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THE BOOMERS

Mature consumers have both time and money to spend. If they are retired or semi-retired, they have more free time and the highest per person discretionary income, after all the kids have moved out (hopefully) and the mortgage has been paid off. With this in mind, merchants and restaurateurs should be motivated to understand their needs and attitudes, and developers need to consider the total shopping or dining experience. What Boomers are looking for may be quite different than their younger counterparts.

For most people, the shopping or dining experience starts with finding a place to park their car. It is a nice sunny day and all is well with the world. You are driving to go shopping and you enter a parking structure. Aside from the temporary blindness you experience going from bright sun to darkness, you feel you have entered an alien world. Low floor-to-floor height, no daylight and low electric lighting make you feel like you should turn around and get back to a friendlier world.

Now imagine you are vision impaired or elderly and you feel like you have entered a black hole and will never escape. Typically, developers consider parking structures as low-priority spaces; they're necessary but are certainly not places to spend much money. Energy codes make the situation even worse by restricting the power density, resulting in very low light

levels. Since these spaces are utilitarian and people will only be there for a short time, why waste energy?

You would think that those who design retail spaces would understand that the shopping experience begins in the parking garage. So, what about more daylight in garages? How about higher lighting levels so everyone can see? These are not outrageous requests. Older

drivers adjust from bright light to lower light in drive lanes. Control all the electric lighting with daylight sensors and occupancy sensors that reduce the lighting levels when no occupant is detected and then come to full brightness when someone enters the space. Developers and retailers creating such a parking experience would reap the benefits of increased sales as word spreads

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people shop and spend money, but if they cannot see or do not feel safe in a garage, they will seek out other retail shops that have surface lots or on-street parking.

As a matter of fact, older people prefer single-level surface parking to elevated structures. The reasons are clear: better lighting makes it easier to see and gives a feeling that the space is safer. If structured parking is a necessity, retailers, cities and office buildings could all benefit from brighter and airier parking facilities. Put windows in the structures, pipe daylight into the deep dark recesses with tubular skylights and add transitions zones that help

that the garage is a friendly place for young and old alike.

MALL MOMENTS

Boomers use shopping malls, not just as a place to buy merchandise but as a place for exercise, entertainment and social interaction. They love to walk where they feel secure, where the walking surface is smooth, where the space is well lit and air conditioned, and where benches and restrooms are available. Lighting designers for malls need to be aware of this dual use of the space they are designing.

As for the shopping experience, itself, a local comparison of light

EYE ON THE BOOMERS

levels in retail and commercial spaces found that those who market cell phones, clothing and books believe that more light is better, exceeding minimum guidelines for lighting even for older people. Interestingly, in our survey, a bank had the lowest lighting levels of all, where task light was equal to or lower than the ambient lighting of the other retail spaces mentioned above. Yet, according to the manager, the bank served a broad range of age groups. I wonder how many people have complained about a mere 16 footcandles on the check-writing counter.

The higher the clothing price, the greater the lighting contrast. If you want the high-priced merchandise to stand out, hit it with 280 fc compared to the 38 fc of the aisle way, an 8:1 ratio. This may be a good strategy for younger and middle-aged women, but the contrast when lighting the high-end clothing lines often favored by older women should be kept within acceptable ranges of 3:1. Ambient light in aisles seems to be rather consistent at 30 fc for stores that serve a wide age range, but stores catering to younger people had light levels half that amount. Could this be their way to screen out older customers before they enter the store?

Daylight is another technique in retail and has been tied directly to sales. The Hescong Mahone Group looked into the impact of daylight in stores of a chain retailer (www.h-m-g.com/downloads/Daylighting/retailc.pdf). HMG found that sales were higher in stores with skylights than in identical stores in

the same geographic area without skylights. They estimated that non-daylighted stores could increase their sales by 40 percent with the addition of skylights. The stores with skylights generally provided more than two to three times the target light levels. Could it be that these higher light levels allowed everyone, including the Boomers, to see the merchandise, read the product information and generally feel more positive about their shopping experience? The use of daylight also saves energy, which coupled with the increase in sales, adds greatly to profitability.

MORE ON THEIR PLATE

Restaurants are no doubt the most challenging retail environments for older adults. Many times the desired intimate dining atmosphere conflicts with the visual tasks of reading the menu, seeing the food, and reading the check and credit card slip at the end of the meal. There is plenty of evidence that people are having difficulties with reading in restaurants. Menus have even caught fire when placed too close to the candle flame. Restaurants offer "readers" magnifying glasses to their patrons, and some patrons carry their own personal flashlights. There is a new product on the market called "restaurant readers." These incorporate the magnifying lenses with LEDs built into the frames. Rather than offering a personal solution which may make the customer feel conspicuous, restaurateurs who are feeling the decline of young and middle-aged customers would do

well to provide an environment that is more supportive to older people in order to take advantage of the increase in dining out by Boomers.

Retail and restaurant trade associations should educate their members about a new do-it-yourself economic stimulus plan consisting of understanding the needs of older consumers and providing the lighting and visual environment to meet their needs.



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