# Marketing Assistive Technology to the Baby Boomer and Millennial Generations

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# Abstract

For the last decade assistive technology (AT) manufacturers have been marketing their products for the parents of the Baby Boomer generation. These marketing efforts have targeted both those older adults and their adult children, the Baby Boomers, who were the most probable procurers of AT for their parents. Now with the Baby Boomers aging, AT marketing demographics are shifting again and the marketing departments of AT companies must now take aim at marketing their products both to the Baby Boomers and their adult children, the Millennial generation.

So how do you market a product or service to Millennials? Where do Millennials get there information on new products and services? How do social media and the internet enter into the equation? This paper will answer those questions and others by focusing on the cultural differences of the Baby Boomer and Millennial generations, the concerns that Baby Boomers and their Millennial children face as Boomers enter their retirement years, and will discuss the most effective means of targeting marketing campaigns at both these technologically-influenced generations.

*Keywords*: Assistive technology manufacturers, AT marketing, Millennials

# Background

According to the United States Census Bureau the estimated current population of the United States is roughly 326 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Of those 325 million people, approximately 76 million were born in the 18 years spanning from 1946-1964 (Information Resources, Inc [IRI], 2008). This demographic group is commonly referred to as the Baby Boomer Generation. Despite being pigeonholed into one all-encompassing demographic group, in actuality, the Baby Boomer generation is quite diverse.

No matter how much you have previously heard or read about the affluent Baby Boomer generation (and there will be a subset of this population that is affluent), the majority of this generation will not be financially well off (Court, Farrell, & Forsyth, 2007). While Baby Boomers in the United States have spent significantly throughout their lives, only 25 percent are financially prepared for retirement and are aging with confidence. Over 50% of this generation want a comfortable retirement and feel entitled to it, but unfortunately they don’t have the money to pay for it (Brandon, 2013).

Baby Boomers have encountered their version of the Great Depression with the Great Recession; and have much less in the way of pensions and retirement nest eggs than previous generations (Associated Press-NORC center for Public Affairs Research, 2013). Boomers aren’t prepared for retirement; and will continue to work in their retirement years. This generation, by the way, is also called the Sandwich Generation as they are caring for aging parents and still providing for their adult children which is causing them to spend even more and save even less money (Williams & Page, 2011). And what does all this mean? It means that when it’s time for retirement, more and more Baby Boomers will be looking for support from all possible avenues including the government and support from their children to fund their retirement years.

So what is happening now to Baby Boomers or what is going to happen? Unfortunately, as mentioned above, the majority of Baby Boomers don’t have enough money saved for retirement that would allow them to age in place gracefully.

So what are Baby Boomers doing? Where is the money they will need for retirement and health costs going to come from? Well, some Baby Boomers, as they retire, are using their paid up homes as a cash source via reverse mortgages thus allowing them to remain in their homes and use their home equity to pay for daily expenses and what remodeling they will eventually need to have done on their home. This remodeling will allow them to stay in their homes for as long as possible as they age (Edlund, Lufkin & Franklin, 2003). The idea or fear of a costly nursing home and its subsequent disruption of the lifestyle they had become accustomed to will prompt these Baby Boomers into remodeling their existing homes.

Others Boomers are selling their homes, downsizing, and selling possessions and moving into senior living apartment complexes. Here they are using their home equity to pay their apartment rental costs. But for how long will that money last?

Still others are relying on government assistance in everything from health care (Medicaid/Medicare) to Food Stamps to federally subsidized senior housing. Lastly, some are relying on children or relatives for support. We are seeing companies and plans springing up for building everything from ‘granny pods’, to garage/apartment conversions to accessible senior apartments being built into or added onto the existing housing of older adults children’s homes.

However, a significant subset of the Aging Baby Boomer generation nearing or in retirement that is not often spoken of is the ever increasing number of individuals possessing some type of functional impairment or limitation.

What is a functional impairment or limitation? It’s a limitation in the performance or completion of a fundamental activity by an individual; such as being able to stoop/bend, stand, walk, push, climb, carry, sit, reach, or grasp. Loss of hearing makes it difficult to hear in noisy environments. Loss of vision makes it difficult to read fine or small print. A functional limitation is a person not being able to walk up a flight of stairs, or being able to carry or lift 10 lbs.

