
Baby Boomers and Beyond: Trends for Senior Housing Home Buyers

By S. Robert August

Special Segment of Home Buying Populace:

Baby Boomers comprise a very special segment of the home buying marketplace. They have experienced a different United States than any other generation. They are products of their parents' generation – a generation that grew up during our country's worst depression. Their parents made survival sacrifices. They struggled with their parents, barely able to enjoy food, clothing and shelter. They all learned to appreciate what they had while never taking anything for granted.

As the Baby Boomers' parents raised their children, the national economy continued to improve. These parents gave the best to their children. They wanted to give their children opportunities they did not have. They provided them with college educations, wonderful food, clothing, shelter, and transportation and spending money. The Baby Boomer generation is also the first to be exposed to television from birth. This communication medium helped to shape the Baby Boomers' thoughts, philosophies and buying decisions. Although the radio had helped shape several prior generations thoughts and philosophies, the Baby Boomer could now hear and see marketing messages to learn about new consumer products and services that could help them enjoy a better life.

Educated to Buy New:

Baby Boomers have been educated to buy new. Homes are built better today than yesterday and they will be built better tomorrow. Housing products are better, municipality inspectors are more demanding for builders to do a better job, and builders realize the importance of delivering an outstanding product to a more demanding buying public of Baby Boomers who are seasoned purchasers who expect value and quality.

As the Baby Boomer entered the work force and accumulated wealth, this generation purchased better, more durable, and bigger products than previous generations. Sacrifices were often not

made. Experiencing shorter economic downturns and longer economic booms, Baby Boomers have learned how to take advantage of good times to prepare for difficult ones without affecting their lifestyle wants and needs.

Population Trends:

Baby Boomers and other seniors have many new housing alternatives. For the last seven decades, there has been a major population shift to the warmer states of California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida. Other states have also benefited from this migration. These areas will continue to grow.

Over the next few years, more growth will occur in the aforementioned states with more growth in New Mexico, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. Expect the biggest population percentage gains in Alabama and Mississippi where the most affordable homes will be built and the cost of living will also be the most affordable.

California, Texas, Arizona and Florida will continue to post outstanding gains in all housing price points and products.

Baby Boomers will also maintain primary residences in their home states. These residences will be smaller, low-maintenance homes while Baby Boomers may also have two or more residences in recreational areas for seasonal homes.

Residential real estate investments will continue to be excellent return on investments. Interest rates are expected to remain low by comparison to past economic cycles, affording Baby Boomers the enjoyment of more desirable lifestyle opportunities while using mortgages and growing their cash position.

Over the last 30 years, an evolutionary revolution has occurred within the senior's housing market. More and more we hear about the trends to focus on senior home buyers. Interestingly, marketing professionals have researched what home buyers want in their next home for decades. After all, if home buyers don't like the builder's home, they will let the builder keep it.

Anticipated Purchase Patterns:

Home building and real estate professionals continue to comprise a list of notable patterns regarding products and services that home buyers want to remodel in their existing homes or acquire in their new homes.

The biggest competitor for this demographic profile is the home buyer's choice to remain in his/her existing home or select another housing alternative.

It is important for real estate professionals such as land planners, architects, landscape architects, manufacturers, home builders and REALTORS to share information with researchers and economic forecasters to determine how to improve today's and tomorrow's new housing product.

By studying consumer buying habits of products, services and lifestyle opportunities in the form of apartment and for-sale homes, researchers are better able to help the industry professionals understand the wants and needs of the next tenants or purchasers with their respective housing needs.

The National Association of Home Builders' University of Housing has a specific designation program offered by its Institute of Residential Housing entitled Understanding Housing Markets and Consumers (IRM I). This two-day course helps attendees learn how to research their markets, prepare products for market, and make product adaptations or changes due to shifts in the market. This course is a must for every real estate marketing and architectural professional to learn how to understand real estate markets and how to improve one's product through sell-out and close-out. For information about this 'must course', please call the NAHB's University of Housing at 1-800-368-5242 or proceed online to http://www.nahb.org/meeting_details.aspx?meetingID=1775.

Design Considerations:

Consumers will continue requiring housing products that afford flexibility, less physical effort and functionality. Architects will use their talents with these research trends to design desirable housing products, ensuring a competitive edge for builders competing with older and obsolete lifestyle environments.

After home builders determine how to integrate these architectural design concepts, it is important for the builder to relate these concepts to the specific design of the homes for their markets. Every regional market may have its own specific design requirements, yet it is important for every builder to pay close attention to the individual requirements of each home buyer. The more that a home builder can personalize each home for each home buyer, the more quickly home buyers will make decisions to move into a new senior's housing market product environment.

