

Powering Through

What constitutes success may differ, but these boomers are all about success. Their goals are clearly defined, and they're determined to achieve them and then set new ones to pursue.

Boomers who power through have organized their lives around a powerful mantra: “Work! Strive! Achieve! And You Will Be Successful!” They have typically started life with a reasonable set of advantages (stable, supportive families; good educations; good health) and have gone on to build productive lives in which they have accomplished much. What “success” means varies from one boomer to another—physical fitness, financial returns, or raising “great kids”—but regardless of personal definitions, being successful is important to all of them, and they take satisfaction in their successes. Even when they encounter setbacks, as many of them have, they have been able to persevere and continue to pursue their chosen paths.

The basic conflict:

Today's goals vs. future values

These boomers measure success in competitive and quantitative terms—the amount of money they earn or their ability to outperform their peers athletically, for example. They remain active, even hyperactive: they are fully involved in their work; they are devoted to remaining healthy and physically fit; and they are actively involved in their families and their communities. They work hard at being good parents, good neighbors and good citizens and derive considerable satisfaction from fulfilling these roles. They have designed their lives around their ideals of success and remain focused on pursuit and achievement of their goals. But because they are so goal-oriented, they have difficulty seeing beyond their current stages of life and their current levels of activity to envision later life that might be organized around different values. If unexpected problems were to deprive them of their current identities, they might have difficulty finding alternative sources of meaning and satisfaction.

Lifestage:

Forever young

America has often been characterized as a “youth-oriented society,” and even as they age, these boomers have remained steadfastly focused on the optimism and ambitiousness of youth. They acknowledge the importance of saving money in preparation for retirement but continue to indulge in the pleasures of living the “good life.” Many of them are still raising children and pride themselves on being good parents, but they have as much or more ambition for the success of their kids as they have had for themselves. When their kids are gone and on their own, they see opportunities for liberation from responsibility, a chance to recapture some of the freedom and fun of their younger lives.

Expectations:

Keep on keeping on

These boomers enjoy their lives and hope to continue their current lifestyles as long as possible. They are more than willing to keep working hard and playing hard, and expect to be rewarded for doing so. They may be active volunteers in their communities, but only as long as they see the value in it for them. They also recognize the importance of strong social support: even those who have been divorced have found new partners whom they may or may not marry.

They see getting older as a problem, but one that they can manage and control. Working out, staying active, and eating well are important strategies for remaining healthy and physically fit. They believe in self-improvement and in the power of science and medicine to stave off the negative aspects of aging for many years, if not forever. They value independence and control above almost all other values and trust in their ability to make the right decisions for themselves. They don't feel tied down by their commitments to vocations or families; instead, they derive happiness and satisfaction from them.



Action Ecology:

Powering Through

The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around our seven dimensions of decision making, describe practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

DECISIONS IN SUSPENSION:

- When to start thinking seriously about retirement?
- When to “step up” to a new house?
- How to embrace children’s independence?
- Whether to seek new partners?

Global Transparency

No place like home

FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL

- Loving their current region
- Volunteering locally to preserve recreational areas

Extended Capacity

Maximizing life span

ADAPTING THE SELF

- Anti-aging medicine
- Competing athletically against younger people
- Rejuvenation
- Strategies for cognitive fitness

CHANGING THE SURROUNDINGS

- “Flipping” houses to generate wealth

Resequencing Life Stages

Everything within grasp

ENACTING THE NARRATIVE

- Re-balancing work and play
- Renewed commitment to work
- Ensuring kids’ success
- Investing in status symbols

INFORMATION

Internet searches
Do-it-yourself planning tools
Online communities
Personal experience



PEOPLE

Later-life partners
Children
Athletic companions

Resources



CAPITALS

Physical fitness
Financial wealth
Cognitive agility
Status symbols



INSTITUTIONS

Stable employers
Fitness clubs
Insurers
Financial advisors

Self-Help 2.0

Independent, active, and successful

EVOLVING THE SMART CONSUMER

- Internet research
- Creating personal journals
- Finding tools for health
- Joining public speaking groups
- Promoting a 12-step program

Wealth Generation

Ensuring financial security

MITIGATING RISK

- Building nest eggs
- Having plenty of insurance
- Investing in health and well being

Re-Institutioning

Embracing change

REPURPOSING THE OLD

- Fixing up houses, their own or ones purchased to be flipped
- Joining support groups
- Taking a sabbatical instead of changing jobs

INVESTING IN THE NEW

- Non-traditional learning opportunities?

