

Anticipating



Boomers

Futures

Through Action Types

Baby boomers are perhaps the most widely studied generation in United States history. Everything about this group has been the subject of scrutiny: their shopping behavior, media preferences, living arrangements, politics, and more recently, their views of retirement and needs for financial planning. Most of these research studies aim to define current attitudes and segment a market that dominates by its sheer size. Few research efforts, however, take a longer view.

How will baby boomers live out their lives over the next two decades—decades when the world will come to grips with unprecedented challenges and innovations? How will they navigate new ecologies of risk, highly politicized foodscapes, emerging sustainability practices, a renaissance of civil society, and a continuing personalization of faith?

Action types:

Diversity in decision-making

Such questions about boomers' futures are difficult to answer until we look at the diversity of boomer experiences and the ways they have already responded to changes in their lives—until we begin to recognize the diversity of strategies and practices they are using today. In their daily lives, boomers are already making choices that will shape their futures. They are deciding whether to marry for the first time, to remarry, to have children late in life. They are deciding whether to move to new cities to start new careers, whether to scale down their homes, how to build a personal legacy, and how to serve their communities in times of rapid change. They are evaluating food, health practices, and prospects for longevity.

Boomers also have a variety of resources and strategies for making these decisions. The resources cover a range of personal skills and networks as well as professional consultants and institutional programs. The strategies are shaped by key dynamics of their current life stage: Some have a deep desire to come home to the communities where they grew up. Some are reinventing themselves after a life-threatening illness. Others are looking for ways to combine faith and service to create meaning in their lives and their communities. In fact, these dynamics and the resources that support them form the basis of **10 boomer action types**.

Dimensions of decision-making:

Big stories, complex choices

Every generation is defined by its stories, and these stories shape their decision-making strategies. Seven key boomer stories can serve as guideposts for evaluating action types and their decision-making patterns. These stories are:

- Extended capacity
- Resequencing of life stages
- Self-help
- A new sociability
- Re-institutioning
- Wealth generation
- Global transparency

Each of these represents a strategy for “future proofing”—for making changes in lifestyles, bodies, and environments to prepare for the next stages of life. The specifics of these strategies differ from action type to action type, but these stories form the basic dimensions of decision-making. Together, the ten action types and these **7 dimensions of decision-making** provide a map for anticipating boomer futures as they transition from middle life to late life.

Working with Action Types

Boomer action types can be used in a variety of ways: they can guide new product development, marketing, and public policy—today and for the future; they can help boomers identify new platforms for social, political, and economic alliances; they can also be used to forecast future societal developments. Here is a description of the basic components of the action type and how to work with them.



Overview

Every action type begins with an overview that defines the action type. It identifies a basic conflict that confronts boomers in this decision-making mode. It also describes the current life stage and expectations that shape the action type.

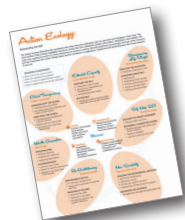
Compare and contrast these different approaches to the future. How would your business strategy or organizational goals differ if you were trying to work exclusively with each action type? Which action types challenge you the most? Which suggest easy wins?



Dimensions of Decision Making

These are key boomer stories that frame decision-making. Each dimension has an associated scale that defines the action type's orientation to the story. These show how the action type is likely to operationalize the story in their lives.

For each dimension, brainstorm alternative products, services, or messages along the scale. Create a combination of settings that define your own organizational "comfort zone." Compare this with existing action types. Are there some types that are good matches for you? Are there some that stretch you in new directions?



Action Ecology

The action ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. At the core are basic resources: people, information, institutions, and capitals. Arrayed around these are strategies associated with each of the seven dimensions, specific to this action type. "Decisions in Suspension" point to critical choices that boomers will make in the coming decade.

Create your own product, service, or message ecologies to match each action ecology. How would you revise your five-year strategy based on the insights from these ecologies?



Profiles & Quotations

Each action type profiles three real-life boomers who embody the action type. They help you understand some details of their personal lives that lead these boomers to adopt this action type.

Use these boomers as a "focus group" for your current or planned products and services. What would each of them likely tell you about your strategy?



Decisions in Context

The action types all suggest specific boomer responses to some of the issues that typically arise when we think about aging: work, housing, food, finances, and health. Each action type highlights the likely decisions of boomers in each of these contexts.

Pick a context that is important to your organization and compare the differences and similarities across action types. Where are the obvious wins for your organization? Do the action types trigger new or unexpected ways of thinking about a particular context?

Ten Action Types: modes of decision-making

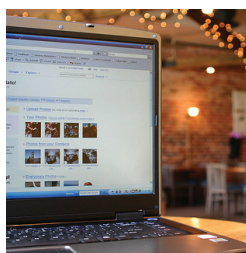
Action types are tools for anticipating boomers' futures. Each action type is a mode of decision-making—an orientation to the future. It defines a key conflict that motivates boomers, a distinctive view of their current lifestage, and a set of expectations about the future. It also describes their orientation to the big boomer cohort stories—the key dimensions of their decision-making—and the resources they draw on in making decisions.