According to the last U.S. Census, nearly 56.7 million Americans (1 in 5) have a disability, 30 million of which are under 65 years old (US Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2016). There are 35 million elderly in the U.S and over 7 million Americans have difficulty seeing words and letters in ordinary newspaper print even with glasses (“The Older Population”, 2011). As of 2016, over 54 million Americans have Arthritis (“Chronic Disease Prevention”, 2017). By 2040 over 78 million Americans will have Arthritis (“Chronic Disease Prevention”, 2017). At some point in our lives, if we live long enough, all of us will age into or acquire a disability!

Ordinary daily tasks are becoming extraordinary burdens for many people. As today’s consumer products become more technologically advanced, many consumers are struggling to operate them easily. According to a recent report, 99% of the existing home stock isn’t designed for people with functional limitations or a disability to age in place (Avenue, 2017). Baby Boomers will need products and housing modifications to help them age in place as they acquire functional limitations and disabilities.

# Target Audience and Relevance

This paper is meant to impact AT industry manufacturers, distributors and service providers in addition to people with disabilities, people with functional limitations, and their families. For the AT industry it is of paramount importance that the industry understands the demographic changes that the United States and the world are currently undergoing. The buying tendencies of their target markets are changing and the AT industry must change their marketing strategies to keep pace.

# Discussion

Assistive Technology companies will have to market their products not only to the aging Baby Boomer population, but also to their adult children, the Millennials.

## Marketing to Baby Boomers

So how do you market the new products, housing modifications, and smart home technology that will allow older adults to age in place to this Baby Boomer demographic? As a side note interestingly enough, Baby Boomers don’t think smart home features are the way to address their functional limitations as they are too expensive to purchase and too expensive to install, and lastly are too difficult to operate and maintain (software updates, security patches, etc.). If you are intent on marketing to the Baby Boomers you should be aware that while over 70% of this generation uses the internet, they use it as a communication tool, an information gathering tool, and some for social networking (Williams & Page, 2011). But that still leaves a significant number, 30% or roughly 23 million Baby Boomers who don’t use the Internet at all!

Baby Boomers still use print media - newspapers, targeted periodicals, magazines, and are still addicted to television. They will search for product information on the internet more than previous generations but less than younger generations. Boomers want comparison product information; want product reviews; want value for their money and historically, when they were younger, were willing to spend more than previous generations. However, one thing we have learned from our focus groups with older adults in the past is that when it truly comes down to it, older adults don’t want to pay for anything! Now Baby Boomers are becoming frugal, just like their parents, the Greatest and Silent Generations, did as they were aging.

For example, years back our focus groups on a new kitchen appliance, an automated jar opener, showed that older adults were encountering great difficulty in opening jars of food and were using unsafe methods to accomplish this task. When we asked these older adults if they needed the device, the overwhelming response was yes. However, when we asked the price point question, the older adults in our focus groups wouldn’t even pay five dollars for the appliance. However, they were more than willing to accept the appliance as a gift, or in effect for free.

Ten years ago, when we were developing products for the Greatest and Silent Generations, we learned we had to market those products both to them and to their adult children, the Baby Boomers. While the older adults from these generations did not want to pay for anything, their children, the Baby Boomers were willing to spend money on new products and technology for their parents.

Here again, we must learn from the past and now market products and services for the Baby Boomers not only to them, since they are ultimately the generation that these products are designed to serve, but also to their children, the Millennials who will presumably end up paying for a majority of these products. So how do you market to Millennials? Where do the Millennials get their information on new products and services available in the marketplace?

## Marketing to Millennials

The Millennial generation is the largest generation in United States history, outnumbering the Baby Boomer Generation by nearly 16 million people. Encompassing individuals born between 1980 and 2000, this generation of 92 million people is different than the generations that preceded it (“Millennials Infographic”, n.d.). As a result of growing up during a time when technology was becoming increasingly prevalent, this generation is 2.5 times more likely to adopt technology early on in comparison to other generations (“Millennials Infographic”, n.d.). Technology has become a part of this generation’s daily life as it has shaped the way they interact with others, think, shop and do research. A study in 2014 revealed that “84% of Millennials don’t trust traditional advertising”, such as magazine ads and direct mailings, since these methods lack the personal touch that Millennials prefer (Moraes, M., 2015). As a result, as more people in this generation are nearing their “spending years”, companies are beginning to pay attention to millennial preferences and adjust the way they market and sell their products (“Millennials Infographic”, n.d.). Reaching this generation is not necessarily difficult, and in fact, some may argue it is easier to reach this group than past generations, but it is important for companies to consider Millennial preferences in order to effectively reach this generation.

