

Editor: Cynthia S. Paris  
(804) 649-6801  
oped@timesdispatch.com

# Op/Ed

TimesDispatch.com  
Search: **opinion**

## Seeking Cities, Salvation, Social Networks

# 10 ways boomers will transform 2012

**W**e've long predicted that baby boomers will continue to transform our culture, pursuing their own vitality through their midlife years and on into old age. Here are our top 10 boomer-inspired predictions for 2012:



### 1 Boomers will remain at the head of the table.

Boomers head more households than any other generation. And now, boomers are heading more multi-generational households — older parents moving



John W. Martin

in for caregiving needs, and boomerang kids returning home — than ever before. Close to 50 million Americans, 16 percent of the population, now live in three-generation homes. Almost all are headed by boomers.

At the same time, more single, unrelated boomers are cohabitating — living together platonically to share expenses and provide emotional support. Let's call this the Golden Girls trend.

So for 2012, plan on boomers remaining the epicenter of most household decisions. More than ever, their attitudes, preferences and spending behavior matter.



### 2 More boomers will embrace city living.

Increasingly, boomers are attracted to the variety of activities, energy and hassle-free lifestyle advantages offered by the center city and new urban villages. Forward-looking communities such as Vancouver, Atlanta, Orlando and Arlington County are already taking advantage of this trend by connecting their population or activity centers with multimodal, hyper-connected transportation systems: light rail, enhanced transit services, public and private car-sharing, bike trails and paths, electric vehicle charging stations, etc.

Chances are you'll visit one of these communities in 2012 and realize that a car-free lifestyle is not only possible but desirable.



### 3 More boomers will get religion.

In 2012, we will see more boomers get religion. According to Gallup, self-reported church attendance increased in 2010, with 43.1 percent of Amer-

icans reporting weekly or almost weekly attendance, up slightly from 42.8 percent in 2009 and 42.1 percent in 2008.

Of course, the median age in America also increases every year as boomers grow older, and older people are more likely to attend church than younger folks. In any event, this is great news for organized religions, as boomers will double the number of seniors over the next 20 years.

The challenge, of course, is for places of worship to relate to boomers individually, helping them answer the question "What's in this for me?" (Hint: "Personal salvation" might be a good reply.)



### 4 Boomers will become even more wired.

Boomers have moved forward to embrace social networking — Facebook, Twitter and the like. Almost half of Internet users age 50-64 use social media now, an 88 percent growth from 2009. The number of Facebook users in the U.S. age 55 and older grew from around 1 million in early 2009 to 10 million in early 2010 (Pew and iStrategy.com).

What's driving boomers to connect more on social networks? Family! Boomers are using social media to connect with their kids and grandkids, those young folks who refuse to pick up a ringing phone when it's right in front of them.

In 2012, as more boomers experience the value of social networking, use of these tools will start to permeate every aspect of life.



### 5 Health and wellness care will be everywhere.

Boomers are reaching age 65 at the rate of one every eight seconds — 10,000 a day. One of the realities of aging is that our bodies don't come with a warranty. Eventually, everything wears out — gradually, then suddenly. Over time, mounting chronic conditions and medical procedures will turn casual conversations into organ recitals — let me tell you about my knee replacement, did you hear about my issues with my sciatica?

With their numbers (76 million) and their focus on "self," boomers' efforts spent on health, wellness, fitness and physical appearance will increase in 2012. And, so, too, will the

related services being offered and promoted.

Early signs to watch in 2012 — health systems, rather than shopping malls, will become the center of communities; exercise programs and services from kettle-bell gyms to local aquatic centers will thrive; and pharmacies and food markets will become more wellness-oriented.



### 6 Boomers will volunteer even more.

Boomers already volunteer at a higher rate than previous generations did when they were 47 to 65 years old. Why? Because boomers at this age are much more likely than older generations to be college-educated, to have white-collar jobs, to have children under 18 in the home and to yearn to make a transformative difference in organizations — all suspected drivers of volunteering.

Over the next 10 years, boomers are projected to swell the ranks of volunteering by almost 50 percent. Their deep-seated motivation and available time will benefit all organizations that rely on volunteers. The key is knowing how to appeal to boomer sensibilities — how to attract them to an organization's mission and chart a course where they can make a meaningful and lasting difference.

In the coming year, we will see more boomers fulfilling their promise by lending a helping hand.



