

Not another article about marketing to the **over 50s**

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Simplistic and misleading are the first two words the come to mind when describing the way the media has covered the subject of marketing to the 50+. Why is this? What needs to change?

The media's reporting about marketing and the over 50s is bogged down in a cycle of trivial and unsubstantiated debate.

Reading an article on the subject is like Bill Murray's experience in the film *Groundhog Day*: a ceaseless round of identical arguments, quotes, examples and unresolved questions. The mainstream and marketing media are equally as bad.

The media is taking a lot more interest in the over 50s. In the last 6 months the number of related articles, indexed by Google's News Search, increased by over 200%. I have read the majority of them and, believe me, the increase in reporting has added little to our understanding of the subject.

So what is wrong with the current set of arguments and what are the issues we should be considering? These are my five biggest gripes about the way the subject is portrayed.

Gripe 1. Scaring by numbers. The most common argument why marketers, especially of the youthful variety, should pay more attention to their parents and grandparents generation is their huge spending power. Within the first couple of sentences of an article you will see a quote along the lines of “they (*the over 50s*) own 80 per cent of the UK's wealth, worth more than £280 billion”. This “scare them by the numbers” tactic is at best useless, at worse counterproductive.

I sense that when younger marketers see these statistics they filter them out and pigeonhole the article as yet another one banging on about old people.

Cigarette packets in the UK contain a health warning that covers 30% of the front and 40% of the back and reads ‘smoking kills, or smokers die younger or more clinically ‘smoking clogs the arteries and causes heart attacks and strokes’. What result have these dire warnings had on young people? In 2002 more 20-24 year olds smoke than did in 1988.

If you can't change a 24 year old's behaviour by telling them they are killing themselves what chance do you stand of convincing them with a litany of quotes containing Billions of

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pounds and percentages of wealth? This technique is not going to generate the equivalent of a “big bang” when young marketers suddenly see the light and say “how stupid of us we have been ignoring the wealthiest group of consumer for the last decade”.

Gripe 2. Obsession with strange names. Within the first few paragraphs of the article you read the revelation that it is possible to divide older people, who are an incredibly diverse bunch, into strange tribal groups. They are given names, often accompanied by pictures, like the sophisticated ‘Astute Cosmopolitans’, the boring ‘Thrifty Traditionalists’ and the scary ‘Temperate Xenophobes’. It is a mystery why a group of consumers, that receives so little marketing attention, has been dissected into so many weird sounding segments. I have counted 150 of them and more appear every week.

Here is one explanation for this obsession with pigeonholing older people into lifestyle and behavioural groups: if you are a research, advertising or media agency looking for press coverage the simplest way is to present research findings that unlocks the mystery of the over 50s by revealing some mystical new segmentation. I have never understood what marketers should do with the knowledge that there are X% more ‘poor apathetic couch potatoes’ than ‘rich consumerist junkies’ and that ‘techno phobic stick in the muds’ enjoy EastEnders more than Panorama, but it makes good press copy.

A second, less cynical explanation, is that age is of limited value as a predictor of behaviour and attitudes hence you have to look for other segmentation factors.

Where this technique is flawed is the assumption that as soon as a person turns 50 they adopt the values of one of these groupings. My hunch is that attitudes and behaviours transcend a much greater age range. When somebody says “I am 50 but still think as I did when I was 30”; they mean it. Somebody age 50 can share the same interests in sport, health and the environment as a 25 year old giving them very similar marketing profiles.

Gripe 3. Pick and mix research conclusions. Ninety percent of articles will discuss the pros and cons of the idea that the over 35s are averse to experimenting with new brands. Simon Silvester (Young & Rubicam Europe) made this claim in his article “Demographic Problem Is Your Marketing Problem”. Note his association of the word “problem” with the aging population.

In the last couple of years there have been ad hoc research studies coming to diametrically opposite conclusions.

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Depending on your prejudices you can select any piece of research to substantiate your arguments. Until we have a

large scale research exercise, that provides reliable evidence, it is a waste of breath continuing with the debate. The simple fact is we don't know.

My hunch is that the proposition has some truth, especially at the older end of the age spectrum, but not of a magnitude for it to have much marketing significance.

Gripe 4. Blaming the wrong people. Most marketers are aged 20-35 and this fact is used to explain why the majority of marketing expenditure is aimed at their peer age group. No doubt this explanation also contains a grain of truth, but to suggest that marketers are unable to think outside their own generational cohort, is simplistic and insulting.

The marketing profession is forever bemoaning its lack of influence in determining corporate strategy. If this is true, and I think it is, then it is ludicrous to suggest that youthful marketers are single-handedly responsible for their companies ignoring such an important customer group. Marketing's lack of attention to the over 50s is an inevitable response to the cultural and corporate environment in which it operates.

When the senior management of companies, many of whom are over 50, feel it is acceptable to espouse the value of older consumers then their marketing departments will quickly follow.

Gripe 5. Sweeping statements. My final gripe is the simplistic and unproven claims from members of the advertising industry. Here are some of the worst:

“Explicit advertising to the old alienates the young”

“Targeting advertising at younger people has a secondary effect on older consumers”

“Older people are harder to influence using advertising”

There may be some truth in these claims but they are such sweeping generalisations as to be useless.

I could add another half a dozen gripes to this list: the mandatory reference and quotes from Saga; the use of bizarre photos that accompany articles of old people perched on top of a

Yamaha superbike or the latest Stewart surfboard; the proliferation of daft terms like SKI (spending the kids inheritance) and “bean pole families” (few members in each generation). The list goes on and on.

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Alex Batchelor (global brand director, Orange)

It is very easy to gripe, especially for a marketer, so what are the issues of substance we should be discussing?

