Age Makes a Difference

Alabama’s census results tell us many things about ourselves, and our ages are among the most interesting data. Baby-boomers represent 26 percent of Alabama’s population—that’s more than a quarter of all the people in Alabama. These Alabamians were born between 1946 and 1964; in 2001 they are between 37 and 55 years old. Baby-boomers have had an effect on society in every decade they have moved through. When they were small, local governments had to build new elementary schools to accommodate all of them. When they were young adults, they influenced the course of the war in Vietnam. Now that they are middle-aged and approaching seniorhood, they are influencing corporate policymaking.

Because baby-boomers are the actual policymakers in many companies, sometimes the needs of this age group get prominent corporate attention. Nowadays businesses are recognizing that more workers, especially among the boomer cohort, have to assume caretaking responsibilities for their aging parents. An increasing number of companies offer eldercare referral services or other benefits. Benefit trends also reflect boomers’ needs in the other direction as well; firms are pitching in to help with college tuition. Some offer scholarships for family members and even the middle-aged employees themselves. Larger businesses are more likely to participate in such programs. Flextime, telecommuting, compressed workweeks, and job sharing are other pioneering ways baby-boomers have affected the business world.

But businesses are also paying attention to the needs of age groups other than baby-boomers. For example, children and teens are a big market. Not only do they command a portion of their parents’ incomes (pediatrician visits, particular brands of cereal, cookies, tennis shoes, or blue jeans), but many of them have access to money for which they control the purchases (CDs, videos, or hamburgers). Children through age 18 make up about 27 percent of Alabama’s population—roughly the same proportion as the baby-boomers. School-aged children account for roughly 20 percent of Alabama’s population and the infant and pre-schooler set comprises another 7 percent. In total Alabama has almost 1.2 million child citizens.

Retailers, marketers, brand managers, and advertisers are attuned to the age structure of their target audiences. These professionals know the number and percent of people in different age groups by locality. They decide what products to carry, what brands will be successful, and what advertisements to run, based in part on data about the numbers and ages of people in their market areas.

Census 2000 has begun to have important business implications for Alabama in policymaking, marketing, human resources management, and other areas. For more information about the age structure of Alabama, go to the CBER website at http://www.cba.ua.edu.

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