

Today's boomers were yesterday's innovators

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They don't get it.

Like it or not, those four words typically epitomize the feelings of younger generations when it comes to baby boomers and technology.

You'll usually hear it from the exasperated, eye-rolling teen who relentlessly posts Twitter updates in the presence of grandparents. Or perhaps the 20- or 30-something who has to help their father set up their cell phone or iPad.

But what perhaps the younger set doesn't realize is that baby boomers are a generation once known for being free-spirited, experimental and open-minded.

They have also been on the front lines of adapting to a multitude of culture-altering technological advancements. As a result, their experience over the years has allowed them to refine their tech tastes.

"I'm as adaptable as I need to be," said Ellen Harper, the 63-year-old mother of popular folk singer Ben Harper and owner of the Claremont Folk Music Center. "I find it easier to just give something to a 25-year-old and say, 'Set this up for me.' But if I need to learn something, I will sit down and learn it."

Harper's view is shared by a lot of baby boomers, who have had time figure out what they like and don't like out of their technology.

After all, they were around well before the days of DVRs ... actually, even before the days of color television.

"Remember, this is a generation that comes from a background of having a lot less technology. The TV was a new thing to them," said New York-based author and futurist Michael Rogers, 53, who grew up in Redlands. "Baby boomers do adapt to new technology, but they look at it in a sense of 'How does this help me as a human being? Why do I need this?'"

In May 2009, Rogers worked with Microsoft and AARP to set up a four-city dinner discussion among boomers to talk about their views on technology. The four cities were San Francisco, Phoenix, Chicago and New York.

Rogers then poured over the discussions and compiled what he learned into a report called "Boomers and Technology: An Extended Conversation," which was published in October 2009.

In his report, he mentions how baby boomers' unique position in witnessing various stages of life has helped them navigate the storm of new gadgetry.

"Baby boomers grew up with technology. They were in their teens to early 30s when the first IBM PCs and Apples appeared, and were the innovators and early adopters of that era," he wrote in the report. "Yet they also recall a time when all telephones had wires and were rented monthly from Ma Bell - a time when there were a handful of television stations, and if you turned on the set in the middle of the night, you saw a test pattern."

Nostalgic images like that come to the mind of Rancho Cucamonga resident Gary Gambino, 59. He remembers television's younger days, especially when it wasn't quite a regular household item in some neighborhoods.

And then, there was also the music.

"Records. I remember records! Everyone had their 45s and LPs, and people would come over and share and listen to their record collections," Gambino said while sitting on a bench at Victoria Gardens. "There used to be these little plastic inserts you'd put in the holes in the middle of the records so they'd fit on the record player."

Those are things that resonate with Harper of the Folk Music Center, which specializes in a lot of hands-on musical education. One of her biggest technological hurdles has been the Internet, which she sees as the main competition for store income.

"People come in and learn, and we educate them in the store, but then they go buy the same thing online," she said. "We can't sell things as cheaply ... but we find that there are still a number of people who enjoy and appreciate that hands-on kind of help."

A number of people also appreciate e-mail, including Harper, who remembers her first experience with e-mail from her days as teacher in grad school.

"We had moved the office from one side of the street to the other ... I thought e-mail at the time was so cool. You just tap the message out," she said. "It later became my goal to try and set that up when I became a teacher at Angelus Oaks. I remember saying in a meeting, 'I want an .edu address.'"

But while e-mail and the computer have become intriguing portals for many boomers, it's raw technical aspects still stump - even scare - many members of the generation.

"That's been the hardest thing, figuring out my computer," Gambino said. "I'm already looking up the Geek Squad."

It doesn't stop with technical fear, either. The advent of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, along with dating sites like eHarmony and match.com, were on the minds of many people Rogers talked to for his study.

He found that many of their concerns focused on the lessening of something very basic to them: human contact.

"It's losing the human element, the personal nature of an encounter," he said. "That's a real fear for them, especially when they see their kids. They're worried about losing a bit of humanity because of technology."

One example Rogers brings up is an encounter with a woman in her 40s who had doubts about her daughter's ability to communicate. She had a boyfriend, and the couple usually talked through Facebook and text messages.

"The mother actually met the boy a few times, and she discovered that skeet shooting was one of the boy's hobbies," he said. "She brings it up to her daughter, and she's like, 'What's skeet shooting?' It's amazing."

Such instances are becoming more commonplace in society, especially among younger people, says Gambino, a retiree who used to be a counselor at Ontario High School for 25 years.

"What makes me sad is that no one's really talking to each other anymore," he said. "It's strange - all these young people want to stay connected, but that 'connection' is actually a disconnection from each other."

People are able to find the Claremont Folk Center on Facebook, but not the person who runs it. Harper says she doesn't see the need or the interest to put herself out there.

"The store is my social networking," he said. "Enough people find me in the real world, and it just seems like one more tedious thing to look after. I'd rather just turn on a light and read a good book."

Books - or rather, e-book readers like the Amazon Kindle were another point of interest for the boomers in Rogers' study. He said that many of the people buying the Kindle are over 40 years of age, and he is waiting to see what the iPad is going to offer down the road.

"The fact that you can change the font size is huge for people over 40, along with the fact that it's lightweight," he said.

The study also notes that boomers are excited about a variety of potential advancements, especially in the field of health care. Rogers was amazed at some of what he picked up.

"A lot of people told me that they wouldn't mind having a chip with their entire health record," he said. "They are definitely interested in diagnostic devices, like scales or blood-pressure meters. They love the concept of telemedicine, where they can get test results at home through smart health-monitoring devices."

Another area to look at, Rogers mentions, is the video gaming industry. Boomers relate better to the Nintendo Wii's motion-sensing controllers as opposed to the button-laden controllers of other systems. Microsoft, in turn, is working on "Natal," which senses and reads body movements - essentially turning your body into a controller.

As for other gadgets, Rogers also mentioned the boomers' desire for larger screens as well as mini-projectors that can show video on any flat surface.

Many of these items have either already been made or in the process of being created and displayed to the public. Until then, people like Harper are content to wait.

"I see the iPad and other stuff ... I'm waiting for the one gadget I really need," she said. "I don't know what it'll do for me, or even what I want it to do, but I'll know it when I see it."

BREAKOUT BOX:

If you're a boomer, you might remember:

PARTY LINES: Several phone customers could occupy the same phone line. You'd have to wait until another person was done talking before you could say your piece.

HYDRAGLIDE: Power steering was once called "Hydraglide," at least if your car came from Chrysler.

TRANSISTOR RADIOS: These were huge during the post-WWII era and served as the gateway for a lot of popular music. These were the boomer equivalent of the iPod.

FENDER: The birth of the Fender Stratocaster in 1954 - a hallmark moment for aspiring metal and rock gods who were looking for the ideal electric guitar.

SATELLITES IN 1958: Three months after the Russians reach the stars with Sputnik, the United States follows suit with Explorer I.

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