New Sociability

Cultivating reciprocity

BUILDING THE INSTRUMENTAL NETWORK

- Finding exercise buddies
- Friends as family surrogates
- Long-term relationships without marriage

The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.

Extended Capacity



Boomers who fit the “powering through” action type are committed to doing what it takes to maintain their current lifestyles, which provide them with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Since the worlds they inhabit work well for them, they see no need to change their surroundings unless their surroundings suddenly fail to satisfactorily reflect success.

Resequencing Life Stages



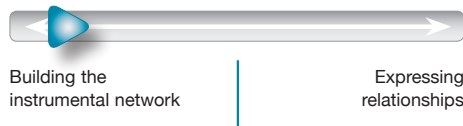
These boomers have been content with many narratives of life stages over the course of their lives. If anything, they take these narratives to extremes, and latch on to new narratives that will help them define and communicate their own success. They are engaged with the cultural narratives of their surroundings but always adapt the narrative to suit their quests for satisfaction.

Self-Help 2.0



Money, and the things that money can buy, are important to these boomers. The material objects they have acquired provide pride and pleasure. They have been successful in the marketplace, and see themselves as able to navigate through it intelligently. They equip themselves with information that will help them select the products and services that best complement or enhance their lifestyles.

New Sociability



Recognizing that friends, family, and colleagues are important factors in success, this group of boomers asks the question, “What will I get out of this?” when considering relationships and commitments. These boomers are hardly selfish, but they do enjoy being centers of attention. Most importantly, they are willing to give to others but expect something in return.

Re-Institutioning



Having found what works for them, these boomers don't see much point in investing in new alternatives. They will do what they have to do to achieve success, but are not interested in moving very far beyond their established comfort zones. They will continue to rely on the institutions that have helped them get where they are and what they have today.

Wealth Generation



More realistic than idealistic, these boomers demonstrate a strong aversion to taking risks. They are firm believers in hard assets and quantifiable accomplishments, not in intangible hopes or faith. They trust their own judgment and their ability to maintain control over their lives, even when they are challenged by difficult circumstances.

Global Transparency



Although some of them harbor wistful dreams of international travel, these boomers are highly engaged with their regions and their nation. They are proud of where they live and engage with international affairs only to the extent that it will tangibly impact their plans and surroundings. Their relationships with particular houses or neighborhoods are fluid, but they tend to stay in or near a single locale they find comfortable and navigable.

Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Powering Through action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

Steve Baker

Age: 46
Urban Northwest

Steve Baker will be happy as long as he can out-compete someone ten years younger than himself—and as long as he can impart his success-oriented discipline to his two teenage children. After relinquishing his anger from a messy divorce, he is now in the “great dad years,” progressively improving his children’s surroundings and his own in order to give them the best start possible. He is a meticulous financial planner who thinks of his house as an investment that has potential resale profit he could use to purchase a bigger house in the future. Steve may listen to the advice of others but really learns lessons from personal experience. He is dedicated to being as healthy as possible and has cut red meat from his diet in an attempt to lower his cholesterol. He resists falling into a rut of a single boring routine, maintaining a series of seasonal routines for himself that allow flexibility and structure to coexist. Steve runs the online outlet of an athletic supply company; sabbaticals to improve his professional and physical fitness punctuate his horizon to retirement. He hopes one day to have a cabin in the mountains and a place at the beach, but knows that it will require careful financial planning to get there.

On staying competitive:

“I thought I could measure health or performance against my son, but he’s growing pretty fast. But I can still kick his ass, and I can still run faster than he can—but I fear that won’t last. I figure a good ten years, if I can match somebody ten years younger than me, competitively, then that’s a good benchmark for me. And that might change as I get older ... so I may have to adjust that to a certain extent.”

