

The Big Boom Theory!

by Sandi Wright

Four generations are now active in the work force and in your choruses. Your membership, leadership and the member's marketplace are more complex than they've ever been. You probably are aware of the increasing influence of the "senior" generation, the power of the "baby boomer" and that generation's aging; and the 30-somethings and the "boomlet."

Because of the different major life experiences each generation has had, each tends to have a different set of values, preferences, and attitudes. Each has expectations and desires, and all four simultaneously make demands on you and your chorus.

Let's examine these generations and how their differences confront and sometimes combine with each other to create a particularly challenging dynamic for our membership and musical leaders trying to treat each as "equal."

The groups we will examine are the World War II or Depression generation, the baby boom generation, and the baby bust generation or 30-somethings and the under 20 age group, which is being classified as a boomlet.

Psychographics

You probably know that demographics describe the physical attributes of a population group: How old they are, their

gender, their educational level, how much they earn, where they live, and so on. The term psychographics refers to demographics of the mind. They describe values, attitudes, and preferences that result from experiences that have shaped a person's view of the world and of his or her position in it. Psychographics can help us understand what promotes differences in behavior within demographic groups.

Remember when you were in high school? There were probably different groups of kids, and you had labels for them. Some called them cliques, others called them clubs. But they really were psychographic subsets.

While the notion of psychographic segmentation is not new, our understanding of its implications is. We need to target programs to segments of our membership that have a natural tendency to be interested in them and to create messages about our programs that match the values of each segment. It no longer may be possible for any musical or administrative program to try to do a little bit for everybody. That's like spreading peanut butter so thin across a loaf of bread that no matter where you bite you can't taste the peanut butter.

The successful chorus in the 21st century will be one that tries to do

less but do it better. The content of and message about what we offer must be matched to individuals, their self-perception, and the values that guide their behavior.

The Preboomer

The World War II or Depression generation includes individuals now 65 years of age and older. They are the preboomers. Their formative environment was war and economic depression. Their primary focus was on making do without and preparing for a better future.

It's a generation that learned that hard work over time is what ultimately brings reward. It's a generation that feels strongly that you work hard, pay your dues, and then are entitled to a position of leadership and authority.

It's a generation that always had its eye on the future because the present was not a particularly good place to be. It's a group of hard workers with values that we might call traditional: Attention to family, attention to country. And it's a generation attracted to institutions that guarantee a modicum of security and stability. The absence of comfort and security is a powerful memory.

Within the World War II or Depression generation there are specific subpopulations, each with different attitudes, preferences and behavior patterns.

One view identifies three psychographic subgroups. The first we may call the “**vitaly active.**” These are individuals who created an identity for themselves by the time they were 40 and will continue to view themselves well into their 80s just as they did at 40. They will be represented in your active membership, in the audience serviced by your membership, and in your senior administrative and musical leadership.

We call the second psychographic subsegment of the World War II generation the “**adapters.**” These folks are making it -- but not easily. They get along with a lot of hard work and a little bit of help from their friends but are still fiercely independent. The primary distinction between the vitaly active and the adapter is economic, but there are also significant differences in behavior. You probably will not have a great deal of contact with adapters as members. Do look for more of them in responsible administrative positions traditionally filled by younger entry-level or “new” members because of their experience.

The third subgroup of this generation is the “**overwhelmed.**” As you can surmise, these folks aren’t making it. You probably will not encounter this subgroup, but increasingly your chorus and Sweet Adelines International may be called upon to assist them, or sing for them.

The Baby Boomer

Next came the baby boom generation, composed of individuals born between 1941 and 1964. These boomers are now between 41 and 64 years old. The massive proportions of the largest generation in the history of the United States gave it two primary characteristics.

First, from the experience of a responsive environment, the baby boom generation is quite used to having its own way. Second, this demographic group is even more diverse than the previous generation. These characteristics have engendered a special set of values in this generation.

First, let’s examine the impact of that responsive environment. The baby boomer has been served since birth by the marketplace and public policy. Do you remember diaper services that picked up and delivered cloth diapers? These services had a place in the market because of the size of the baby boom in infancy. When the boom generation got a bit older, the cereal industry grew to feed it. The toy industry grew to amuse it. And later, the record industry developed to give teenage baby boomers the ammunition to demonstrate independence from their parents.

As the generation aged, public policy also responded. First, it invested increasing amounts in elementary and secondary education; then, as boomers got older, it shifted those dollars to higher education. As the middle of the boom reached driving age,

Detroit responded with the Mustang, the Camaro, and the Z-28. As the boom generation began graduating, dollars flowing to higher education were redirected to economic development so there would be jobs for those graduates. Those dollars were reinvested in health care when the boomers reached middle age and grew concerned. And now those dollars are again being reallocated -- this time for long-term and chronic care as boomers face not only their own aging but the aging of their parents.

