

First, Buns of Steel. Then, Minds Like Steel Traps

The first rumbles of a demographic earthquake have begun rattling the pencil jars at The Trend Desk. This month, the oldest Baby Boomers -- that gargantuan group of Americans born between 1946 and 1964 -- begin turning 60. Each day this year, 7,918 Boomers will celebrate a 60th birthday. That's 330 new sexagenarians an hour.

In the world of trends, this is an uber-trend. And many of its implications are well-known: A rethinking of retirement, imperiled private pensions, Social Security and Medicare stretched to the breaking point.

But in our fixation on the fiscal, we often overlooked the economic effects of the human dimension. Every day for the next 18 years, a portion of history's richest and most influential generation will be forced -- at least momentarily -- to reckon with their own mortality. And that, I predict, will have three important and intriguing business consequences:

- A new brain-fitness culture. While the grownup brain is less "plastic" than the brains of children, it turns out to be much more supple and improvable than originally believed -- that's a key insight neuroscientists have gained over the last 15 years. As Boomers grasp the importance of this research, and as many see their own parents ravaged by Alzheimer's, they'll begin treating their brains much as they treat their bodies -- with a steady regimen of exercise and workouts.

University of California-San Francisco neuroscientist Michael Mezerich calls it a "new brain-fitness culture." What aerobics was to the 1980s, brain fitness will be to the next decade. Expect a steady stream of books, workshops, even "gyms" designed to keep aging Boomer brains in top condition.

- An accelerated search for meaning. When Boomers blow out 60 birthday candles, they'll inevitably take the measure of their lives. "When," they'll wonder, "am I going to step up and do something meaningful? What kind of legacy will I leave?"

The result will be a flourishing of volunteer work and public service -- much of it, I predict, centered around environmentalism in general and global warming in particular. If their parents were the "greatest generation," this age cohort could well become the "greenest generation."

- An "I've always wanted to ..." industry. In the rush to raise families and build careers, Boomers have postponed many ambitions, large and small. "I've always wanted to read War and Peace." "I've always wanted to climb a mountain." "I've always wanted to learn gourmet cooking."

Tapping these "I've always wanted to" urges will be big business -- for the travel industry, for publishers, for adult education, and for a variety of new businesses in the experience economy.

Is That Your Phone? Or Did You Just Eat a Burrito?

First came ringtones. Now comes ... smelltones. The Japanese company Ketai Kun Kun has developed small

packets of fragrance that attach to customized mobile phones. When users receive a call, a "micro scent generator" attached to the phone triggers a burst of aroma. So, instead of hearing your phone ring, you smell it. If you thought people yakking at restaurants was annoying, wait till they start stinking up the joint. You can find more info [here](#).

The Age of the Conversational Artist

The entertainment industry is in upheaval. Rocked by downloadable music, time-shifted television, and an explosion of user-generated content, some of the economy's most important companies must now rethink the basics of their business. But what does this new world mean for the individual musician, writer, or performer?

The best answer I've heard comes from Cory Doctorow, a science-fiction author and one of the proprietors of the popular BoingBoing blog. In a [recent essay](#), Doctorow says we're entering the third era of modern entertainment.

During the first era, vaudeville, what mattered most was charisma. Artists could overcome deficiencies in technical skill by giving a great show. When radio and sound recordings emerged, the importance of stage presence diminished and the second era began. Since audiences couldn't see performers through their Victrolas, what began to matter most was their "technical skill with your instrument."

Now the Internet is changing the game again. As Doctorow writes, "The search-cost of finding another artist whose music or books or movies are as interesting as yours is dropping through the floor, thanks to recommendation systems, search engines, and innumerable fan-recommendation sites like blogs and MySpaces. Your technical skill is matched by someone else's, somewhere, and if you're to compete successfully with her, you need something more than charisma and virtuosity."

That something is conversation -- the ability to engage the audience in authentic dialogue. Independent bands are already using message boards and mailing lists to stay in touch with fans. Amazon.com is giving authors space to blog. Barnes & Noble is establishing online book clubs to connect writers and readers.

This new world will change the power relationships in the entertainment industry -- propelling some artists into prominence and others into oblivion. "Conversation with an audience isn't easy," Doctorow writes, "and there are lots of people who produce great art and lousy conversation."

Message to Hollywood, Motown, and Nashville: Stop hiding behind your talent, and start talking to your fans.

The Age of the Conversational Call Center

Speaking of conversations, the commercial for Citibank's new Simplicity credit card is a sign of the times. A guy on a commuter train is calling his credit card's customer-service line. He reaches an automated attendant, which leads him to respond to a battery of security questions -- with answers that begin to alarm his fellow passengers. "Big boy!" he repeats loudly at one point.

Then when he finally reaches a human being, the train goes into a tunnel, severing his cell-phone connection. A voiceover provides the punch line: Simplicity cardholders can just press "0" to be connected immediately to a customer-service agent.

After years of trying to route callers through automated systems and concealing how to reach an actual person, at least one company is taking the opposite tack -- it's making the task of conversing easier, not harder.

Competitive logic, as much as corporate benevolence, probably played a role in Citi's decision. Check out Paul English's brilliant [IVR Cheat Sheet](#). English, the Chief Technology Officer of a Boston-based online travel company, has compiled a massive list of how to circumvent interactive voice-response systems at companies from financial

giant American Express to software maker Zone Labs. Lots of people now pull up the IVR Cheat Sheet when they're lost in a particularly annoying phone maze.

It's another example of the ultra-transparency created by the Internet. Since you can't beat the Paul Englishes, you might as well join them.

Ha!

Laughter is no laughing matter. There's ample evidence that [laughing is good for body and mind](#). And thanks to an inspired Indian physician named Madan Kataria, individuals and organizations across the world have formed thousands of laughter clubs to practice what Kataria calls "[laughter yoga](#)."

If you've missed the worldwide laughter movement, this month you can make amends. January 24 is [World Belly Laugh Day](#). At 1:24pm, people around the world will throw up their hands and guffaw lustily. As organizer Elaine Helle explains, "Belly Laugh Day allows you to remove your work persona, put on a smile, and laugh to innovate at the speed of fun."

So mark your calendars. And if you're one of the nearly 8,000 Boomers turning 60 that day, laugh especially hard.

Want to start a conversation or share a laugh? Send your trends and tips to dantrend@danpink.com. I read every e-mail and respond to most.

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