

Op/Ed

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THE BOOMER PROJECT

What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been — and Continues to Be

Baby boomers. They seem once more to be the talk of the media. Everywhere you turn these days there are stories about boomers, including a dizzying number of stories in recent weeks about the first baby boomer applying for Social Security benefits (and the impending doom that means for both Social Security and Medicare programs).



MATT THORNHILL

We're not complaining about all this interest in today's boomers. After all, it's our business.

But something is missing in most of what we read, hear, and see about boomers. And that's *context*. What makes boomers tick? Why do they think, feel,

and act the way they do? And what can we expect from them in the future?

In our work during the past four years we've frequently been asked what we can expect from boomers in the future. In truth, no one knows. But if the past is prologue, we know that boomers will demand and force changes. Why? Look at the changes they have been involved in since WWII: Women's Lib, civil rights, gay rights, and now the Green movement.

Now firmly in their own middle age, with parents who have made it to old age and beyond, boomers have a clear sense that their own aging is next. Their psychological "can do" wiring suggests boomers are about to transform "growing old in America" forever. But how?

The one thing we know with certainty about America's boomers, who are 43 to 61 years old in 2007, is that by the time 2017 rolls around, they'll

be 53 to 71 years old. By 2027, they'll be 63 to 81 years old.

IN OTHER WORDS, the only certainty is the march of time. Everything else is open for discussion.

And that's the purpose of this new column, *Viva the Vital*. We will write about what we've learned through our national research studies conducted by the Southeastern Institute of Research (SIR), our monthly BIGresearch consumer pulse tracking survey of 7,000 Americans, plus what we can share from the hundreds of studies we've conducted for our clients. This column will offer observations, insights, and our pointed opinions about what drives baby boomers as they venture into and through this next stage of life.

In survey after survey, boomers tell us they are not yet "done." They have mountains to climb, worlds to conquer, wrongs to right, and grandbabies to kiss. For most boomers, they'll be over the hill when they're under the hill.

The quest, it seems, isn't for the Fountain of Youth, but the Fountain of Vitality. Boomers will spend time, money, and considerable effort to maintain their vitality until their last breath. *Viva the Vital!* — Long live the vital! — will be the mantra for the next 40 years. It is the context that explains the path boomers are taking.

Over the coming weeks and months, we will explore five areas where boomers will focus their quest for vitality:

■ *Financial Vitality* — This is good news for anyone in the financial services and related fields. Boomers will work to manage their money and maintain their assets, along with "helping" their

vitality in these areas, and it will only increase in the coming years, with health being most important.

■ *Mental Vitality* — The impact of mental diseases like Alzheimer's have made a tremendous impact on today's boomers, who have seen it in parents, grandparents, and loved ones. They will spend money, time, and energy to avoid a similar fate. This is uncharted territory for boomers.

■ *Social Vitality* — As a generation that created and managed social networks in the real world for the past 40-50 years, boomers will want to maintain their vast social networks. They've invested too much of their lives in it, and are not about to uproot themselves and relocate to some distant retirement community.

■ *Spiritual Vitality* — As boomers get closer to "what's next" after life, they will reach out to organized religion or other spiritual forces to get a better sense of the "grand plan" as it relates to their world on a very personal basis.

AS BOOMERS ourselves, our goal with this column is to report and comment on the journey of the rest of our lives, all of our lives, as it is happening. We'll try to provide a map of the progress along the way and share stories from those pioneers already on the road. We will welcome your feedback and participation, as together we plot this new path forward.

Together, *Viva the Vital!*

• The Boomer Project, part of SIR Research, a 43-year-old marketing research company based in Richmond, conducts national research studies to help companies and organizations understand today's baby boomers. The Boomer Project's new book, *Boomer Consumer*, was recently named a 2007 top 10 business book. More info can be found at www.boomerproject.com or 804-358-8981.



VIVA THE VITAL!

A series on boomer-related issues.

children and grandchildren with college loans and homes.

■ *Physical Vitality* — This relates to health, fitness, and physical appearance. Boomers already spend countless billions trying to maintain