These five suggestions result from my spending the last year immersed in the subject and having talked to many marketing practitioners.

Suggestion 1. Don’t exaggerate the problem. We need to recognise that attitudes towards the marketing importance of older consumers are changing. Not as fast as many would like, but slowly it is becoming acceptable to talk about marketing and older people in the same sentence.

When my colleague, Janet Kiddle, interviewed Alex Batchelor (global brand director, Orange) he said, “With our market segmentation we try and ignore age as much as possible”. You can have 70 year olds who buy all the latest gadgets alongside 30 year olds”.

In the last few weeks Vodaphone has announced it will have offerings aimed at older phone users. Last year DoCoMo introduced its raku-raku ‘easy-easy’ phones that have larger display fonts and buttons that are targeted at old people.

When I asked Richard Reed, the founder and marketing director of Innocent, the drinks company, how he approaches the issue of age his answer was very simple: “Age is unimportant”.

Lexus has been very successful in appealing to older and wealthier drivers. Its latest advertising campaign in the US, 'Rules for people who never follow rules' brilliantly spans the age range from David Bowie to Freddy Adu (the world's youngest football professional).

Virgin Megastores has revamped its San Francisco store to include sections that appeal mostly to older listeners. This store is now outperforming the company's other 21 locations.

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Sony has poured more than \$25 million into advertising to make the company's camcorders, digital cameras and other high-end gadgets more appealing to people between 50 and 64.

Don't get me wrong – there is still a massive mismatch

between what business is doing, and should be doing, to appeal to older people. But, portraying the corporate world as if it has taken collective leave of its senses does not assist the argument.

Suggestion 2. Focus on the real culprits. Berating marketers for not paying more attention to older people is criticising the wrong people. We should focus on the real culprits – their bosses.

Wally Olins (chairman of Saffron, the branding and identity consultants) believes it is much more than a marketing issue: “Our society portrays the old as boring, lacking excitement and not sexy. Why should anybody be concerned with the old? Why should marketers be any different?”

We will only see a significant change in the way that companies behave when the “age-thing” (a convenient catch-all term for the numerous business issues resulting from an aging population) makes it onto the boardroom agenda. The changing balance in the numbers of old and young people has consequences in all parts of business. HR, R&D, finance and of course marketing, all need to evaluate what the aging population means to them.

Once corporate senior management realise the enormous size of the age-thing then the attitudes of marketers will embrace the new reality.

Suggestion 3. Question the relevance of age. We should be sceptical about the value of age as a determinant of consumer behaviour. I think Richard Reed's views illustrate the point to perfection. “Innocent's business and brand values are about the quality and freshness of the product and our responsibilities to our

customers, the people and places that supply the fruit, and the people who work at the company. These values are not limited to one age group but are shared across the age spectrum.”

When Innocent was creating its promotional plans, age was never an issue it considered.

A couple of other examples illustrate the demise of age as useful factor. The market penetration of women in the UK buying anti-aging cream changes by less than 3% across the age range 25-74. Interestingly, in France there was a larger age variation. (TNS –Care study). The news that Xfm, the London-based rock radio station, attracted over a quarter of its listeners from the over 45s was received with astonishment by the marketing press.

For certain groups of consumers, age will remain a predicting and targeting factor, especially at the extremes of the age spectrum.

Alex Bachelor (Orange) told us that “Where customers do vary

by age is the degree to which the handset is seen as fashion accessory. This definitely does decrease with age.”

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My suspicion is that marketers must come to terms with the concept of age-neutrality. Consumers will always remain a diverse bunch but age will cease to be a good predictor of their behaviour. This is a topic that is crying out for some comprehensive market research.

Age-neutrality doesn’t mean ignoring the implications of age on the mechanics of how a company interacts with its customers. The way older people use the Web and respond to e-mail marketing is very different to the young. A lot of this is to do with the physiological aspects of aging but also the differing time spent using PCs and the Internet.

I believe (and hope) the days are numbered for our obsession with putting older people into behavioural groupings the instant they say goodbye to their 40s.

Suggestion 4. Its mainstream marketing. We should stop treating “marketing to the over-50s” as some form of niche activity. Marketing to older people employs the same core of skills as is used for any other age group. Understanding and influencing the mind of the customer is the foundation to marketing, be they a child or a pensioner.

There are many similarities to the days of the dot.com era when interactive marketing was seen as being different from mainstream marketing. In hindsight we know that

was wrong. At the periphery it does need specialist skills, but at its core it's just plain marketing.

The challenge for marketers is to apply their skills in the absence of myths and prejudices.

Suggestion 5. Stop recycling the advertising myths. Claims about the interaction of older people and advertising should be limited to those that can be substantiated by research. These myths have been repeated so many times that they have taken on the status of facts.

The challenge for marketers is to apply their skills in the absence of myths and prejudices.

So please: no more statements about advertising to the old alienates the young, and older

people being harder to influence using advertising.

When I talked with Wally Olins about these simplistic arguments he said, "You cannot make these generalised comments". He went on to say, "in my experience marketers are lazy and will take the easy option. It is much easier to keep doing what you know rather than move out of your comfort zone".

Alex Batchelor of Orange said, "We don't think appealing to older customers alienates the young or the other way round. Older people either ignore it, if it is more about style over substance, or they get the message, even if it is conveyed to young people".

Adapting to the aging population presents companies with massive opportunities and some horrible problems. Marketers are getting little help from the way the subject is presented and discussed, which is far more driven by mythology than by facts.

One fact is indisputable. It is going to be a hell of an interesting decade to be in marketing.

This is one of a series of articles written by Dick Stroud about Marketing and the 50+. Go to www.20plus30.com for the other articles. For the latest news about 50+ marketing visit Dick Stroud's Blog www.50plus.blogspot.com