

## Take Notes! Getting Into the Senior Mindset and Bodyset - By Jeffrey Catrett

2008-09-16

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#### **October 2007 - The first Baby Boomer filed for Social Security.**

The ripple effect of this demographic event will reach wave proportions within the hospitality, service, and health industries. As 78 million consumers enter their sixties, intelligent and innovative businesses should be both creative and caring in meeting the sweeping changes this greying population will demand. Although Boomers aren't there yet, they will be getting there within the next 10 - 15 years.

The overriding priority: finding ways small, medium, and large to cater to the spending power, psyches, and the physical realities of this burgeoning senior generation.

A commercial for an online hotel booking agency humorously plays on this challenge, presenting an older couple just starting their hotel stay. All smiles, the couple leaves their room and takes the elevator down to their first vacation activity, a swim at the pool. On the way down, the elevator stops to let on a fellow hotel patron-a hairy, bare-chested, big-bellied John Belushi college guy, also heading to the pool. The older couple exchange glances, their smiles get a bit weaker, but they still have their vacation faces on. Smiles disappear, however, when the elevator doors open and they take in the wild, overwhelming, loud poolside partying crowd, all twenty-somethings. The generation gap can deflate a mood in a nanosecond.

This is not to say, of course, that all Baby Boomers want to slip away gracefully and quietly. In fact, many in this generation object forcefully to the very notion of growing old, adding yet another level of complexity to our challenge.

### **Take Note:**

#### **Be savvy, but also be subtle.**

Most Boomers simply do not wish to think of themselves as old or excluded. So our first mandate is to find the all-important middle ground, avoiding treating seniors like stereotypical old people while still addressing the full range of age-related circumstances. There are enough gradual and not-so-gradual indignities associated with aging that businesses need not add unnecessary emphasis. So in thinking about how best to accommodate older guests, we must also consider ways to downplay the products and services so they come across as considerate options, not unwelcome reminders.

### **Take Note:**

#### **Attend to the range of physical and psychological issues.**

While Boomers may mentally reject the aging phenomenon, aging nevertheless involves a daunting reality of constraints on both mindset and bodyset. The following list serves as an overview of the areas we must attend to.

**Stamina** - Ambulatory challenges mean that distances to be covered on foot become obstacles. We need to become more proactive in finding ways to either decrease the physical distances from one place to another and/or increase options for making those distances less Olympian. Consider distance to and from entrances, hotel rooms, available tables, restrooms, parking lots. Consider wheelchair design, availability, and etiquette. Carts. Moving sidewalks. Segways?

**Strength** - Waning strength creates a number of challenges, and current building configurations can be veritable minefields. Think chairs, restaurant booths, luggage, doors, stairs, bathtubs, shower stalls, heights of mattresses and of toilets. Think low-impact fitness facilities and equipment.

**Sight** - More analysis of both overhead and task lighting. Closer scrutiny of print size and font styles on menus, brochures, and miscellaneous reading materials. More thought to desk supplies like magnifying cards or glasses.

**Hearing** - Background noise and music can be a great nuisance for guests with impaired hearing or with hearing aids, excluding them from conversation. Some electronic equipment can induce high-pitched feedback in hearing aids. Hotel room telephones equipped with amplifying options can be very useful. Soundproofing of walls and ceilings make for smart renovation.

**Diet** - Taste buds change with age, generally dulling taste sensation. And dietary restrictions imposed by chronic ailments and conditions demand culinary wizardry. Menu variety, portion sizes, and prices need revamping.

**Balance and dexterity** - Uneven, bumpy, or slick surfaces may result in awkward spills with debilitating consequences. Emergency pull cords are common in European hotel bathrooms, but almost unknown in the US. Anti-theft hangers can be a hazard, and complex temperature controls are less than ideal. Decreased dexterity make chores out of such simple tasks as opening ketchup packets, unscrewing tops off water bottles, manipulating a room key/card, turning a light switch.

**Sleep** - Various named 'celestial' beds address comfort needs, and some hotel companies offer a potpourri of pillow options, but other ways of customizing the sleep experience will be increasingly important. For greenfield projects, greater attention will need to be paid to sound insulation between rooms and floors. Existing properties' use of empty rooms as noise breaks offers another solution.

**Take Note: Simplify.**

**Everywhere, find ways to streamline.**

Be direct. Let older guests know specifically whom they should contact if something is not to their liking, then make speedy service adjustment. recovery.

Get rid of unnecessary forms.

Simplify processes wherever possible.

Provide clear value. Fixed retirement incomes make spending money stressful.

**Take Note: Care.**

Overall, we must be on constant alert to provide a rich quality of interaction with older guests. Many often relish conversation, attention, and respect. This means giving a few more seconds or minutes of time to them, and doing so politely and graciously. This means training staff not to be dismissive (and not to address a senior as honey, sweetie, or darlin').

We readily assess the needs of emerging youth generations and adapt products accordingly, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the largest generation of all-the Baby Boomers-will be an essential element in our economic success. They offer us an extraordinary opportunity. We should respond with extraordinary service.

**About the Author**

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Jeffrey Catrett has served as the Dean of the Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne and the Dean of Academics at the Les Roches Swiss Hotel Association School of Hotel Management in Bluche, Switzerland, lecturing to undergraduate upperclassmen and graduate students in a variety of subjects including Information Technology and Strategic Management.

He turned his attention to academics after a ten-year management career in hotel operations with such companies as Omni International and Swissôtel. His professional experience in hospitality and hospitality education spans twenty-five years and four continents.

Mr. Catrett holds a BA from Middlebury College and an MMH from the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, and has been published in major hospitality texts and journals including the Cornell H&RA Quarterly and the Surrey Quarterly.

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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