



Senior Moments

Effectively Reaching and Motivating the Senior Segment

A majority of seniors today feel much younger than their actual age. When developing marketing materials for this age group, marketers should keep this in mind yet also be aware of the basic cognitive and physical changes that occur as people age.

BY ROBIN RAFF

We likely all have heard this by now, and we get it – seniors today are not the same seniors as those of 20, 10 or even five years ago. Particularly with baby boomers aging into the segment, we have a whole new breed of seniors coming. According to a 2009 nationally representative study of 3,000 adults conducted by the Pew Research Center, the average age considered “old” by the majority of respondents was 68. But there were real differences in perception driven by the respondents’ own ages:

- More than half of those under 30 say the average person becomes old before 60
- Middle-aged respondents say it’s closer to 70
- Those aged 65 and older say “old” is not until 75

Among those aged 65 to 74, just 21 percent say they feel old, with one-third of them feeling 10 to 19 years younger than their years. And, 61 percent of the 75-plus segment said they don’t feel old! What does this all mean to those marketing to the over-65 segment? It means that marketers must speak to

the 65-plus segment as if they are at least 10 years younger than their chronological years, but must still also be aware of changes that occur as we age, regardless of how old people feel.

Most marketers have made the shift to using photographs of younger, vibrant adults engaging in fun activities, along with upbeat, aspirational messages when marketing to seniors. The good news is that this shift has occurred, and we no longer see ads of lonely looking old people in rockers. However, the shift has at times resulted in ridiculous extremes, with photos of seniors bungee jumping and mountain climbing. Or we see countless stereotypical photos of seniors gardening and couples holding hands on a cruise or at the beach. Smart advertisers seem to have figured out that seniors value time with family and friends, and are using more natural photographs that speak to their varied life stages and lifestyles without the stereotypes or extremes.

In spite of how much younger the average senior feels compared to his or her actual age, there are basic cognitive and

physical changes that still occur as we age – regardless of how young we look or feel – that should be considered when developing marketing materials to seniors.

Vision changes as we age

Vision changes are one of the more undeniable signs of aging. These changes in vision usually occur between the ages of about 40 to 50, with most people noticing more difficulty seeing objects closer than two feet as they age. As we continue to age, vision changes in other ways. Frequently it becomes more difficult to see in dim light. Color vision may also change as we age, as the lenses of our eyes tend to yellow slightly with the aging process. Yellowing affects how colors at the blue-violet end of the light spectrum are viewed. Shades of blue tend to be less vivid and look more like gray. Older people may have trouble reading black letters on a blue background or reading blue letters in general. Red tends to be much more vivid.

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The ability to see differences in shades and tones and as well as to see fine details also decreases as we age. Vision experts usually attribute this change to the fact that the number of nerve cells of the brain used to transmit visual signals from the eyes to the brain decreases. All of these factors must be kept in mind when designing material for seniors. It is also important to note that interface design may at times have different requirements than print design. Visual guidelines for designing effective online and off-line ads and marketing materials for seniors include:

- Use serif typefaces for printed materials
- Online, serif types can sometimes be less legible on lower-resolution or small monitors; allow users to set their own font, font size and color
- In general, avoid using several types of fonts mixed together or very narrow or decorative types
- Avoid using drop shadow on text, which makes type difficult to decipher
- Don't use all capital letters, which decreases readability
- Use at least 12-point size fonts in print
- Don't use reverse type on a light background; don't use dark type on top of dark shades; the most effective combination is dark type on a light background
- Avoid type in pastels, which become indistinguishable
- Vary the hues of backgrounds and type so there is enough contrast to read
- Use red or other bright- and bold-colored type for emphasis, but not for too much content, as these colors will tire the eyes

- Keep designs crisp and interesting, but not overly “busy” or distracting
- Online layout should be kept simple and organized, with large areas of white space and small blocks of text to increase readability and make pages cleaner looking and easier to navigate
- Applying a light complementary background color online has been proven to reduce screen glare, eye fatigue and eye strain

Auditory changes as we age

Hearing loss is common as we age; many people over age 50 have significant hearing impairments. The most common manifestations of hearing impairment are an inability to hear high-frequency sounds or to discriminate words from background noises. A major barrier in effectively communicating with mature adults is unsynchronized audio and video that each make different points. A linear and synchronized execution is critical for mature audiences.