The ten action types described here emerged from over 40 in-depth interviews with boomers across the country. They may be summarized as follows:

- 1. Crafting an Environment:** A blend of equal measures of creativity and control in these boomers drives a focus on crafting their personal worlds—and expressing themselves through their crafts.
- 2. Aging Sustainably:** Aging Sustainably means understanding the importance of balance between homes and environments, retirement and finances, and relationships and legacies.
- 3. Forging Family:** For these boomers who focus on forging and maintaining intimate family bonds, family is not just a given; it is something they have discovered and worked for through adversity.
- 4. Serving Faithfully:** As a central precept of their lives moving forward, these boomers follow their faith into service to others. Through service, they create value to their communities, their peers, and to themselves.
- 5. Reinventing the Self:** In a constantly changing world, these boomers adapt by remaking their bodies, interests, and skill sets—perpetual reinvention.
- 6. Rebuilding a Life:** After experiencing significant setbacks, these boomers have designed new paths that may be quite different from anything they had anticipated or planned, but offer opportunities for finding satisfaction in unexpected places.
- 7. Powering Through:** What constitutes success may differ, but these boomers are all about success. Their goals are clearly defined and they're determined to achieve them and set new ones to pursue.
- 8. Lost in Transition:** In dealing with unexpected problems, these boomers have lost faith in the goals that motivated them. They are struggling to create a new framework that will provide security and satisfaction.
- 9. Still Questioning:** Work identity drives these boomers, an identity still more in the making than for most. In their quest for something in their futures, they actively distance themselves from their pasts.
- 10. Coming Home:** Returning to the childhood home gives meaning to these boomers. With an instinct for freedom, they are now exploring values of commitment, care giving, and comfort.

Each of these action types is a narrative about how a group of boomers currently approaches the key decisions in their lives—today and as they look out into the future. These narratives suggest patterns. They point to issues and dilemmas that boomers face, and what their response to those issues is likely to be.

These action types are not segments. A segment would suggest that a particular set of boomer values, needs, resources, and strategies are fixed. Action types are, instead, a dynamic set of strategies and practices for confronting change and transition. Over time, any individual may move out of one action type—one mode of decision-making—and into another. They may also combine aspects of action types. For our purposes, the action types described here are collections of strategies and resources for coping with the present and anticipating the future. They help us understand the dimensions of decision-making and the different ways that different boomers are likely to react to challenges, large and small. Action types map the possibilities and give us a sense of the great diversity of choices and the strategic adaptability of boomers.



Source: All photos, Flickr.com

Dimensions of Decision Making: zones of innovation

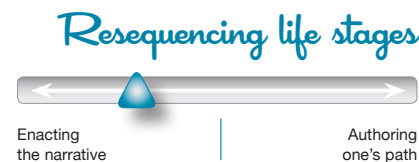
Most studies of boomers have looked at decision-making in terms of specific issues—housing, health, finance, or other obvious aspects of aging—or in terms of attitudes and values that arise from their cohort experience.

In our initial mapping of the next 20 years of boomer experience, we identified seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. We suggested that these stories will be the real overarching issues in boomers' lives.

They provide an integrated framework for thinking about how boomers will make decisions. Together, they tell us where to look for distinctive boomer strategies and how to understand them. The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of these stories. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales (ways of acting) with the defining actions on either end. **Here are the seven dimensions and the seven scales:**



Extended capacity is about a refusal to accept limits. Boomers have always pushed the boundaries of what is possible, and as they age, we expect them to continue to do so. Based on our interviews, we found that the strategies they employ to counter the effects of aging range from attempting to adapt themselves (physically and cognitively), to changing their surroundings (future-proofing their homes, moving to new or familiar communities) in an attempt to define a more hospitable environment in the present or anticipated future. For a generation that has been deeply engaged with the self as a project, it is not surprising to find that many of the Action Types lean toward strategies for adapting the self.



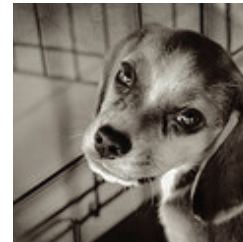
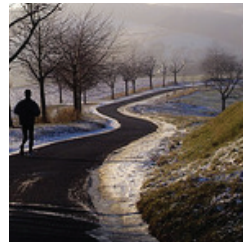
Life stages form a narrative about what a life should be and how it should unfold. Boomers have disrupted the traditional life stage narratives by cycling back and jumping ahead—getting divorced, having children late in life, retraining for a new vocation, or choosing early retirement only to return to the workforce shortly afterward. They have created many new narratives about life stages, which are quickly incorporated into the traditional cultural narratives. As a result, many boomers who want to author their own paths find themselves enacting existing narratives—whether they're about sustainability or the sandwich generation. Truly authoring one's own path is tough in a world where narratives are quickly recognized, analyzed, and packaged for mainstream consumption.



