

# Baby Boomers Aren't Filling Charity Gap

*Here are the new rules of the road.*

**B**aby boomers may not be stepping in to fill the void in charitable giving as mature donors age. As a result, nonprofits are facing a widening “charity gap” in the differing habits of America’s baby-boom (ages 30-50) and mature (ages 50 and over) generations, according to a recent survey.

This gap means new challenges in cultivating support in an increasingly competitive nonprofit environment. If they are to remain viable, nonprofits must do more to understand and cultivate support among baby boomers. For example, baby boomers tend to be more cynical and disillusioned than their parents’ generation and therefore want to see tangible results from the organizations to which they give.

Once politics was the force that drew people to causes. Now only 22 percent of boomers rate politics as “very important” in their lives, down from 44 percent when a similar poll was taken less than a decade ago. Baby boomers are also self-described as less loyal to the charities they support, with only 48 percent describing their generation as loyal, compared to 70 percent of mature respondents. As the mature generation gives way to the boomers in terms of affluence,

there’s fear that the younger generation isn’t filling the void.

The poll results show that nonprofits have a lot riding on the baby boomers but need to do more to cultivate support among this critical segment of the population. Nonprofits simply won’t have the same type of relationship with boomers as they did with their parents. Boomers’ life experiences, and therefore their needs and expectations, are very different.

As a result, nonprofits need to explore new ways to make connections with boomers. Most important is consistent communication and outreach to both existing and potential supporters to provide evidence of accountability—to show the difference the organization is making as well as its fiscal responsibility. Based on their findings, pollsters lay out a checklist of do’s and don’ts for bridging the charity gap:

**DO** establish and maintain a media presence for your organization, both to keep your supporters informed and to raise the awareness of potential new ones.

**DON’T** rely solely on direct mail and interest group publications to get your messages out to current and potential supporters.

**DO** proactively convey evidence to donors of your sound fiscal stewardship.

**DON’T** leave it to donors to find this information out for themselves.

**DO** cast a wide net and seek to educate a broader public on your issues.

**DON’T** discount the importance of donors spreading the word to the “unconverted” about the causes they care about.

**DO** think creatively about the best tools to reach out to existing and potential supporters. Consider traditional outreach channels as well as new methods such as on-line communications (75% of boomers surveyed have Internet access).

**DON’T** try to employ a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Customize your outreach for specific target audiences.

**DO** remember to spread the news about your successes and positive achievements to let supporters know that they (and you) are making a difference.

**DON’T** fall into the trap of only emphasizing the problems and challenges you face, without positive reinforcement.

**DO** give donors a yardstick by which they can discern change and progress on your issue, particularly if it is complex.

**DON’T** assume that donors know what constitutes significant and realistic improvement—whether it’s the freeing of a political prisoner, the building of one house or a hundred, or the passage of hard-fought legislation.



**Both younger and older generations are optimistic about the future.**

**DO** coordinate all your communications tools to convey a clear and consistent message to appropriate audiences.

**DON'T** expect supporters to wade through a mass of information and identify the key messages you wish to get across.

**DO** invest in on-line communications, including the development of a compelling, informative, user-friendly Web site, vehicles for collecting donors' e-mail addresses, and Internet fundraising mechanisms.

**DON'T** get behind the curve on this fast-growing technology.

**DO** think about and design your communications from the point of view of donors' busy lives. Be disciplined in selecting what's most important to convey.

**DON'T** expect supporters to attend to a plethora of messages and recognize the handful of ideas that are most significant.

The survey was a follow-up to a similar poll taken in 1990. The latest survey shows that both the younger and older generations are more optimistic about the future than they were at the start of the decade. Fifty-one percent of all respondents indicated they were optimistic things will change for the better, while 33 percent were less hopeful. In 1990, only 34 percent were optimistic, while 54 percent were pessimistic. ■

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations (608-274-9777).

*The survey on which this article is based was conducted by Peter D. Hart Research and Associates for the fundraising firm of Craver, Mathews, Smith and Company (CMS). The survey sampled the opinions of 708 donors to compare attitudes and giving practices of baby boomers versus mature respondents. For more information, call Lori Greenbaum at 312-337-7400.*

**Selected References**

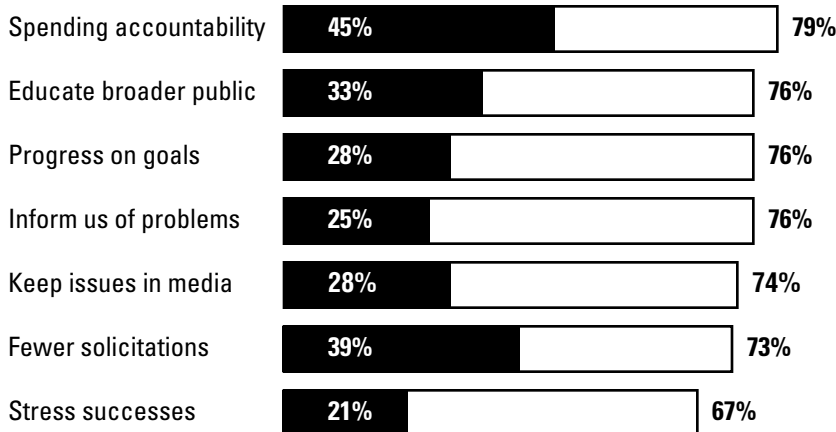
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**Best Ways To Maintain Donor Support**



■ Absolutely essential  
□ Very important/not essential

Craver, Mathews, Smith & Company Donor Study/Hart Research Associates