomers are getting old now that we are in our fifties and sixties – with some even beginning to contemplate the once-unthinkable 70. (Expect to hear “70 is the new 50!” a lot starting in 2016.)

But baby boomers would beg to differ: no matter how many (or few) grey hairs we have, no matter how many wrinkles may furrow our brows, no matter how much extra weight we’ve packed on to our midsections, we baby boomers simply do not see ourselves as old -- or at least admit it, even to ourselves.

In my own surveys of baby boomer travel attitudes, I asked, “No matter what your driver’s license says, what age do you see yourself?” While there were some 60-something realists in the group, the most common answer was...40. (A few saw themselves as still in their 20s – even 18!)

So if in your marketing you make the mistake of lumping boomers in with “seniors” – even if millions of leading-edge boomers have been receiving “senior discounts” and Social Security for years – you risk turning us off for good. A press

release I read recently that started, “Calling all boomers and seniors...” made me cringe. I can pretty much guarantee that that was not written by a boomer.

One tour company – which used to be called “Elderhostel” – learned this lesson well. In boomer-think, “Elderhostel” is something your aging mother might patronize. Recognizing this, the folks who ran Elderhostel changed their name to “Road Scholar” a few years ago. The name change was an inspired one for several reasons: It dropped the verboten term “elder”; it dropped the word “hostel,” which is also toxic to many boomers; and it substituted “Road Scholar,” which appeals to the boomer love of educational travel.

An additional note: While we boomers don’t think of ourselves as old, we’re suckers for nostalgia. So we like “oldies” radio stations, aging rock ‘n’ roll stars, old movies, real ‘50s-style diners, and classic cars. At least five million of us claim to have been at Woodstock! If you can work a nostalgia angle into your marketing materials, you’ll score bonus points.

Just don’t mistake us for our parents. We’ll turn away from you, fast.

2. Boomers Want Creature Comforts -- Even in the Wilds

When I ask other boomers what they “would rather be caught dead” than doing on a trip, one common answer is: “Staying in a youth hostel with the bathroom down the hall.”

How can that be, when boomers want to be considered young, and many of us spent our formative years staying in youth hostels in Europe?

Again, don’t expect total logical consistency from boomers – after all, we’re only human. But we’re getting, well, older (if not “old”). Our bones creak from time to time. Our feet ache on occasion. And we want our bathrooms to be private sanctuaries, thank you.

This rule applies even when boomers are trekking to Machu Picchu, on safari in Africa, or taking an expedition-style ship to Antarctica. (And many boomers do still have a taste for the exotic and the physical ability to get there and back.)

One adventure travel company has coined an effective slogan -- “indulgence meets adventure” – that perfectly reflects the current boomer mentality.

Another adventure travel outfit is touting an option of one night of “sleeping under the stars” (i.e., camping) on their three-night river-rafting trips, with the other nights

spent in an inn – serving up a brief, romanticized taste of “roughing it” combined with the prospect of comfortable mattresses and hot showers the other nights.

Offer boomers comfortable inns along the river or trekking route, ensconce us in luxury lodges in game parks, or entice us with well-outfitted staterooms on expedition cruise ships, and we’ll gobble them up.

3. Boomers Want Something Unique

Establishing a USP – a Unique Selling Proposition separating you from your competitors – is a battle-tested marketing technique.

And it works especially well with boomers.

Partly because there have always been millions more baby boomers than the generations on either side of us – moving through the decades as a demographic bulge, the proverbial “rat in the python” -- we’ve been catered to by everyone from marketers to college admissions officers, parents to politicians, for much of our lives.

So we boomers think we’re special. (And, of course, we are!) Offer us an enticing USP, and you’ll pique our interest and win our business.

What’s your USP? Until you nail this down – and communicate it clearly -- you may find that boomers will look elsewhere.

It helps to think “niche.” For several years, I’ve written a column about niche theme cruises for a leading consumer cruise magazine, chronicling everything from vampire cruises to knitting cruises, ballroom dancing cruises to motorcycle cruises, astronomy cruises to Red Hat Lady cruises, mahjongg cruises to poker cruises.

