

Capital Business editor's note: Why boomers matter, and big data will go small

By [Dan Beyers](#) February 2

I'm a sucker for new ideas, particularly those that might animate the next big business trend.

I came across two last week — each provocative in their way, which is another way of saying I have my quibbles. But that's what makes future-gazing so much fun: Who knows how it will turn out?

The first idea came in a [guest post](#) on the Web site of 1776, the D.C. start-up incubator. Michael Vidikan, the chief executive of the appropriately named strategic consultancy Future in Focus, predicted that 2015 would be the year of smartphone-enabled health devices.

"Devices that empower consumers with real-time health monitoring can create a revolution in health care as consumers focus more attention on prevention and health maintenance," Vidikan wrote. "Devices to provide round-the-clock health monitoring of babies will also gain traction. Much of this monitoring will take place in the home, and health monitoring devices will become part of the home's new information infrastructure."

As someone who has high hopes for an iWatch, I, too, believe we are on the cusp of a wearable world. But I take issue with one of Vidikan's central assertions: "Millennials likely will drive adoption of these devices as they seek to better quantify their own health and demand more control over their health care options."

I think it's just as likely that baby boomers will clamor for these gadgets, if only because their future is now. Some of the most fanatical Fitbit-ers I know are folks like me keeping track of their steps. Besides, never underestimate a boomer's ability to become self-absorbed in his or her own data.

From 'big data' to 'small data'

Speaking of data, the folks at Opower, the Arlington energy data company, ran [an interview](#) with Jim Messina, a political strategist who used data analytics to support President Obama's successful campaign in 2012.

A couple things caught my attention; one was the power of using data to fine-tune strategy.

"We had one unifying theory: that data was the empirical avenue to truth," Messina said. "We measured and tested everything — from how far the welcome reception desk needed to be from the front door to increase volunteer sign ups, to running 66,000 computer simulations of the election every night for 18 months, which allowed us to predict our final vote in every battleground state within 0.2 percent.

"By the time we sent an e-mail to our 13 million-person e-mail list, we had tested various facets of that e-mail (sender, subject line, incentive, where the ask was, color and size of donation button, and so on) to 16 different subgroups. This allowed us to increase open rates and donation rates by 79 percent overall from 2008. I would guess any business reading this would take a 79 percent increase in effectiveness with their customers!"

That's encouraging, but then again, maybe we are too late. Here's what Messina said next:

"This famous 'big data' era that the journalists are celebrating is really already over. We are now in what I call the 'era of small or personalized data,' meaning we can effectively predict individual behavior and give each customer a

unique experience based on their needs. If your business can't do that in the next few years, even if you have an incumbent monopoly or built-in advantage, you will eventually lose the game.”

Small is the new big. Now I just have to figure out how to deliver a personalized editor's note to each one of you!

Dan Beyers is the founding editor of Capital Business, The Washington Post's go-to source for news about the region's business community.



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