

# What We Know

## ARTICLES & INSIGHTS

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## How to Talk to a Boomer

May 9, 2017 | by

**MAYBE BOOMERS' MUSIC WAS BETTER THAN TODAY'S MUSIC**, but our clothes were ridiculous. We were self-centered libertines in youth, we cannot multitask, and we have a fetish for the telephone. Now we run the company. Until us Baby Boomers all die, retire or get outvoted, everyone else has to decide how best to communicate with us. Did you know that Baby Boomers constitute 40% of the US population, control 50% of all private wealth, occupy 70% of business management positions, and possess \$2.3 trillion in annual spending power? Only 11% expect to stop working altogether upon retirement. *Disclaimer: I would be remiss if I didn't mention – the following article is filled with gross generalizations and stereotypical behaviors. Not all of them are positive, but all of them subjective and based on the experience of a qualified member of the Boomer Generation. Readers with a finely tuned sense of political correctness will likely be outraged. Read at your own risk. Yes, we Boomers are judgmental. It comes with age.*

### I. DEFINING THE RELATIVE GENERATIONS

**A. The “Veterans” aka the “Greatest Generation”- also the “Silent Majority” and to Boomers “The Establishment.”** Born before 1946, children of war, a real Depression, privation and 20th-century chaos, they were often utterly despised by Boomers in our youth.

- Hard-working from a sense of duty. Work for its own sake.
- Personal privacy has real meaning and value. Feelings go unexpressed.
- Deference to authority and to vertical command structures.
- Personal integrity and loyalty. A promise is a bond and a test of character.
- Desire for established social order, often perceived as bias.
- Formality in dress, behavior, and communication. Neckties and starch.
- Materialism. Possessive of “stuff” and conscious of social status it signifies.
- Communication style: Command and direct, by written paper memo. Meetings were for announcements, not idle questions or brainstorming.
- Money is for saving. So are rubber bands and wrapping paper.
- “Feedback” is a negative expression. No news is good news. Praise is rare.

**B. The “Boomers” aka the “ME Generation.”** Born 1946 – 1964, we migrated from “Leave it to Beaver” to Woodstock in less than a decade. Much of our character was

formed in reaction to the Veterans' "bourgeois" behavior.

- Remarkably egocentric and self-absorbed.
- Highly competitive as individuals and within groups. Rugged individualism is seen as a virtue, not an indication of anti-social behavior.
- Workaholic. Boomers invented the term, but embrace work not as a duty but as a means to an end or as a self-definition of value.
- Goal-oriented and impatient with delays and bureaucratic "Mickey Mouse."
- Quick to challenge authority. Rules are for everyone else, or to be evaded. Boomer expression of disdain: "Selling out to The Man."
- Quick to embrace causes. We inhaled tear gas and cannabis 40 years ago.
- Inclusive of others provided they are competent and contributory. Diversity as valuable for its own sake is a concept still unlearned by many Boomers.
- Dismissive of insincerity or fraud, and slow to restore legitimacy.
- Functional in groups, but a Boomer expects to be the most valuable group member and expects to lead it.
- Communication preference: face-to-face or by telephone. Meetings are opportunities to see and speak, not read and listen (or to text under the table).
- Money is for spending – preferably on ourselves.

**C. Gen-X'ers and Y'ers ("Millenials").** Let me just say, *this is not about you*. Please define yourselves elsewhere. Popular literature is replete with hand-wringing observations that you are "The End of Civilized Society." If Boomers did not trigger the downfall of the species, then neither likely are you.

- Gen-X: the perennial Middle Child, born 1965 -1979. "Cynical slackers" is unearned, but our parents (the Veterans) called Boomers much worse.
- Millenials: born 1980 – 2000. For you, Boomers are an endless nuisance.

## II. BOOMERS' LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE TELEPHONE

The telephone is surely our preferred communication device, but it is not our preferred method. Boomers prefer face-time over Facebook, and spoken words vs. texts.

### A. What the various generations prefer is what they grew up with:

- The Veterans: a paper memo, containing direct commands, delivered to the desk, signed in ink by The Boss.
- The Boomers: a personal meeting, face-to-face or by phone.
- Everyone else: Anything but the above, especially if it is in an electronic format delivered to a hand-held device.

### B. Boomers' order of preference for business communications:

**(1) Face to Face.** Boomers attended college lectures, not online podcasts.

- Look us in the eye and maintain eye contact. Millenials have a reputation of timidity for lack of eye contact