Of the hundreds of people I’ve interviewed for these stories, the majority have been baby boomers. Many boomers have been around the block – and the world -- and are looking for something special (there’s that word again) in their travels. The fact that these are cruises is often incidental to their decisions to sign up – what they’re really looking for is the chance to get intensive training in ballroom dancing, or to witness eclipses of the sun in the South Pacific, or to spend a solid week communing with fellow Red Hat Ladies, or to play mahjongg or poker late into the night without distraction. The cruise aspect is a bonus.

Many of these niche cruises sell out year after year. And they attract new people to cruising who might never have taken a cruise otherwise. I know – I’ve talked with many of them and have been told this time and again.

Multigenerational travel – grandparents and grandkids, and three generations of grandparents, parents and kids/grandkids – is another up-and-coming niche. Grandparent boomers are often willing to pay top dollar for the chance to spend some quality time with their offspring. Just make sure the trip emphasizes safety, convenience and things for everyone to enjoy – with a chance for each generation to spend some time with just their peers as well. Cruises, resorts and urban destinations (with kid-friendly museums included) are especially well suited for this.

A third emerging niche to look to is gay and lesbian tourism. Gay and lesbian boomers – some newly married – are often affluent and looking for friendly, welcoming destinations.

And here's an affluent group you may have overlooked: birders. According to surveys, bird-watchers spend more per capita than any other niche travel group – more than golfers, more than skiers! Can you think of a bird-watching angle in your travel destination or product? Does it lie along or near a flyway? Has a rare bird been spotted in the vicinity? (Birders flocked to Martha's Vineyard a few years ago from around the U.S. when one European bird deviated from its normal fly pattern and unexpectedly wound up across the Atlantic. They filled local hotels and restaurants when not manning their binoculars.) If so, let birders know about it!

Niche travel may include offering customized options. Most boomers don't like to be herded into big groups or to be told where to go and what to do, or to be wrongfully pigeon-holed. Some of the biggest turnoffs are “bus tours with a bunch of old people” – again, we boomers do not see ourselves as old. Another turn-off is being asked (or required) to wear an item of clothing – hat, T-shirt, button – that pegs you as being part of a group tour. Boomers may grudgingly go along with it at the time, but we'll make a mental note of it next time we're ready to book a trip.

These attitudes offer a huge opening for marketers -- the customized trip -- designed for one family, or one group of friends, or maybe even just one person. These tend to be much more expensive than regular group tours, but boomers are often willing to pay the price for exclusivity – and to do exactly what we want to do and to go exactly where we want to go. I strongly recommend offering customized options if you don't already do so.

So, if you're not attracting as many boomers to your travel product as you'd like, consider *narrowing* your focus rather than broadening it. So what if it sounds contradictory? It works!

One more, related thing to keep in mind when marketing to boomers: traveling boomers aren't looking for familiar amenities when we travel – we're looking for exotic

(or at least different) foods, people and experiences that we can't find at home. In other words, the old "ugly American" stereotype of folks who will only eat hamburgers in France or who stare goggle-eyed at someone dressed a bit differently cannot be applied to boomers.

This is one reason why fantasy travel – journeying to extravagantly luxurious or unusually exotic resorts and destinations – is catching on fast with boomers. In Dubai, UAE, boomers can look forward to staying at an underwater hotel, complete with views of tropical fish off a coral reef; another Dubai developer is constructing a life-sized replica of the Taj Mahal. It all fits in with the admittedly weird, but seductive, appeal of a desert state that offers visitors indoor ski slopes and the world's tallest skyscrapers.

You don't have to represent Dubai to emphasize what's different – and better yet unique -- about your destination or product. If you do, you'll find boomers flocking to you.

4. Boomers Want Value – And Are Willing to Pay Top Dollar For It

Pay top dollar for value? To boomers, that makes perfect sense.

Remember, boomers control *70 percent* of the disposable income in America. Many seniors are also affluent. The difference is that boomers – unlike Depression and World War II-nurtured seniors – are willing to spend our money.