The boom generation has always had its way in public policy and in a marketplace of job and personal opportunity characterized by prosperity.

Boomers are shoppers because they always had choices they tend to exhibit certain values in the workplace, the marketplace, and the trade associations and social organizations - such as choruses - in which they choose to participate. They aren’t loyal like their parents were. If they don’t like the way a certain chorus sounds or is run, they will leave it for another that is more in line with their tastes.

Baby boomers are a bit schizophrenic. They have a high social conscience and at the same time a strong need to pursue what contributes to their personal development and status. Boomers want to participate in choruses and organizations that give them access to activities that are socially worthwhile and contribute to a satisfactory bottom line. They will shop until they find a chorus that

provides both.

Boomers also want to be actively involved in shaping the policies, procedures, and programs of any chorus to which they commit. They want to be consulted. They want their contributions recognized and appreciated. This group insists on participatory management and will look for choruses or organizations that provide that opportunity. If they don't "own" a decision, they tend not to support programs to implement it. It's the "me" generation.

Notice how different that is from the values of the previous generation, which was more apt to accept judgments made by groups in which it had invested authority. Boomers absolutely must be involved in decisions which affect them. This generation will probably constitute the majority of your membership for at least the next five to ten years, so you might as well get them involved as quickly as you can, otherwise they will feel helpless and frustrated and they will leave.

Boomer Subgroups

N. W. Ayer, a New York City advertising firm, developed a psychographic model that segments the baby boom generation into four groups. Ayer considered two variables that seem to distinguish their behavior: the degree to which they are secure or insecure, and the extent to which they are open or closed to new things.

Achievers

These "satisfied selves" are very secure and open to new things. They have the hot cars, the new computer systems and software, and the latest fashion. They are the risk takers, investors, the strivers. They see themselves on the leading edge of every curve - they're the innovative activists.

Programs appealing to this subgroup will have to do with artificial intelligence, technical vocal production or competitive advantage in the contest arena. They will be attracted to committees that create opportunities for them to advance their understanding of effective leadership or the mechanics of singing and dancing. They are the first ones to know their music and are impatient when others are not as quick as they are.

Contented traditionalists

Singers in this subgroup are also very secure, but paradoxically, because they are so secure, they tend to be traditional and closed to new things. Contented traditionalists like things the way they are; they're heavily invested in family, actively affiliated with religion, and loyal to traditional values. This psychographic subsegment is most like the previous World War II generation.

Which words will attract this subgroup to your choruses? "Preserve harmony, tried and true friendships built here, guaranteed to make you happy." What color should the brochure be? Red, white and blue. Where should the

convention be? A family resort that doesn't require the contented traditionalist to choose between the family and the organization.

Discontented traditionalists

This group is very much like the contented traditionalists in that it shares a commitment to traditional values. But discontented traditionalists differ in that their behavior tends to be motivated by significant insecurity. They worry about everything. They worry about whether their checkbook is balancing and whether they can afford this hobby, and they worry about environmental disaster. They worry about burglary and whether they will be safe going to the parking lot after rehearsal -- they are the single largest purchasers of home security systems in America and a primary market for liability insurance. Members of this group worry so deeply and broadly that they even worry whether they are worrying about the right things.

For that reason, they tend not to be risk takers. They worry about whether there's something they are missing, but they almost always wait for somebody else to go out front and do it first. Now who would you guess they wait for? Often the satisfied selves. So this group is usually a bit "behind the curve."

To characterize a program or to position the chorus to market this subsegment, you would use phrases like "reexamine yourself...wouldn't you love to hear applause," 60-years of

harmony -- tradition that will be here for another 60 years” and “If you worry about losing your identity -- come and sing with us.”

Acknowledge and address the anxiety, but don't manipulate. We should reflect the fact that as musical and administrative leaders, we are responsive to the needs and values of the members that we serve. We're reflecting what the population believes is important, not what we tell them they should believe is important. We're creating an opportunity for them to benefit from their active participation in our organization.

Non-Conformists

The last subgroup is very insecure and closed to new things. Folks who held onto the values of the 1960s, or “neo-hippies” who in the 1980s wanted to return to a '60s-flavor lifestyle like “do your own thing” and legalized drug use, this group has few resources, makes up a substantial percentage of the unemployed, and is unlikely to be active in choruses or any organized unit.

The Thirty Somethings

Following the baby boom is a generation we called the baby bust, but now we refer to them as 30-somethings. They are individuals in their 30s who have entered the marketplace, the work force and Sweet Adelines. Born between 1965 and 1975, this generation had two primary environmental influences: an established market catering to every need and exploding technology.

Because the baby bust is so much smaller than the boom generation, it is less competitive. All of the positions and opportunities created for the boomers were still there for the 30-somethings. In many instances, there were more opportunities available than there were busters to fill them. When members of this group were ready to attend college, schools struggling for enrollment sent postcards notifying them they had already been accepted.