Get social and get talking.Social media is widely used by Millennials, with nearly 90% of the generation reporting having a social media account (Pick, T. 2016). With the ability to connect with people with the click of a button, social media has become the preferred method of communication for 1/3 of this population. With 62% of Millennials indicating that they are more likely be become a loyal customer of a company if the company engages with them through social media outlets, social media presents a new way to connect with this generation and to build brand loyalty and an increased customer base (Schawbel, D., 2015).However, just having a social media presence for a company is not enough. The company’s social media account must be used daily, if not multiple times per day to engage with the company’s followers. Companies should post questions, ask for feedback and reach out to followers whose posts indicate that they may be interested in or may benefit from your product.

While social media could prove to help companies gain customers and increase brand awareness, it can also bring some risks and challenges. Millennials are willing to freely share their opinions, good or bad, on social media. With 70% of the Millennial generation using Facebook(Bose, S. 2017), the median number of Facebook friends these Millennial users have is 250 (Suh, M., 2014). As a result, one user could potentially spread their thoughts on a product or company to hundreds of people in a matter of seconds. Additionally, this generation is more likely to ask a company a question on social media, rather than over the phone, and they expect the question to be answered promptly. How do you handle the need to engage with customers daily, address both positive and negative reviews appropriately, and answer the questions Millennials have? For some companies, dedicating people solely to the management of social media accounts is the answer.

Millennials desire to be included in a conversation with companies on social media extends beyond just Facebook. In fact, while the use of social media is expected to remain the same for the Millennial generation, it may not come as a surprise that younger Millennials preferences are shifting from Facebook to other social media platforms less frequented by other generations such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and in some cases YouTube (Simpson, C., 2017).

As an example, Proctor & Gamble (P&G) has also shifted its efforts geared towards Millennials away from Facebook, and towards outlets such as Instagram. Over 1.5 billion people use Facebook on a daily basis, making it difficult for companies to target Millennials specifically on this platform. P&G tried it, investing heavily into “highly targeted Facebook ads”, only to realize that they “targeted too much” and saw a minimal impact on sales (Sloane, G., 2016).

While P&G is not moving away from advertising using broader Facebook ads, they have stepped back from targeting particular groups of consumers on Facebook, and are instead extending into Instagram, a platform in which users post pictures with captions to share with their followers, as well as Twitter (“P&G Shakes up”, n.d.). Additionally, P&G has noticed the tendency for Millennials to follow influential people, celebrities and bloggers on social media. As a result, they have begun to partner up with these influencers by “sponsoring blog and social media posts”, further increasing brand awareness.

Companies marketing assistive technology (AT) products could apply these same concepts when they market their products. While fewer Millennials may be in need of these products personally, their parents are likely on their way to needing some, and chances are high that Millennials will be the ones purchasing these products for their aging parents. Therefore, the marketing of these products needs to be catered to the Millennial purchasers. Without doing so, companies run the risk of not capturing the attention of Millennials.

Make a video.With over a billion total users and nearly 54% of people between ages 18 and 34 visiting YouTube at least once per day, YouTube is the third-most used social media website used by the Millennial generation (Spangler, T., 2015). Millennials prefer to watch digital video over television, largely due to their ability to use websites such as YouTube to easily find free video content that they feel is relevant to them.

Given that Millennials are more likely to watch YouTube for extensive amounts of time than they are to watch television, YouTube has proved to be a great platform for companies in multiple ways. Arguably the most obvious benefit, YouTube serves as a great way for companies to advertise their products by developing video ad content that can be inserted between videos that users are watching. Companies are given the option to create “non-skippable” ads, ranging from 15 to 30 seconds long, or can develop “skippable” ads with no time limit (Olenski, S., 2017). It is important to consider, however, that only 29% of Millennial YouTube users reported watching YouTube ads in their entirety, suggesting that company’s ads may be most effective if kept short yet still visually appealing to capture their attention (“Millennials and YouTube Ads”, 2017). In addition to creating ads, YouTube can also be used by companies to engage with consumers just as they would on other social media platforms. By posting “how-to” videos, encouraging customers to post videos of themselves using their products and by welcoming people to review their products on YouTube, this website can help companies reach many consumers that they may not reach through other social media platforms. But, for companies who have not created YouTube ads before, knowing what would appeal to this generation may be unclear. While research surely helps, some companies are utilizing their very own Millennials sitting in their office by making them “mentors” for senior level management. By doing this, management can gain a better understanding of Millennial preferences and view points and adjust their strategies accordingly.

