

Boomers' Digital Affinities Rooted In 'Practical Web'

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Young generations more likely than baby boomers to log on to internet daily

Increasing numbers of baby boomers own smartphones and have accounts on social networks.

But headlines that herald such developments can create a misleading impression about the underlying story, according to eMarketer's new report, "Baby Boomers and the Digital Life: From Pioneers to Laggards." "Amid gains, boomers (especially older ones) still tend to be less digitally engaged than younger people."

While a majority of boomers go online on a typical day, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, it's not the landslide one finds among younger adults. "Marketers can safely assume they'll find most 20-somethings online on a typical day. They shouldn't have the same assurance about boomers," said eMarketer.

The mobile internet is another area where boomers trail younger age groups. eMarketer estimates that 42.6% of boomers who have mobile phones are mobile internet users. Among Generation X (now ages 32 to 47), six in 10 are in that category. More boomers will buy smartphones and above-average growth in mobile internet penetration among boomers will narrow but not close the gap during the next several years, according to eMarketer projections.

"Though boomers tend to be less digitally engaged than younger adults in many areas, it would be a mistake to assume their usage is low across the board," said eMarketer. "Boomers are not averse to engaging in digital activities whose practical benefit is clear to them."

Email is a prime example. Boomers are about as likely as younger internet users to use email. And in this instance, boomers don't fall behind younger cohorts in frequency of usage. In February 2012 Pew polling, six in 10 boomers reported using email "yesterday," essentially matching the 30-to-49 and 18-to-29 age groups.

Marketers who approach boomers online shouldn't mislead themselves with the illusion that boomers are as immersed in the digital life as younger people are. Boomers are the desktop, Web 1.0 generation. They don't shun digital technology, but neither should marketers expect to find them adopting every new twist in it.

The full report, "Baby Boomers and the Digital Life: From Pioneers to Laggards," also answers these key questions:

- Looking beyond simple penetration numbers, how engaged are boomers in living digitally?
- How willing are boomers to interact with brands via channels like ecommerce and social networks?
- How do younger and older boomers differ in digital behavior?

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