Please note the specific items that are being requested by senior home buyers throughout the United States as they determine to remodel their home or plan to move to their next home as introduced through studies by the American Association of Retired Persons, John Burns Real Estate Consulting, Inc., the National Association of REALTORS...the National Association of Home Builders:

- single level floor plan/one-story ranch/flat designs
- at least one bedroom and bathroom on the first floor
- washer and dryer on the same floor as bedroom
- “zero step” entrances – ramps
- package shelf by front door
- handrails on both sides of all ramps, steps, and porches
- light switches at the top and bottom of each staircase
- “freewheeling” or “clutch” handle on doors that lock
- one landing for every 10 steps in a staircase, but at least 3 steps between each landing
- a landing every time a staircase changes direction
- swing clear door hinges

- sidewalk curb cut outs
- path or sidewalk to house with textured surface
- high density, low-pile carpeting
- threshold flush with the floor
- 32-inch to 42-inch wide openings (hallways and doorways)
- lower doorbells and front door viewers
- light switches and climate controls no higher than 48 inches above the floor
- electric outlets no lower than 27 inches above the floor
- rocker light switches
- higher wattage light fixtures
- built-in night lighting, motion detected outdoor lighting
- outdoor lighting (path lighting)
- easy-open crank windows, no more than 30 inches off the ground
- lever door handles
- adjustable height closet rods and brackets
- visual smoke detectors
- front loading washer/dryer
- under counter knee space
- lever handle faucets with pull-out spray
- variable height countertops
- pull-out cabinet shelves with cut-out bowl holders
- adjustable height cabinets and closet shelves
- low-level storage
- fold-out steps to reach cabinets
- dishwashers and ovens at raised heights (to avoid back strain)
- rolling islands or carts under counters (Lazy Susan)
- revolving corner shelves and pull-out shelves
- pull-out cutting board
- adjustable height sink
- refrigerators with adjustable shelves (side by side) and water/ice dispenser
- ovens with heat indicators, automatic shutoff, and controls on front

- larger cabinet and drawer pull (C or D shaped)
- easy glide hardware for drawers
- larger bathrooms with maneuvering space
- fold down stools in shower
- variable height counter tops
- higher toilets
- towel rods that double as safety bars
- grab bars in shower
- inset shampoo nooks
- curbless showers (roll-in showers)
- walk-in showers
- easy-lever fixtures
- anti-scald devices
- non-skid flooring
- sink and bathroom spray attachments with extra long hoses
- keyless entry/locking system
- garage door opener with “Rolling Code Technology”
- emergency response system
- intercom doorbell/video system for front door
- security system

Other noteworthy development trends, highlighted by RealtyTimes columnist Michele Dawson and the author of this article, are being enhanced in residential communities throughout the United States. These include:

- maintenance-free lifestyle
- on-site storage
- access to off-site storage
- desire to live by loved ones
- lower living costs through better design and product implementation
- personal security

- closer to amenities and local activities (shopping, churches, hospitals, doctor)
- attached garage for security, safety, and seasonal comfort
- controlled community entrance
- high speed internet access
- grandchildren friendly
- luxury design
- high tech appliances
- natural stone countertops
- custom cabinetry
- whirlpool baths
- walking and jogging trails for active adult communities
- country club or resort-like amenities

Educate, Train and Motivate Sales Personnel:

Making a housing change is difficult at any age; yet, it is more difficult the older one becomes due to family, friendship and career ties to the local market.

Sales personnel and any home builder representative need to be educated, trained and motivated about senior home buyers. These buyers need more patience, eye contact, sincerity, thorough explanation, kindness...consideration than other home buyers. Remember, they do not have to move. They are trying to make excellent decisions for their future and need counselors to mentor and guide them.

Sales personnel should plan separate appointments for return visitors not to exceed 45 minutes. Have an agenda for each meeting. Always explain your agenda points. Make sure you have time for questions and answers. Ask closing questions. Secure the closing of the sale as soon as possible. Reinforce the outstanding decision to buy a new home. Set the agenda and expectation for each pre-scheduled meeting through the actual acquisition.

Always thank prospective home buyers for their interest, consideration and business.

Earn and ask for referrals early and often!

Study and Implement a Proactive Plan of Action:

As home builders continue to prepare for seniors' future housing needs, it is important for them to note that these home buyers have more discretionary income than any other generation in the history of the United States. They have the option to seek the best lifestyle opportunity and will only make a decision to move from their current home when their needs are not being fulfilled there. Therefore, you must be a better student of the housing marketplace to study housing products, financing, and lifestyle environments for your buyer's next home.

Read. Study. Tour product locally, nationally and internationally. Evaluate. Ask questions. Listen. Learn. And, make the best decision for your next senior lifestyle housing product!

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