

Majority Rules...

new rules and new tools to succeed in an aging market

By G. Richard Ambrosius

It took all 76 million *baby boomers* celebrating a 40th birthday for corporate America and the mainstream media to begin waking up to the fact that the median age of adults in the US increased by almost a decade while they continued to worship the youth culture of the past. For the last two decades, businesses, nonprofit organizations and Madison Avenue have ignored the reality that between 1990 and 2020 the age 50 plus population will grow by 74% while those under 50 that have driven markets for decades will grow by 1%.

To say it is way past time to begin changing paradigms is what author Tom Peters called “a blinding flash of the obvious”. Whether you like it or not, older adults are the New Consumer Majority – and their numbers continue to swell as all 76 million Boomers will be over 40 by year end.

As always, articles and conference topics on *boomers* are standard fare, but working knowledge and understanding of how to communicate and better serve the New Majority has a long way to go. Articles all address burning issues such as, “Are *Boomers* old people? What do we call them? Will they behave like past generations of older people? What do they want? How do we get their attention? How will we care for all of them?” As the market potential becomes more and more obvious, consultants, authors and trainers are offering solutions on how to capture this elusive, *boomer* beast – but little of it is new; and all too often is a repackaging of outdated stereotypes of both boomers and older adults.

If you are searching for *four easy steps* or *six simple typologies* that will insure success in the aging marketplace, you’ll not find them here. Why? Because, the *typical boomer*, like the *typical senior*, is as much like other boomers as a snowflake is *typical*. Consumers become more dissimilar as they age not more alike. Although they share common ‘gut level’ values, their experiences are vastly different.

Since so few have paid attention to and even fewer have successfully targeted the New Consumer Majority, there is little concurrence on what works. Some have explored the mature market using traditional advertising and marketing methods only to conclude there was little potential because consumers failed to respond. They blamed neither the messenger nor the message, but the targeted recipient of the message. Likewise, millions of dollars have been spent teaching *aging sensitivity* without first developing an empathetic understanding of the consumer, their values and their decision-making processes. Unfortunately, *sensitivity* training often reinforced rather than correct stereotypes.

New Rules

Ageless Marketing, a new book by David B. Wolfe, documents the reality of a New Majority market (adults aged 40 plus), well beyond a question of a doubt. While a plethora of rising experts are now touting the importance of boomers and politicians bemoan the negative impact on a country that is now more senior than junior, Wolfe sets forth a well-researched,

ageless formula for future success. According to Wolfe, the first step is to admit that much of what we thought we knew about marketing and advertising is wrong.

In *7 Habits to Highly Effective People*, Dr. Stephen Covey cautioned that, “none of us sees the world as it is; we only see the world as we are.” To succeed in communicating with the New Consumer Majority, marketers must learn to listen empathetically in order to identify the values of the intended recipient of their message, and then communicate those values with less directive and more conditional messages. Of course, this is counter intuitive to those with years of experience in the ‘features and benefits, youth oriented’ world of marketing and advertising driven by young creatives that find marketing to older adults just plain boring.

The old rules worked in the youth driven markets of the past (1940’s – 1980’s), but in the 1990’s the return on investment in advertising began a downward slide as leading edge baby boomers (Americans born in 1946 to 1954) began swelling the ranks of age 40 plus customers. As Wolfe states, “Adults under 40 were once the majority and they ruled the marketplace. Adults 40 and older are now the majority, and they rule the marketplace – in numbers, in spending, and in determining the rules for successful marketplace engagement.”

Wolfe has written what many marketers with years of mature market experience believe will one day become the Bible for the world of advertising and marketing. Those capable of checking their egos at the door and admitting it’s time for some New Rules will see their share of the market growing while those stuck in mentality of the 60’s are doomed to watching their market share erode. This trend is already evident even in the “senior” living industry that “caters” to adults over age 60. While the industry has made attracting a younger, more active adult a priority, the age at move-in has continued to increase; due largely a failure to positively position the communities as places to find meaning and purpose rather than care, security and entertainment. Simply put, to attract the New Consumer Majority, businesses must adopt New Rules and utilize New Tools if they are to survive.

New Tools

The first step is to throw out the worn out tools by abandoning the stereotype-ridden “vocabulary of aging” that is a product of the youth dominated culture of the past. Terms that carried too much baggage, due to years of negative stereotyping, must be “excluded” and replaced with more inclusive terms. A partial listing of those terms includes senior, elderly, nursing home, retirement, facility, residents – and yes, Baby Boomers.

By adopting the language of inclusion, companies may begin realizing a positive return on their investment in advertising and direct response marketing rather than the declining returns of the past decade as the very ads designed to attract consumers are turning them away. Advertisers can begin by projecting a positive, mindful image of older adults by including them naturally in marketing messages. While physiological declines are a part of life, older consumers “feel” anywhere from 15 to 25 years younger than their biological age, which doesn’t mean they think they “look” 15 to 25 years younger. Therefore, when models are too young or engaged in extreme sports, the consumer simply dismisses the message. The key is realistic people in real world activities.

