

**Baby boomers and millennials are our largest demographics but they demand very different dental experiences. Here's how to customise your offering to suit both groups.**

Australian dental patients pay almost 60 per cent of the cost of dental care out of pocket, far more than the amount contributed by health-insurance funds and government rebates. Thanks to their dominance in population terms, baby boomers and millennials fork out much of these costs, and this pattern is set to grow even stronger as wealthy boomers age and millennials mature into their prime income-generating years. So what can practices do to ensure they satisfy these dominant yet often conflicting generations and earn their piece of the fee-paying pie?

**Boomers versus millennials**

Favourable social and economic conditions after the end of World War II gave rise to a baby boom that saw the global birth rate grow until the early 1960s. Fast forward three decades to the years spanning 1980–1994, and the baby boomers began to have families of their own, heralding the arrival of the millennials.

Now aged 52–70 and 22–36 respectively, in population terms the boomers and millennials (otherwise known as generation Y), are our largest demographic groups. According to Mark McCrindle, head of social research firm McCrindle, 5.17 million baby boomers and 5.22 million millennials dominate Australia's population of 24 million.

As well as being large, both groups are wealthy—albeit in very different ways. Baby boomers own more than half of Australia's wealth but are earning less as they approach retirement, while millennials have fewer assets but great earning potential. Plus, millennials stand to inherit the boomers' wealth in what McCrindle says will be the biggest intergenerational wealth transfer in Australian history.

"The 25–34 age group have net wealth of \$268,000, while the 55–64 age group have net wealth of \$1.2 million dollars," McCrindle says. "That said, the boomers are starting to ease out of full-time roles and they're starting to drive those dollars into the post-working years, while the gen Ys are in the key wealth-accumulating years."

**In the dental chair**

Much has been written about the differences in the ways boomers and millennials make purchasing decisions, and it's no different at the dentist's. For boomers, a visit to the dentist is about functionality and seeking out professional expertise, whereas for millennials the focus is on aesthetics and image.

"In the lifetime of the baby boomers, there's been a massive shift in how we view dentists," says McCrindle. "They were raised in an era where the dentist was a medical professional, you went to a dental surgery, it was Dr so-and-so and there was that professional hierarchy."

"Now it's a retail space, one of innovation, and there's been a shift in terms of priority from health to aesthetics, and now dentistry is not just in the medical category but also in the cosmetic category. What millennials expect is easy-to-access customer service, retail environments and effectively branded dental practices."



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Millennials are a polarising bunch, often derided for being entitled, lazy and disloyal, but Evan Mitchell, co-founder of millennial brand strategy specialist HOW&Y, believes the emergence of generation Y is notable because it is the first generation to prioritise image (how the world sees me) over identity (how I see myself).

“In the past people based their expectations on how they would mature on their parents because there were so few other media or different examples of models given to them,” he says. “That is not the case for gen Y. What’s replaced this vertical modelling is horizontal modelling, which is based on their peer social group, and diagonal modelling, which is modelling on aspirational figures which are largely celebrities and social media influencers.

“Previous generations like the boomers have a more cautionary, less aspirational and more pragmatic view of the world, and subsequently they see dental health as an end in itself,” he says. “The way to energise millennials about the importance of dental health isn’t a message that resonates with previous generations that dental health is a reward in its own right, because that’s not striking the buttons that are most important for gen Y, which are those of image and aspiration.”



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## Commodity shift

At a practical level, Tony O'Brien, production manager at communications agency Integrated Dental Marketing, says boomers prefer to build a relationship with their dentist while millennials view dental health as a commodity and are more likely to be interested in cosmetic treatments like teeth whitening.

“The older age groups, including the boomers, see dentistry as a service not as a product and they’ll stick with the same provider unless they have a bad experience,” he says. “With the boomers, if you go back to when they were younger everything was needs-based, so the whole industry was bridges and crowns and a lot of repair work. The general dental health now is so high that there’s not this need for constant repair anymore, and that takes out the loyalty that people feel towards their provider and they really do see it as commodity-based.”

Mitchell says millennial-friendly strategies that position dental care as important for physical appearance should be subtle and can even work in reverse by playing on fears. “One thing dentistry has going for it is it can be positioned to have an impact on physical appearance,” he says. “That would be a message more likely to resonate with this generation but not in so transparent a way as saying, ‘You’ll look better’. It’s that aspiration of appearance—enhancing social life, love life and career prospects.

“This is the most anxiety-ridden generation in history and part of that is because of the fixation with the importance of image and identity. At any point at which image and identity do not entirely coalesce, that causes a great deal of cognitive dissonance, which in turn causes a great deal of anxiety.”

## Likes and dislikes

Boomers like more formal interactions with their dentist while millennials feel more comfortable in an informal environment. “For the boomers, it’s about highlighting that professional expertise,” says McCrindle. “They still respond to the credentialed certificate on the wall.

“For millennials, it might be addressing their dentist on a first-name basis. They don’t at all mind if the dentist is casual and is the one to poke their head into

the waiting area and say, 'Are you ready now?' They don't need that same formality or hierarchy."

Millennials have far less tolerance for unsatisfactory service when it comes to everything from chairside manner to practices that aren't open on weekends and tardy dentists. "The boomers are prepared to sit and wait, whereas the millennials are very time poor and impatient in terms of their expectations so don't have as much tolerance for long waits," says McCrindle.

Thankfully, there is one criteria that both generations consider the gold standard of choosing a dentist: word-of-mouth recommendations. "The key point

about marketing to both is supporting your word-of-mouth," says O'Brien. "People say in the boomers' day everything was word-of-mouth, but a millennial will ask who your dentist is then go online and research that dentist. They don't just take that one referral—they follow it up."

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