Go mobile. As a generation known for multi-tasking and always being on the go, nearly 85% of Millennials own a Smartphone (“Mobile Millennials”, 2014). These mobile devices now play an increasingly large role in company and consumer engagement, and overall marketing strategy. Some social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are purely mobile apps, and roughly 56% of Facebook users only use Facebook mobile (Smith, C., 2017).Additionally, a recent study found that 60% of consumers who have mobile devices use these devices as their primary internet source (Schauer, P., 2015). As a result, companies need to be sure to have mobile-friendly websites that are easy for consumers to navigate and make purchases from while on their mobile devices. Content should be simple enough that a mobile device can load it quickly, yet still visually appealing in order to capture consumer’s attention. As a generation that prefers the latest and greatest, outdated visual content and icons are likely to deter Millennials from exploring a website beyond the homepage.

Sale-savvy.While Millennials are known for seeking out new technology and trends, and are likely to adopt these new technologies or trends earlier than other generations, this generation is also known for not just handing out their cash (“Who Are Milliennials”, n.d.). Millennials do research before buying a product, to find the best bargain and to be sure the product they decide on is worth their money. In fact, a study revealed that 82% of millennials will look for opinions and reviews before they buy a product, further showing the importance of companies encouraging consumers to share their opinions as well as addressing their negative reviews online (Elejalde-Ruiz, A., 2015). Once decided on a product to buy, Millennials will then search for the best deal.

The good news for companies is that the millennial generation is actually the most brand loyal generation (Smith, G. 2015). So, if companies can capture a millennial’s attention and get them to try a product, they run a higher chance of maintaining that consumer’s business in the future. But, how can companies get Millennials to try a product if it costs the consumer more money than they want to spend? As a generation known for searching for the best deal, and nearly two-thirds of the generation’s internet users turning to social media networks to search for coupons, many companies are utilizing their social media to get Millennials to try their products, offering a coupon or promotion in exchange for consumers following one of the company’s social media accounts (“US Millennials Emerging”, 2016). By offering coupons through social media, the likelihood of Millennials purchasing a company’s product and sticking with that company for future purchases is considerably higher. Additionally, by requiring consumers to follow a company’s social media account to get a discount, companies can easily increase brand awareness if they continue to engage with these new consumers through social media. Research shows that 43% of Millennials share coupons or deals with their friends through social media, carrying the potential for companies to have their brand shared with hundreds of potential customers as a result of just one consumer sharing the company’s latest coupons (Carter, B., 2017).

Create an image or experience. While Millennials look for deals, there are exceptions to their “lowest price wins” rule. In fact, there are several exceptions. As a generation that is often painted as entitled, it may come as a surprise to hear that social responsibility is actually high up on Millennial’s priority list (“Millennial Demand for Corporate Social Responsibility, n.d.). More and more companies are showing their support for causes they are passionate about, which is capturing the attention and eventually the money of the Millennial generation. According to the Boston Consulting Group, this generation is more likely than older generations to purchase products from companies that support a cause important to the consumer. In fact, 37% of Millennials are willing to purchase a product from a company that supports a particular cause, even if it will cost the Millennial some extra money (“Who are Millennials”, n.d.). What does this mean for companies? Support a cause. Find something you actually care about, because Millennials can tell if you aren’t genuine, and then connect with Millennials who care about that same cause. Chances are high that if you have a product or service they could benefit from, and you value the same things as they do, they may end up becoming a customer.