On the futility of regret:

“I’ve often looked back and thought, ‘You know, if I never had kids, if I never got divorced, or if I never got married, and the career that I have—man, I could’ve really done a lot of things.’ But I’ve never really thought to second-guess myself like that. I mean what good is it? What value do you get out of it?”

On the next ten years:

“When I look out to 2017, it’ll be all about me ... My objective would be to get to the position where I could make a choice to do something if I wanted to and still have the flexibility to say, ‘No, I don’t want to do that,’ and do something else. You need a financial foundation to be able to do that. And the health piece, too ... being able to be healthy enough to be able to go back to work to kind of support that change.”

Frieda Alvarez

Age: 52
Suburban Rocky Mountains

Frieda Alvarez lives in a suburban community with her boyfriend, whom she met two years ago. She describes herself as a “Mexican-Irish-American” who makes decisions quickly and without lament. She was divorced 15 years ago and raised her two daughters, now in their 20s, as a single mother. If she and her current boyfriend were to get married, they’d do so mainly for practical reasons, both financial and legal: life insurance, social security, and end-of-life decisions. Ten years ago, Frieda was in a bad car accident and suffered brain damage that took her many years of intensive therapy and an extraordinary amount of determination to overcome. Frieda now has a private practice as a speech therapist, is an active member of a 12-step group, and is dedicated to using her experience of recovery to empower other women. She works hard to stay fit, mentally agile, and beautiful. In addition to jogging and lifting weights regularly, Frieda is inspired by outdoor sports activities popular in her region. She’d also like to run a marathon. In 20 years, she will be a “senior citizen” with striking white hair, but for now, she will keep herself looking and feeling young even if that means plastic surgery. While she once saw herself retiring at 65, she believes that, deep down, she always knew she’d stay busy and has postponed the possible retirement age to 70. She thinks about applying her experience and knowledge to a writing career.



Source: flickr.com/alitdarbac



Source: flickr.com/purplegecko

William Stapleton

Age: 56
Urban Midwest

On living to 100:

“I picked up jogging as a pastime just before I turned 40, and that was when I decided I was going to live until I was at least 100, and that I had 60 more years to go, and that I’d better stay in shape.”

On newfound freedom:

“I was aware that when my kids got out of high school and kind of moved along in their lives, I’d find a partner again, and I have. And so it feels like it’s time for he and I ... to do things that you do without kids. And I’m on it. I’m free again. I’m active. I love my job still, continue to build my business. I feel money flows easier. Kids need less of it, so I get to have more of it!”

On adjusting to an aging body:

“I think some my biggest fears are poor health, poor cognitive function, loss of freedom, loss of choice. Twenty years from now, you might have this same conversation, and you’ll ask me, ‘How were the last 20 years?’ And I’ll say, ‘Well, I continued to run until my knees gave out, and now I swim.’ And I think it’s that attitude, and however one develops values.”

On overcoming injury:

“My neurologist told me that when people wrote about their experience they seemed to recover more. So, I began this 400-page catharsis, and it turned into a book, which I haven’t published. I think he was right, actually. I recovered my spelling ability. I had trouble writing, I had trouble typing. So, day after day after day of tapping out a story for two years, I would say it tremendously affected and improved my brain functions and other things.”

William Stapleton and his wife Cheri live in the suburban house where they raised their children but are considering a move to the city. The kids are now adults but their son, 22, still lives with them. William has worked his whole life in the energy business. After many years of working independently, bad deals and natural disasters quashed his businesses, and he now works for another company. His current employer expects him to be on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Cheri is an educator and just got her Ph.D. They are very health conscious and are both taking anti-aging hormones to “keep themselves young” and stay active physically, sexually, and professionally without feeling rundown. They don’t anticipate any changes in their health in the short term but are insured against anything that may happen, just in case. William has no intention of retiring and intends to stay healthy and busy to the end of his life.

On giving back to the community:

“We did a lot of that—we paid our dues in the earlier years. And I can remember at one time, I was on the board of seven or nine different volunteer organizations. And I just decided this was ridiculous. I had a family at home, and I needed to be home with them instead of doing all that other stuff.”