For communications with audio components, keep background elements subdued relative to the main voice-over. Keep critical audio elements at relatively low frequencies and high intensities. Web site interfaces that use sound to get the user's attention will need to use a lower frequency, such as a range of 500 to 1,000 hertz, to be most effective. Speakers with low-pitched voices are most effective when communicating with seniors via radio, video, online and television.

Successful telemarketing to seniors requires sensitivity to an audience that is often hard of hearing, processes information more slowly than younger adults and (with more time to spare and many living alone) is much more eager to converse. Therefore, they require more time per call than younger segments. It



is very important that telemarketers working with seniors are not compensated based on the number of calls they make, or those calls will be rushed and ineffective. Telemarketers who are trained in working with older adults and provided with “senior sensitivity” skills will be far more successful in communicating and motivating seniors, and their appropriate behavior will favorably reflect on a brand.

Cognitive changes as we age

As we age, we tend to process information at a slower pace. This means it takes longer to figure out what is going on and what (if anything) to do about it. Older people often also lose some short-term memory and have trouble remembering some things, but not others. To adapt to these changes, many older people will slow down and take more time to think about things carefully before making decisions. As marketers, we should note this particularly for online design and not provide too many steps, animated information or varied paths.

Due to spatial and working memory decline, elderly people are more likely to get lost while navigating a Web site. Always avoid a very deep hierarchy. Provide clear and consistent navigation mechanisms, such as the orientation information, navigation bars, a site map, and so on. Additionally, information organization on a screen is important not only due to visual decline, but to assist with overall comprehension of information. Principles of perceptual organization, such as grouping, should be applied. Put related information together, and use color-coding to help make information organization clear, easier to read and to understand.

Too much use of quickly flashing or blinking elements online is not only highly distracting to peripheral vision, but distracts people’s attention and can cause short-term memory loss, slower reading speed, and can compromise reading comprehension.

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In print materials and online, use of images can be an important aid in conveying a message and assuring that it is recalled. Graphs and charts help us to understand and retain factual information. Photographs that illustrate enriching experiences can help us to retain conceptual information, particularly if the images can be related to our own lives. Emotional presentations that stir recollections of pleasant events can enhance memory retrieval and make a rational appeal even more effective.

It’s best to develop messages that are single-minded and use key facts and simple visuals to back up complex information. Write in short paragraphs, and break up the copy with sub-heads and callouts (such as quotes) to make complex information easier to digest. Using a variety of media along with a clear and consistent message in all channels will help to reinforce your brand image and make sure that your brand is memorable.

Attitude changes as we age

A grave error that many brands that market to seniors make is to apply the stereotypical “how to market to seniors” direction without determining if it applies to their industry, brand or the situation. Healthcare insurance marketers who sell Medicare products have learned that those seniors who are making decisions about their Medicare insurance for the first time (just turning 65) do not really care if you understand that they don’t look and feel like their parents or grandparents did.

They are confused and overwhelmed about Medicare and want clear, factual information to assist them with their decisions. Seniors have also made it clear that they do not resonate with photos of dancing couples on a beach from drug companies selling medication for a chronic health condition. It is more important for healthcare marketers than in any other industry that targets seniors to understand their needs and to know that healthcare is the primary concern of the 65-plus segment.

More than any other segment, seniors value support, empathy and respect. Effective healthcare marketing strategies will include these three elements in all of their messages. The Pew Research Center Social & Demographics Trends survey also underscored the importance of being treated with respect among older adults. When asked to identify some of the good things they experience in growing older, “getting more respect” was cited by 56 percent of the survey respondents aged 65-74 and by 62 percent of the respondents over 75.

Effective marketing to seniors will require that you know the concerns of the segment, are not condescending and provide appropriate and valuable information. In summary, marketing to seniors really just requires the use of some very basic manners and social skills, and it can be very effective. Brands that employ these simple rules can develop loyal senior customers. **DTC**

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