Another way to capture the attention of Millennials is experiences. Nearly 78% of the generation indicating that they would prefer to spend their money on an experience rather than a “thing”, which is great news for companies that focus on providing these experiences to consumers and profit from them (Morgan, B., 2015). But, what does this mean for a company that specializes in selling actual products? While it’s obvious that a company shouldn’t switch their business to focus on creating large music festivals and skydiving opportunities, retailers such as Macy’s are embracing this millennial preference and using “mini concerts, yoga classes and cafes to draw consumers through its doors” (Saijdi, U., 2016) While Macy’s of course still sells goods, and in some cases likely don’t always offer the lowest price for a product, they use experiences to capture the attention of their millennial consumers. This generation places greater importance in living a happy, full life than in owning things, and thus participate in experiences that carry the potential to lead to life-long memories (Morgan, B., 2015). For companies who focus on selling AT, perhaps hosting shows that allow people to try out your products, or a series of classes that help teach users how to get the most out of your product would help draw in consumers from the millennial generation. Or, perhaps exploring an event or experience entirely unrelated to your product, but still hosted in your store or building would help attract customers.

This desire for experiences and opportunities to make memories is so strong that millennials have an actual fear of missing out on these opportunities, which companies can capitalize on. The term “FOMO”, or “fear of missing out”, is something that every millennial can relate to. This fear of missing out on an experience, opportunity or even a deal can be induced by many things, such as friends posting pictures on Instagram. As a generation who values experiences over things, it does not come as a surprise that they are eager to share these experiences through social media. If companies host experiences, not only will they attract consumers, but their consumers are likely to share that experience on social media and further spread the word about your company or product.

# Conclusion

## Millennials and Assistive Technology

While Millennials are currently purchasing experiences for themselves, friends, and their parents, purchasing experiences for their parents will eventually have to come to an end. From our experience, we have found that there is an age cut-off point where older adults enter the *‘Resistance to Change’* phase where they no longer will cherish or accept an experience based gift, or a tangible physical gift such as clothing. As older adults age they enter a phase where they don’t want to be bothered going out and fighting crowds at a venue and will actually look to give away experience based gifts, such as tickets to a sporting event or a show. Tangible physical gifts such as clothing may be greeted with a response of ‘*I have everything I need already.’* As time goes on, Millennials will have to adjust, just as previous generations have, to basing gift purchases for their aging parents on their observed or perceived daily living needs of their parents.

From our experience in providing products for older generations, we have found that in many cases aids to daily living (ADL) products such as a big button television remote, an adjustable bathtub grab bar, a bath bench, a dressing aid, kitchen appliances such as jar openers, or a raised toilet seat can address an older adult’s functional limitations and allow them to remain independent with an increased quality of life. But here, the *‘Resistance to Change*’ phase comes into play with the older adults saying they don’t need or want those devices in their home. We have worked around that response by offering to install items in an older adult’s home for a limited amount of time, a month or so, and if after that time, if the older adult wants them removed we would do so. Once we have the older adult’s consent to the month long trial period for a device or devices, we have found that when we do revisit them in a month, the older adult is unwilling to part with the new device and wonder how they ever lived without it. This is the tact or approach Millennials may have to use as they purchase products for their parents and it is something that AT companies should be aware of as they try to market their products. In the service component of our Center, we have a ‘loan closet’ in which people are allowed to check out and use a product for a short period of time before buying the product. AT companies through their Durable Medical Equipment (DME) suppliers could consider a similar approach allowing consumers to try out loaned products before purchasing them.

## Outcomes and Benefits

When Millennials purchase gifts for their aging parents, they may have to use these same tactics with their aging Baby Boomer parents, just as Baby Boomers used the same ploys with their older adult parents. Hence, the Millennials may have to adapt their buying preferences when it comes to their aging parents.

And what does all this mean? While Millennials are adjusting their buying preferences for their parents, it also means that AT device companies, resource and service providers and mainstream consumer product companies must *‘sit up and take notice’* of the changes going on around them. It’s a different advertising and marketing world than it was 10 years ago, and these companies must adapt or they may perish. Most AT products, specifically aids to daily living (ADL), seem to fly under most people’s radar as they are not aware of their existence or the positive impact they could have on someone’s quality of life. With the coming of the technologically advanced Millennial generation, if AT companies would utilize the Social Media marketing efforts and tools discussed in this paper, it could lead to newfound growth for these companies and an overall dramatic improvement in the quality of life for people with disabilities or functional limitations. Those companies who *‘sit up and take notice’*, may be poised to reap significant financial rewards from using these relatively low cost marketing approaches while reaching and benefiting older adults with functional limitations and disabilities.

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