For this generation, work is a means to a yet unknown end. Adults in their 30s have seldom had to think about where they were going or plan how to get there. The typical baby buster has a well-developed, aggressive sense of entitlement and an expectation that respect and privilege are automatic rather than earned.

Inward-looking but not reflective, adults in their 30s claim as heroes not John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King or Golda Meir, but Spuds MacKenzie and Madonna. Their theme song is “Don't Worry, Be Happy.” This generation likes to party.

It's difficult to involve this group in social issues, although this seems to be changing as their own baby boomer parents begin to age. They tend to distance themselves from hard work and commitment, and they grew up in an environment of technological miracles. “Don't worry about AIDS; we're only a few years from a vaccine.” “Why be concerned about oil spilling on an Alaskan coastline? Somebody

will invent an enzyme to eat it up.”

Thirty-somethings agree that social causes and crises need resolution but distance themselves from involvement and expect technology or someone else to provide the solution.

On the flip side, this generation matured with a degree of comfort and interaction with technology unlike anything previously experienced. It grew up with a joy stick and a mouse. If a piece of music is not printed from a computer -- if it is hand-written -- they complain and will eventually sit down and key it in so they don't have to look at the mess of sloppy printing and unclear notes on a page.

For most busters, the inconceivable - space travel or walking on the moon - is mundane reality. Television has brought the globe to their living rooms, kitchens, dorm rooms, and now their hands. Thirty-somethings take global interdependency for granted, as events around the globe have occurred routinely 24 inches from their eyes in real time.

Learning and technology

Remember when you learned to use a hammer? You found that a hammer could be more effective than your hand alone. Driving a nail, you learned that the hammer is an extension of your physical strength. You also learned that you controlled it; when the hammer hit the nail, you made it happen.

They baby bust generation has that same understanding about computers, information, and interactive communication technology. As we see the hammer as an extension of our physical strength, this generation sees the computer as an extension of its intellectual capacity. This generation understands that it is responsible for what technology does or does not do.

Like the satisfied selves or achievers in the boom generation, busters like opportunities to interact with knowledge -- at their own pace and at times they choose. Give them a learning tape with their part predominant so they can utilize technology when it is convenient for them. The experience they are having is often more important than what they are doing.

Learning preferences of the three generations tend to be distinct. The baby boomers like a touch of technology to make a program "sexy" but are just as happy to learn interactively with a group of colleagues and an "expert."

Baby boomers learn fastest in a section rehearsal with a smart section leader to guide them through the process and one-on-one instruction if necessary. Preboomers tend to be most comfortable in learning situations that involve their peers. They are committed to the social network as a source of information because when they were growing up intellectually, they didn't interact with computer-driven video disks.

Preboomers will tape the entire rehearsal and listen to it over and over in the privacy of their own homes, or they will invite other members of their same age group over to their house for an extra session.

The baby bust generation challenges musical and administrative leaders who are citizens of another generation. Their expectations and preferences differ widely from those of the generations that designed most of the chorus's and the organizations' programs, products, and services. The 30-somethings are ready to change the image, the policies, the programs, the judging system and eliminate most of the rules while they're at it. To our 30-something baby busters, the medium is the message. The baby buster is more attracted by how content is presented than by the content itself.

30-Something Subsets

Perhaps the greatest challenge for all generations is the baby bust generation's divergence into two polarized segments. This generation is emerging with no middle ground. "Haves" and "have-nots" are divided by extraordinary differences in the quality of their education. The haves develop the critical thinking skills that will enable them to make decisions and approach any number of tasks. The have-nots are unable to read on a functional level, to add or subtract numbers - they are "losers." Because of this, they become very emotionally needy and can challenge a chorus's ability to please.

The Boomlet

The under 20 generation is still being studied, but it is clear that they have many characteristics of their grandparents in the Pre-Boom, Depression and World War II generation.

This generation wants large families. The women want to stay at home and care for their children. They want to do things with their parents and grandparents. They are comfortable moving back home and living with their parents because it is socially accepted and financially convenient. They are listening to swing and big band music on their I-Pods, drinking martinis and smoking cigarettes in dance clubs, and enjoying life and sampling all its pleasures without guilt or worry. Stiletto heels and dresses from the 30s and 40s are back. It's a generation looking for the romance and nostalgia of the World War II, and the music of Sweet Adelines is a perfectly acceptable choice. They are enthralled with the style and the music. To the Boomlets, barbershop is not a bad word.

In Conclusion

Musical and administrative leaders are challenged to target our services and products to four generations and each psychographic sub-group -- all at once. And these characteristics, attitudes, goals, and desires co-exist in our choruses.

They have to be recognized, targeted, and managed to avoid fragmentation of membership and preserve our ability to continue to advance and grow.