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WHY ADVERTISERS WILL STOP IGNORING AGING BOOMERS

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Although advertising agencies never had a healthy blend of gender and ethnicity until recent changes emerged—although many believe there’s considerable room for improvement—agencies from the 1920s through the 1960s employed an effective mix of young, middle-aged and older people. Creative directors, copywriters and graphic artists could be any age. Smart account executives assigned accounts to creative staff based on their ages and cultural strengths.

In the 1970s, though, ad agencies turned their creative departments over to people ages 20 to 30. By attrition, this process would have occurred naturally, but the change happened 10 or 15 years sooner than it might have otherwise. The youth focus was due to the sheer size of the boomer generation. It made them the *only* market—a market composed of scores of unwieldy cohorts. Conventional wisdom back then was, “All other age groups (preteens, teenagers, those over 35) were mere niche groups. Why market to them? Besides, we already reach older folks and they have to buy products anyway. So why sully our ads with old people and kids, except as comic foils?” (Think of Mr. “Don’t Squeeze the Charmin” Whipple, Clara “Where’s the Beef?” Peller, or Life Cereal’s Mikey.)

CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS

Fast-forward to today. During the last 20 years, two concurrent cultural revolutions have directly affected marketing. The first was the slicing and dicing of mass media: The United States now has a multitude of information and entertainment choices. We don’t all watch the same three television stations, anymore. Media outlets have grown exponentially and now have their own complex audience cohorts.

The second, almost imperceptibly slow revolution had to do with age. That huge, seemingly amorphous group, the irrepressible boomers, once the coveted 18–34 demographic, kept getting older. This year they begin turning 60, and they remain the most powerful, influential socioeconomic group. However, along the way came a major marketing disconnection. Although boomers—not all of them, but as a whole—are the richest and largest generation in history, advertising agencies brush them off their market radar.

How did this happen? Boomers who worked in the advertising industry largely moved on. In many cases they were kicked out—or upstairs to management. Of course, some attrition or career development is natural. And boomers left a positive and important legacy in the marketing and advertising worlds: more racial and ethnic diversity, lifestyle inclusion, many more perceived markets. But we—and I speak from personal experience—also left advertising agencies with the youth-culture stigma.

The conventional wisdom today sounds uncomfortably familiar: “Why market to boomers? We reach them anyway.”

Advertising agencies are image conscious and want to be hip. Not only do they *not* want to market to boomers, they simply want to do what they do best: *market to themselves*. Even many older professionals still in advertising are obsessed with the 18–34 demographic—and lean on younger professionals in their companies to “get it right.” Unfortunately, they’re wrong.

THE HR REVOLUTION

Today's advertising industry is primed for a human-resources revolution. Talented men and women in their 40s and 50s—including account executives, copywriters, graphic artists, producers, directors and creative directors—need to be brought back into the fold to reach boomers. Implementing a marketing strategy that targets boomers as a primary, secondary or tertiary market, then turning the campaign over to a different generation of advertising professionals, means forfeiting the natural sensibilities required to generate vital campaigns.

Truth is, one can analyze marketing fodder all day and night, but if the right people are not in the right jobs, the result will be failure and mediocrity. The victims of this myopia will be the clients and advertisers with products and services for the aging population of boomers.

When searching for an advertising agency, businesses need to make sure it has a good mix of young and old in all departments. Then the question is, "How do you best reach the boomer target market?" One way is with infomercials. Sure, that ugly word conjures up half-hours of tacky, humdrum hucksterism. But it's the content that's clumsy, not the concept.

Throughout most of the last century, print was king, even during the age of radio and the early years of TV. Beginning in the middle 1960s, dazzling cinema-like spots mixed with the succinct wit of print became the pinnacle of advertising mastery. An effective television campaign often did it all: customer awareness, imprinting, positioning, branding and messaging. That's not so today, at least for us boomers—and not simply because we're not being targeted. The real reason is that our attention spans are longer. More mature consumers want to know more before a product or service is imprinted on their minds. A 30-second salvo misses by a mile. We flip past a simple, minimalist ad in a magazine with a simplistic branding message and subconsciously (often consciously) dismiss it.

If television advertising was once the poor cousin to print, nowadays, infomercials are the bedraggled outcasts of both. Although there are exceptions, infomercials are shoddy also-rans in the advertising world. But there is hope. Some marketers are taking advantage of the Internet and cable TV. The cliché "thinking outside the box" applies here, but with a twist: Think outside the television box. If an ad agency targets boomers and badly storyboards an infomercial, especially by committee, the result will end up DOA. With the long-form infomercial, a genuine relationship between a product or service and target market is vital, and there is plenty of time to develop one.

At some point in the 1960s, someone convinced somebody that one-minute commercials could be exciting, absorbing, mini-masterpieces. To reach boomers today, though, now is the time to persuade agencies and clients that 5-to-30-minute infomercials are the effective way to go.

Who's apt to get it right? Many talented boomer film writers, directors, editors and cinematographers are available—people who haven't gotten their advertising hands dirty in ages—as well as many ex-advertising video and film directors who haven't put together a campaign in decades. Businesses should demand that their advertising agencies find and hire them, then let them alone to create their magic.

THE FUTURE

Media planners and buyers, who place marketing and advertising in appropriate media, were once relegated to back offices next to water coolers. Nowadays, though, media planners are front and center and have very big offices. Everyone is looking to them for answers. Television (network or cable or satellite)? Is there an end run around TiVo? What about radio (local or satellite)? Internet—where and how? Videocasts? Blogs?

In the current upheaval of new media technology, media planners don't have the answers because the answers change every few months with the unveiling of each new technological marvel. Some of these marvels will fail; others will be considered too invasive for marketing and advertising. Will boomers really want their cell phones to become flashing mini-billboards spamming them at every turn?

What's the answer to reaching the boomers—or targeting any age group or demographic? I could give you an answer—and it might even be correct. But I'll have a different one next month. That's because marketing and advertising will be a wild ride for the next decade.

What will hold true for the next 20 years, though, is that boomers will have most of the money, and most of them are not technologically phobic. In many cases, they will decide how they prefer to be reached.

My advice is simple: Advertisers targeting boomers should not be too concerned with the media flavor of the day. They should stick with the tried and true—at the moment, the Internet, television, radio and print. Mainly, businesses should keep an eye on their product or service. Boomers will make it evident which newfangled marketing and advertising funnels they prefer without too much delay. ❖

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