

The Write Way To Reach Boomers

Every day, it seems, you hear more self-styled experts talk about marketing to Baby Boomers. They inundate you with facts and figures to support their contention that Boomers make up the most lucrative market segment in history, and they' re right.

There are also countless consultants who are trying to recycle conventional marketing techniques that they claim will help you tap into the Boomer market. Greet their claims with skepticism, because, for all the talk, you're highly unlikely to find any reliable counsel on the most important subject of all: How to talk to Boomers in ways that will motivate them to take action.

When I was studying for my master's degree in Clinical Gerontology, I came to appreciate how crucial it is to use creative concepts and precisely the right words to frame important issues when speaking with older adults. This skill is just as important in marketing communications as it is in counseling, because both disciplines depend on clear, concise, cogent communications to succeed. And it certainly helps to be creative, as long as it's relevant.

If it sounds like I'm talking about salesmanship, that's because I am. Salesmanship in counseling? Absolutely. If you think it's challenging to sell a product or service to a demanding target market,

imagine how difficult it is for a counselor to help motivate a client to consider making radical, life-altering changes. That's a sale and half, and the outcomes involved are far more important than what kind of artisanal brew or vacation spa a person chooses.

I coined the term GeroMarketing™ in 1994 to give a name to a new discipline that was largely unexplored territory in terms of marketing. Even then, it was apparent that the most desirable segment of this market wasn't the Old-Old cohort or even the Middle-Old, it was the Young-Old—the Baby Boomers, the biggest group of free-spending folks in American history.

It was easy to see that the rise of the Boomers would have an unprecedented—and unimaginable—impact on the world of business, particularly marketing. The more I thought about it, the more I realized the crucial role that thoughtful, sensitive, relevant marketing communications would play in reaching this finicky, fickle group.

Today, it's obvious that those who would successfully market to the Boomers must be adept at reframing old ideas to make them more palatable to an audience that sometimes seems determined to stay forever young. For example, if you want to sell them on long-term care, it better be framed to seem more like country club living than human warehousing.

Of course, innovative conceptual frameworks alone are insufficient unless they're expressed in precisely the right way, using

exactly the right words and evoking the most meaningful emotions. I discovered that can be a daunting task, even for a trained gerontology counselor who also happens to be an experienced advertising copywriter and marcom pro.

I also discovered that to profit from the Aging of America, you have to know how to woo and wow the Boomers, something which becomes more difficult with each passing day. Why? Because the louder the clock ticks, the more the Boomers desperately try to ignore it—like the *Telltale Heart*—as if their psychological denial might somehow alter physical reality.

Those Boomers who don't chronically indulge in denial have become adept at cherry-picking the most attractive benefits from the aging process. For instance, older adults generally expect to be treated with greater consideration—even deference—as they age. Many Boomers have taken that expectation to new heights, but they want the respect that comes with age without the wrinkles. They want to be granted eternal youth, even as they struggle against the unappetizing inevitability of one day being forced to “act their age.” The main reason this group is so hard to talk to is that they're not all that fond of reality, but then, in advertising and marketing, who is?

So how do you talk to this complex, perplexing group? Well, for openers you have to understand them more deeply than other groups. Although they stress their individuality, they have many important

characteristics in common. As a group, they're the wealthiest, best educated, most sophisticated consumers in the world. They're also the most vain. At times, Boomers can be even more self-absorbed than teenagers; the big difference is that they've got a lot more money than teens to indulge their whims.

The key to communicating with Boomers isn't to overlook their self-centered nature but to embrace it. Empathize with them, help them love their selfishness, and there's a good chance you can make them loyal customers. And that can be extraordinarily lucrative, because when all is said and done, appealing to their underlying self-centered, self-indulgent vanity will be key to wooing Boomers.

Tom Wolfe called them the "the splurge generation," and it's easy to see why, considering the houses they drive and the castles they live in. Even under pressures like the rising price of oil and the sub-prime crisis, the Boomers are far better equipped to keep spending than younger consumers who have maxed out their plastic.

The Boomers became known as the Me Generation, because they seem to believe that the universe should, in fact does, revolve around them. This doesn't make them bad people. In fact, they can be kind, generous and idealistic, but you've got to know how to talk to them. As always, this task will fall to advertising and marcom strategists and copywriters.

We who specialize in Creative GeroMarketing™ will be the ones tasked with putting a happy face on all those wrinkled ones. We'll be expected to know how to romance those creases so they seem to be signs of wisdom rather than indications of the nearness of life's finish line. We'll also be the ones who will be asked to discover, explore and, ultimately, tap into the emotional reactions that will drive Boomers to make important purchases. For example, what kind of car best expresses a given Boomer's most important values, a "green" Prius or a big, black Mercedes? Is botox treatment for wrinkles unnatural? Of course not. If you're happier staring into the mirror and seeing a 30 year-old face through 60year-old eyes, visit a plastic surgeon. It's like the Sixties all over again. If it feels good, do it!

When copy connects with a Boomer's idealized image, it's far more likely to be acted upon. So, the best writers will hone their craft so that the love letters we send to Boomers will tug at treasured memories, even if they are more based in fantasy than reality. The more sensitive we are as writers, the more we'll be able to elicit the emotional responses that will motivate Boomers to do what we ask. The more vivid and meaningful the copy, the stronger the memories and emotional responses we'll elicit. From an advertising and marketing communications perspective making that kind of connection is money in the bank.

A word of caution, though: Don't ever take Boomers for granted. These folks tend to be individualists who won't respond to formulaic writing. To be effective, writers will have to be more "artistic" and less "commercial." We'll have to walk the tightrope of "faction," balancing reality and fantasy. And we'll have to avoid absolutism, because that won't fly with this free-spirited, open-minded crowd.

Strongly worded and delivered claims about a product's features and benefits may work well with younger, more literal-minded adults, but strong narratives work better when it comes to grabbing and holding the attention of Boomers. And that's good, because stories arouse genuine feelings more readily than bombastic declarative statements. In fact, research shows that the more emotionally neutral information is, the less likely Boomers will pay it any mind.

The bottom line? Well, there is no short and simple one, because the Boomers are such a complicated group. Just keep in mind that when you're talking to them, be sure to frame your subject in an attractive, enticing way. And use evocative language. Connect with their emotions, and you'll be able to powerfully influence the way that Boomers perceive your products and services, as well as what they buy.

Facts and figures may be important in identifying and analyzing opportunities in this market, but in the end, the best way to reach Boomers is the Write Way. And that's what this book will help you do.