As long as we feel we're getting value for it.

As noted earlier, "travel" has topped surveys in categories that we boomers would like to spend *more* of our money on: More than on padding our portfolios, helping out our children, or even taking care of our health.

But as boomers near or reach the age of retirement, with many facing loss of regular paychecks, we do insist on value – even if it's at luxury prices. One boomer defined good travel value this way: "Going to a genuinely unusual place -- somewhere I actually want to go -- at whatever price."

So, how do you best stress the value of your product or destination for the boomer market?

The best first step is to give the customer what he or she wants, starting with creature comforts. When asked what the quickest route to ruining a vacation is, a high number of boomers reply, "a bad hotel room." Comfortable accommodations will go a long way toward convincing a boomer that a travel package has good value.

You can also sell expertise. Boomers consider a knowledgeable guide one of the chief reasons to sign up for a guided tour. The generation that grew up wearing buttons reading “challenge authority,” it seems, now largely respect authority – as long as it’s earned. Boomers seek authoritative knowledge and educational experiences -- but we aren’t looking for someone to tell us what to do or herd us around like cattle. That’s a surefire turnoff for my generation.

A third way to stress good value is by ensuring convenience when booking a trip. Boomers are generally impatient and don’t just want gratification, we want it *now*. Start by making it easy for us to find you on the Internet, navigate your website and find your pricing. Hard-to-navigate websites offer nothing but frustration to boomers, who did not grow up with computers. If we can’t find the basic facts about your offerings quickly, including the prices, we’ll head to the next site as fast as our browsers will allow. We’re also likely to think: “What are they trying to hide?”

My recommendation: If you want to market to boomers, have some boomers (including those in their 60s) test out your website to see if they can do so without giving up in frustration – especially if the site was designed by a 20-something. Keep it simple, and boomers will stick with you and respond. And include a phone number and snail mail contact information, prominently displayed. A live person to answer the phone is a big bonus.

5. Boomers Love the Internet, But Continue to Value Print

It’s easy to fall in love with Internet advertising and email campaigns: they’re quick and cheap and a crucial part of an overall strategy. But they aren’t the only -- or necessarily the best -- way to reach boomers.

Boomers grew up with real guidebooks you can carry in your hands, newspapers that crinkle and fold, magazines that you can tear articles from, and printed full-color travel brochures that arrive in the mail.

All of the above are more expensive to produce than their digital counterparts. And all of them continue to more than pay for themselves when marketing to boomers.

Generations X, Y, Z and beyond may be ready to go all-digital, but we boomers – while embracing the Internet -- are also loathe to give up our old, familiar sources of information. Even as many of us look to well-designed, informative websites for initial leads and for booking our trips, once we’re on the road or in the air we also prefer

carrying old-fashioned guidebooks and maps by a nearly 2 to 1 margin over laptops and smart phone apps combined.

National surveys show that boomers in general respond positively to travel information they receive in the mail: full-color brochures and circulars, direct mail advertisements, and destination guides that fill impressive-looking envelopes. Two-thirds of boomers say they are more likely to open direct mail than an email, and say they trust direct mail, newspapers and magazines far more than online media.

For a baby boomer, it can be hard to resist opening a big, thick envelope or beautifully photographed, printed brochure that arrives in the mail from a visitors' bureau, tour agency, resort or cruise line. The psychology is simple: this is something with heft that you can hold in your hands -- just as we boomers have held printed matter in our hands all our lives. Nor will typical boomers be quick to discard the contents (assuming the material is compelling). Physical mail establishes a kind of emotional connection with boomers that shouldn't be overlooked.

Compare that to emailed pitches from the same senders, which can be easily ignored, piling up in the recipient's inbox, or be quickly deleted.

To repeat: if you want to attract more boomers, have an aggressive presence online – but don't neglect print.