Self-help has been a trademark of the boomer generation. In response to their self-directed, self-sufficient, and sometimes self-absorbed inclinations, a cornucopia of self-help books, courses, alternative health care practices, and spiritual opportunities have stoked the overall economy. At the same time, many boomers have been deeply influenced by the appeal of communal values. So it's not surprising that, as they move into later life, boomers are balancing their efforts at self-help along a scale that ranges from continuing to evolve as smart, savvy consumers in a complex marketplace, to becoming more community-oriented, "connected" citizens.



Much is said about how the young "digital natives" who, growing up in today's hyperconnected world, will change the landscape of society. But boomers, while less explicitly focused on the technological tools of social networking and media expression, are nevertheless reshaping the later years of life while they quietly, almost invisibly, integrate these new tools into their lives. Their approaches to sociability range from a focus on building practical networks that help them achieve their individual goals, to a focus on expressing and reinforcing the bonds of personal relationships with family and close friends. In a world where networks are ascendant institutions, most of our boomers line up impressively on the network end of this scale. It is perhaps their surprisingly scant focus on expressiveness that will differentiate them from the generation of digital natives.



Source: All photos, Flickr.com

Re-institutioning



The boomer generation has changed virtually every institution they've encountered. What's more, they come into their later years at a time when the institutional world looks frayed, and a lot of upstart social organizations and business enterprises are emerging from the bottom up. The action types span two strategies in relation to institutions—engaging with existing institutions in an attempt to reshape them versus investing time and energy in creating new social forms. As a generation, boomers are no longer the institutional innovators so much as they are still trying to bend the big institutions to meet their needs and desires.

Wealth generation



While many stories about boomers focus on the ways they are likely to drain society of its wealth in their old age, our action types make clear the capacity of this generation to be innovative contributors to the economy in their later years. Their strategies for managing resources range along the scale from taking practical steps to mitigate risk, to relying more heavily on faith to sustain them through the challenges they'll face. While faith might look risky to some, it is a strategy that allows many boomers to be productive in the present—and perhaps inspires them to make unexpected contributions as they age.

Global transparency



Thanks to electronic media and the nationwide availability of jet travel, boomers have had exposure to more of the world than any generation prior to them. How will this exposure shape the way they live out their lives? Will they focus more on the local as they reach later life, or will they actively engage with the global? The action types suggest a tendency toward the local, which aligns with today's larger societal reactions to globalization. At the same time, several of the action types are tempered by an awareness of global issues or opportunities, and two actively pursue global engagement.

Methodology

To build our perspective on boomers in the next 20 years, we look at the boomer experience through multiple lenses. Cohort effects are the formative experiences baby boomers share as a generation. Aging effects are universal experiences related to the process of growing older. Period effects concern the environment in which boomers will grow older: the changing social, economic, technological, medical and global environments of the next two decades.

The first phase of our work was a map that provides an overview of the outside forces likely to impact boomers over the next 20 years. This map was developed in an expert workshop held at the end of 2006, and it identifies the seven big stories that form the basis of our dimensions of decision-making.

Building on this framework, we conducted an ethnographic survey to develop a set of action types that would help us understand the decision-making processes and choices of boomers as they age. Our research focused specifically on transitions and decision-making. For example, it is reasonable for boomers to change residences or experience shifts in health status or changes in household roles over the coming decades. By focusing on these specific transitions that boomers are facing, we can explore the cascading changes they create. Stopping work, for example, not only has financial implications but can also create opportunities for community engagement and time to pursue new forms of creative expression. Transitions require decisions and decision-making resources.

We probed these transitions, decisions, and resources in over 40 in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted in the interviewees' homes between July and October 2007. We recruited participants to span urban, suburban, and rural locations in Northwestern, West Coast, Rocky Mountain, Southern, Southwestern, Midwestern, and Northeastern states. Participants range in age from 43 to 61, and include both men and women, individuals and couples who were selected to represent a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, occupations, and socio-economic status.

Each interview lasted at least two hours and explored major events and transitions in the past 5 to 20 years of their lives, their present situations, and anticipated changes in the future, as well as their specific expectations around food, health, finances, governments, community, and families.

The names used for the respondents are pseudonyms and some details about their lives and locations have been changed, withheld, or blended to protect their identities. All the participants contributed to the development of the final set of action types, although not all are directly quoted.

We are profoundly grateful to all our participants for sharing their stories, experiences, strategies, anxieties, beliefs, and dreams.

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Institute for the Future is an independent, nonprofit strategic research group celebrating its 40th year of forecasting experience. The core of our work is identifying emerging trends and discontinuities that will transform global society and the global marketplace. We provide our members with insights into business strategy, design process, innovation, and social dilemmas. Our research generates the foresight needed to create insights that lead to action. Our research spans a broad territory of deeply transformative trends, from health and health care to technology, the workplace, and human identity. Institute for the Future is located in Palo Alto, California.

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