- Learn to shake hands like an adult. “Puppy-paws,” fist-bumps and man-hugs have no place in business.
- Employ honorifics (“Chief,” “Colonel,” “Ma’am”) upon first meeting. We’ll tell you when (or if) you can drop them.
- Initially, address a Boomer in a business setting by her first name at your own risk. No one ever embarrassed himself using “Ms.” at first. Boomers are less formal than Veterans, but we’re becoming more jealous of our prerogatives as we age. So will you.
- Learn to speak up. Precision, candor, clarity and backbone provide instant credibility.
  - Boomers are apt to form emotionally based initial impressions – a function of age and reliance on one’s “gut feelings.”
  - Negative initial impressions seem nearly immortal and interfere with objective information.
  - Bad grammar, incomplete sentences, and obscure cultural references compete with body odor as a means of self-defeating behavior.
- Banish verbal irritants from your vocabulary:
  - “Like” is a Millennial’s verbal crutch. (Boomer ancestor: “You know” and “uh”) It drives listeners over age 45 to distraction. It makes the speaker sound like an inarticulate teenager.
  - “Can’t” as in “It can’t be done” when the actual statement is “I refuse” or “I don’t know how to do it.” Boomers distrust camouflaged incompetence more than insubordination.
  - “So” as an initial filler word (Equivalent: “Well”)
  - “Really” or “honestly” or “To be perfectly honest with you.” As opposed to what? Lying? It sounds like a false effort at truthfulness. Try, “to be candid.”
  - “Never” and “always” beg for exceptions. Absolute propositions attract skeptical responses.
- Avoid wardrobe and “personal adornment” errors, unless your message is less important to you than your credibility.
  - Visible tattoos: Millennials’ equivalent to Boomer’s platform shoes, helmet hair or Elvis sideburns, but harder to remove. Cover them up, especially if they convey any social or political message.
  - Visible piercings that make Boomers wince to look at (i.e., not the earlobes). Self-mutilation looks creepy to us.
  - Hair colors not found in nature, or mammalian life forms.
  - Cosmetics applied to cause the viewer to question the wearer’s sanity. Ex; the Goth, the Superhero wannabe.
  - Exposed undergarments.
  - Over-exposed endowment – of any sort.
  - Political messages of any sort, unless you know in advance the Boss agrees with them. We probably won’t.

## **(2) In-person, conference-room meetings.**

Meetings are great with coffee and donuts. PowerPoint is optional, but remember

darkened rooms beget chins-on-chest after lunch. The room will always be stuffy or frigid.

- Body language really does matter. Watch where your hands go.
- Get caught texting under the table, and you can expect a reprimand. It reinforces the stereotype of Millennials' zero attention span and electronic addiction.

**(3) The telephone.** Boomers grew up with TV and land-line telephones. As with music, we remain most comfortable with what we first learned at 14.

- Answer the call. Voicemail is for unavailability, not unwillingness to talk. VoiceMail now transcribes to text, but:
- Return the call with a call, not a text. Boomers perceive text responses to voicemails as dismissive, detached, abbreviated excuses for interpersonal interaction.
- Make the call. Boomers are accustomed to taking calls reflexively, rather than screening them or routing them to VoiceMail. (We hide behind telephone receptionists and "executive assistants" instead of electronics).
- Try the phone first, before resorting to electronics. Call before we get in, or during lunch hour, or later in the evening, even if remotely. It makes the caller appear diligent.
  - Call our office landline first, then try our cell. Although Boomers invented the cell phone, most do not consider it an extension of our bodies.
  - Land-liners cling to the illusion of privacy by using it solely for personal communication, not business needs.
  - Cell calls are often still seen as expensive minute-burners, reserved for backup communications.
- Beware the dual-phone user. Select the right cell line.
  - Company-provided electronics mean NO expectation of ANY privacy by any user, ever. Cell phones are now only incidentally telephones. They are more correctly archiving computers with telephonic capabilities. Your life is recorded – literally.
  - Litigation-holds can extend to cell phone records, texts can be subpoenaed, call records can be mined, and privacy is meaningless.
  - Lost phones can be remotely wiped of sensitive information. Some businesses now furnish phones and track their use so they can be wiped if lost or misplaced – and all the grandkids' pictures.
- Blending business use with personal use on any electronics means all the personal use history is subject to scrutiny forever.

**(4) Voicemail.** This is an extension of the telephone, not of email. Do not express anything on voicemail (or in an email) you do not want read back to you at your next salary and performance review, or under cross-examination on the witness stand.

**(5) Email.** Use email, especially after-hours, unless an emergency arises. Then call. The only reliable way to get a Boomer's immediate answer is to call, not text.

- Many Boomers are more comfortable with email than Twitter or any other electronic

method (except Skype or its equivalent). The rules that applied to paper memos to Veterans, apply equally to emails to Boomers:

- Reliance on spell-check, auto-correction and emoticons in business communications betrays the writer as lazy, foolish, naive or immature. Use them at your peril.
- Grammatical errors, text-spelling abbreviations, sentence fragments and misused words interfere with the message. They are the bad breath of the written word.
- Jargon (especially techno-jargon) and passive voice sentence construction are the preserve of the frightened bureaucrat. E.Nothing transmitted is confidential, much less secret.
- Nothing on Facebook or any other social medium can ever be kept from The Boss. It will be forwarded to him (or her).

**(6) Texts and Social Media.** These are the bottom of the preferred list. Unless you know for certain that your Boomer-reader is a texter, a dedicated Facebook addict or a tweeter, the preferred method to reach a Millennial is the last choice to reach a Boomer.

- Many are not connected 24/7/365, nor within reach of a touchscreen even at the bedside.
- Send a text to a non-texting Boomer and expect to receive a handwritten note in response – in cursive a Millennial cannot read.

### **III. Boomer attitudes to watch for, even when your communication is received:**

- “Show me.” Beware many Boomers are quick to interpret body language and eye contact. We will trust non-verbal communication over statements that contradict them.
- Adopt an open, direct, candid style of communication.
- Provide front-loaded answers and back-loaded explanations, not the reverse. We do not require sound-bites, but we do require details if requested.
- Present options and alternative solutions, whenever stating any problem. Otherwise, the speaker risks whining.
- “It isn’t real if it isn’t on Facebook” does not apply to Boomers.
- Multi-tasking usually means performing a number of tasks badly at the same time, for Boomers.
- Do not expect immediate feedback unless it’s negative. We got none from the Veterans, and we have not learned Millennials yearn for it.

*“[Boomers] need to realize how important acknowledgment is, but the younger generations need to realize they’re not going to get an I.V. drip of praise.” ~ Dana Brownlee, Professionalism Matters*

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