6. Don't Keep Boomers Waiting

As noted, we baby boomers think we're special -- and we expect to be treated that way. No matter how we first learn about your product or destination, if we're interested, we will want action...*now*. Boomers are not passive or slackers: We're active and want to be in control – that's one reason why many boomers like to book their own travel -- and get impatient with those who aren't. If we've emailed you or left a phone message, we expect to hear back and get answers quickly -- without condescension. Most of us traveling boomers have known success in business or professions, and don't like being talked down to.

Women boomers I've sounded out on this topic feel even more strongly about this than men – maybe because they've been talked down to too much over the years, despite forging independent lives and careers. Women boomers were in the forefront of the women's liberation movement and the sexual revolution – and they make most of the travel decisions in American households. Take heed.

On a side note: the need for speed has taken on another meaning in America: the length of time workers can devote to travel. As the traditional American two-week vacation has been first whittled down to one week and more recently to the “long weekend,” two- and three-week vacation trips are becoming more and more rare. Hence travel providers of all types have followed suit by offering shorter trips and itineraries.

However, in my own research I’ve found that my fellow boomers – many of whom are now recently retired – are eager to take longer trips. When asked their ideal trip length, boomers consistently choose two weeks over one week or a long weekend – with one month as a close second choice (some even pick six months – a throwback to more footloose days). True, this is an “ideal” trip length rather than what we actually might be able to manage every time we pack our bags, but I’ve been struck by the fact that virtually no boomers – even those who aren’t particularly enthusiastic travelers -- pick the media-hyped “long weekend” option.

7. Win Boomers’ Trust, Win Our Loyalty

In my own research, when asked what would ruin a vacation faster than anything, boomers answer “Getting ripped off by dishonest tour operators” more often than “airport and other delays” and even the dreaded “crying babies on airlines and in restaurants.”

But you don’t have to be a dishonest rip-off artist to lose boomers’ trust.

To build trust with boomers, start with an informative, easy-to-navigate website – this is a must. If you have positive testimonials posted, make sure they’re legitimate. Some boomers may want to “check your references.”

If you’re selling tours or other travel products, be sure your website is equipped with auto-responders, so that your boomer customers can get quick written confirmations of anything they purchase. Set up a secure mechanism for taking credit cards. When you collect email addresses or other personal information, promise confidentiality and that you will not sell their personal details to others.

And don’t promise more than you can deliver – that’s a sure-fire way to lose our trust. Boomers may be too polite to complain publicly if, say, a tour itinerary is changed for what seems to be no good reason, but we won’t forget the next time it comes to booking a trip.

Maybe boomers value trust so much because we feel our leaders lied to us back in the day about Vietnam or Watergate. But the psychology of it doesn't really matter; if you tell the truth to boomers about your product or destination, we will appreciate it and reward you with our business.

Another good way to earn boomers' trust? If you run tours, especially, consider making charitable donations to causes at your tour destination that may be near and dear to boomer hearts – health clinics, environmental programs, schools, etc. (An occasional visit to a school or health clinic where tour participants can offer small gifts can also be memorable.) The majority of boomers indicate that such donations would make them more likely to book a tour with a company that did so. You'll not only be doing the local people some good, you'll be doing your business some good – a win-win, as they say.

Sure, we boomers are getting older, but many of us will be around – and traveling – for years to come. If you want to attract and then keep us as patrons, be sure you can fulfill your promises – and boomers will stay your loyal repeat customers. And tell our friends as well.

If you're facing a baby-boomer wipeout, you're probably violating one or more of my seven Profit-Surging Rules above. That's exactly the case in travel business after business that I see.

If you're concerned that you're not attracting these affluent, big-spending customers, then I invite you to contact me to discuss my Five-Step Baby Boomer Attraction Blueprint. The initial consultation is just \$497, which you can apply against any future investments. You can reach me at clark@clarknorton.com or at my New York office, 845-588-2007.

Clark Norton is an AWAI-trained direct response copywriter and communications consultant specializing in baby boomer travel. Also an award-winning travel writer, he has traveled to more than 100 countries and authored or co-authored more than a dozen travel guidebooks. His feature articles have appeared in The Washington Post Magazine, Outside, Hemispheres, Parenting, Health, Porthole Cruise Magazine and many other major publications.