### 7 Boomers will drive green innovations that matter.

In our research, 80 percent of all consumers told us they think or act "green" or in an "environmentally responsible" fashion. Green is now mainstream and is here to stay. Leading the way are boomers, who rate themselves greener than the other generations, in part because they had to learn to be green.

Today's boomer consumers want to be responsible in their consumption. They crave sustainability, not planned obsolescence, and prefer to address their needs, not wants.

To help boomers satisfy their green needs, everyone is jumping on the environmental bandwagon — product manufacturers, services, foods, home builders, schools and even entire commu-



ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

**Deacon Phyllis Brame listens to a sermon at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church. More boomers are attending religious services, a trend that is expected to accelerate.**

nities. By the end of 2012, green certification seals will appear on everything. And as green seals become ubiquitous, the challenge will lie in deciphering which activities and related designations really matter.

Advertising-savvy boomers who grew up with Captain Midnight decoder rings will point the way.



### 8 Boomers will lead the age of responsible consumerism.

Mass consumerism fueled by boomers has peaked. The Great Recession, timed with the green movement, volatility of retirement accounts and anticipated governmental cuts ahead, has helped usher in responsible consumerism.

The economy is already feeling the effects of this shift as boomers, more than any other generation, are curtailing spending and placing more emphasis on saving.

As the economy recovers in 2012 (we hope), we anticipate an increasing awareness of the wrenching realization that boomers may be the last generation that enjoys a higher standard of living than the previous one.

The silver lining in this revelation, however, is that we may all come to accept that there are more important things in life than, well, things. Over time, experiences, relationships and community service will become our new currency.



### 9 Boomers will create the "longevity economy."

What's going to replace our old consumption-based economy? An energy economy? A green economy? One likely emerging force that will gain traction in 2012 is what some are calling the "longevity economy."

Thanks to declining birth rates, inoculations and sanitation, and advances in medicine, we are living much, much longer. Life expectancy in 1900 was 47. Today, it is over 80. We are not only living longer, we are living more active, productive lives well into our 70s and beyond. As a byproduct, a growing portion of our economy will be based on the behaviors, needs and desires of the 50-plus market.

For example, boomers are and will continue to work longer. Today, 88 percent of boomers say they will work past their eligibility for retirement benefits, transforming workforces and workplaces.

Another example is where and how boomers plan to grow older — at home. This desire to age-in-place is fueling new industry categories. Subdivision builders report a spike in demand for wired granny flats and other accessory dwelling units. GE, Intel and other forward-looking companies are launching technology-based services to seamlessly connect boomers to caregivers, parents, adult children and geriatric specialists from distant locations.

Experts predict the emerging aging-in-place market will exceed \$20 billion by 2020.

In 2012, the idea of a longevity economy, along

with its challenges and opportunities, will coalesce for communities across America. Some enlightened cities will even put a stake in the ground claiming their localities as centers for this new economic force.



### 10 Boomers will support a thoughtful plan for America's future.

Boomers are transformational. Throughout their lives, boomers have led or supported many societal shifts — from women's rights to gay rights. Our crystal ball says the next boomer-led revolution may be under way.

Study after study suggests that the vast majority of boomers are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country today. Like everyone else, boomers are ready for our economy and our country to change, to become a place where there is still limitless opportunity, but also a responsible safety net for those in need and a sustainable future.

The provocative appeal of Herman Cain's 9-9-9 tax plan, the flashpoints caused by the Occupy movement, and the Tea Party's ascendancy are all signs that change must come.

Political orientation aside, the 2012 elections should culminate with a new path forward. No doubt, this plan will require compromise and sacrifice from everyone — reduced services, higher taxes, delayed retirement benefits and elimination of some other seemingly intractable benefits.

We believe boomers, the cohort with a lifetime of rejecting the status quo, will ultimately support a thoughtful path forward. However it manifests itself, the plan needs to protect future generations of Americans from future generations of politicians.



### Happy New Year?

These predictions may paint an optimistic view of 2012, but we have never been fervent believers in the Mayan prediction that the world ends on Dec. 21, 2012.

For boomers, 2012 marks the first year of the rest of their lives. Another year when they can make a difference. Viva the vital!

John W. Martin is president and CEO of The Southeastern Institute of Research, home of the Boomer Project. To learn more, go to boomerproject.com.