On enjoying life:

“This phase of life? Run around naked ... Money and booze ... We’ve got a nice place to live, and we can do anything we damn well want. So it’s really fun. I mean we have a fun life.”

On drugs and health:

“We are going to very highly educated, knowledgeable physicians that are basically our generation. The way it was described: your lifespan is going to be from here to X. Wouldn’t you rather feel good to X than to degenerate and just be dragging all the way down to the bottom? Instead of that—having a flat—your lifespan is basically flat and feeling good at the same level as 40, and you get up to X and you’re dead. That’s fine with us. We don’t want to live forever.”

On weathering the storm:

“I chose [that] business, and unfortunately it didn’t work. So you tend to learn far more by your mistakes than you do from your brilliance. And so we learned. We weathered the storm. Fortunately my parents were very kind to help us weather through that very difficult time. And they’re the best.”



Source: IFTF

Decisions in Context

At a glance

Although they have wrestled with major decisions, boomers who are powering through do so through a lens of practicality: these boomers see no value in second-guessing themselves. They take courses that preserve their momentum: upward and forward into the future.

Work:

Retirement doesn't mean "not working"

These boomers derive considerable satisfaction from their careers. They are engaged in their careers and have difficulty envisioning themselves retired a decade or even two in the future. While they may have dabbled in ventures outside of their career path, the fundamental trajectory of their work life has been steady. They do their work well and enjoy it, and though they may think about second careers, they will not stop doing work that makes them happy. They enjoy recognition and cultivate a sense of steadily building their skills and reputation. They need to stay busy and feel useful, and the specter of boredom will drive them to keep working as far as they can see into the future.

Housing:

Financial asset

Houses are both status symbols and financial assets for this group of boomers. Their homes are showplaces that reflect their financial successes, whether modest or opulent. They have a flexible relationship with housing, even when the houses hold intangible memories of their now-adult children, and see no problem in flipping houses to accumulate wealth. They are attracted by the idea of multiple homes, each communicating a different aspect of themselves: active lover of the outdoors, hip urbanite, grandparent, etc. These boomers are not worried about overextending themselves. Even in times of sluggish and unstable real estate markets, they have confidence that they will be able to accumulate indefinitely if they play their cards intelligently.

Food:

An instrument of longevity

Boomers who power through use food as an instrument to help them live longer and stay healthy. Food is fundamentally tied to their lifestyle of fitness and quest for feeling young: they discuss it in the same breath as their exercise regimes and interests. This regime of longevity is a strong motivator for them to stick to dietary restrictions, solve health problems through food choices, and follow doctors' orders. At the same time, they love the vitality and status of the consumption of good, simple foods. They have to hold in tension their love of quantity with their athletic body image and fitness goals.

Finances:

Insurance and endless accumulation

Whether their platform for accumulation is real estate, a strong business, or a stable employer, these boomers are focused on the stable accumulation of wealth. They enjoy the good life, though, and enjoy showing off their accomplishments through material acquisitions. They have experienced major setbacks—sinks of time and money—but these experiences have only strengthened their perceptions that this is their time to make money and spend it on themselves. They recognize the need for insurance against disaster, major health incidents, and accidents, but don't anticipate these things affecting them in the near term. These boomers are not willing to sacrifice their lifestyles for security and see their investments in their own fitness and financial success as the best insurance of all.

Health:

Measuring performance, defying age

Performance is a key aspect of these boomers' understandings of their health and bodies. They are constantly measuring and comparing themselves to others through practice, competition, and medical testing. They are tenacious about fighting against slipping metrics associated with aging. They aim to defy age and retain mental agility, attain slim and hard bodies, lower their cholesterol, and build stamina. They often gauge their performance against the performance of younger peers. They will not be satisfied receiving care that overlooks their fundamental identities as healthy, vital people. They will follow medical advice when it suits them, even bringing a "good student" mindset to the table when they see a course of action is to their advantage. But when it comes to care, they want to be treated the way they envision their ideal selves: forever young.