To keep our conscious minds from being overloaded with unimportant information, our brains function something like a *MASH* unit sorting casualties according to severity. The brain sorts through billions of bits of information each moment to select things for the conscious mind to think about. And it doesn't dally, but will only give your message from .2 to .8 of one second to make a first impression (your cognitive window of opportunity). To make the cut your marketing materials must resonate with the values, wants, needs and aspirations of consumers.

To further complicate things, the brain does not process words; but reviews pictures and sensory data in context with the circumstances and your value programming. If there is a perception that "senior" means old, frail, dependent, bingo player, or other traditional stereotypes, the older mind may "exclude" whatever is associated with the message from conscious consideration if they don't view themselves fitting the stereotype. In other words, their eyes and ears may detect what you are trying to tell them, but unless their brains sense personal relevance, little of the message content will reach their conscious mind.

You can begin the slow change process by simply becoming mindful of the power, both positive and negative, of the words used in marketing materials and adopt more inclusionary terms to describe older adults while avoiding stereotypes. Inclusionary/conditional terms allow the brain to screen a message based on expectations, aspirations, needs and life experience rather than preexisting stereotypes. Inclusionary terms are much more likely to be positively perceived than exclusionary terms or words that are perceived negatively by large groups such as senior citizen, senior, retiree or resident. Even if 70% of your older customers had no problem with the term senior citizen, but 30% did; are you willing to eliminate up to 1/3 of consumers on purpose?

New Tools Communicate Values and Establish Context

When developing creative copy for ads or brochure or stories for newsletters, using these tools will improve your response rate or prospect relationships:

1. *Use more values-based messages and less objective logic.* In photos and headlines, make your first appeal emotional with a subjective lead paragraph to pull the prospect into the ad and increase the probability consider the offering will at least be considered. When presenting features and benefits, present only facts, not conclusions like, "you should", "you must", "you need to", "act today" or similar directive language. Urgency language does not work on well-educated, experienced consumers and directive language threatens their autonomy and independence.
2. *Tell stories using context sensitive messages.* If prospective consumers can't fit themselves in the story you are telling, they will dismiss your offer. Use inclusionary terms, more open-ended, deferential approaches, and conditional language to take advantage of the mind's irrepressible need to complete and incomplete picture. The less specific, the more you will connect with the experiential backgrounds of multiple consumer segments. Also balance the use of couples and singles in photos. Widows and widowers will not see themselves in an ad made up of couples. The same is true for racial/ethnic mix in images.

3. *Avoid hyperbole.* Older consumers place a high value on experiential perceptions developed from years of sorting through offers and sales presentations. They have heard and seen it all. Therefore, avoid terms such as new, best, latest, unique in favor of positive, conditional, value charge words of phrases... *for a genuine experience, for all life can be, a future of opportunities, designed with you in mind*, etc. Although initial response is emotional, experienced consumers spend more time examining facts and figures than younger consumers once you have their attention.
4. *Don't form conclusions.* Life experience teaches all of us to eventually view the world in shades of gray and trust our feelings and emotions. How we read an ad or process a presentation is conditional and qualified based on our worldview and beliefs. It is then analyzed in the context in which it is presented. Generally speaking, mature consumers tend to use right brain functions (intuition, visuals, creative, and emotions) to screen messages before processing them rationally. If your message does not get through the screening process, your offer will not be considered.
5. *Become a storyteller.* Therefore, develop text using a clear, easy-to-read, personalized, narrative style, and involve the reader using positive statements in the active voice. Narrative or story telling reduces the number of inferences that must be made due to the increase in subjective skills, vocabulary and conceptual skills in later life. However if incorporating objective information, remember that the older mind processes objective information more slowly therefore lengthy documents should be broken into short sections to aid in comprehension.

Changing Paradigms

Whether developing a ‘retirement’ community, introducing a new product or service or re-positioning a current brand, businesses will need *new tools* and abide by *new rules* if they want to survive and prosper as mature consumers become the majority of the consumer base. The window of opportunity will continue to narrow as insightful companies such as Harley Davidson, New Balance, Chico’s and Starbucks continue developing systems and processes that are building values-based relationships with middle age and older consumers.

The challenge is not about how to market to Baby Boomers. While the baby boom is the driving force behind the New Majority, these new rules and tools will guide success in all middle-aged and older segments. Since the reality of a New Consumer Majority cannot be denied, understanding the new rules and how to use the new tools will be critical to future business success.

It is past time to view the market with a new lens. When it comes to serving the new consumer majority, the youth lens of yesterday is totally out of focus. The rules and tools needed to grind a new lens for future success are readily available to those with the vision to use them. As paradigms change, perhaps we will once again view later life as the crown jewel of the human experience – a time to celebrate our individual uniqueness and worth. And one day, we may again revere and benefit from the wisdom of life’s experiences.