



Brand matters in an aging marketplace

Use the light of creativity, conditional positioning and ageless marketing to help you build a memorable brand

by G. Richard Ambrosius, MA

With all the ink being devoted to Baby Boomers these days, one could easily conclude there is no need to look at anyone over 65, at least this year, when developing branding strategies. It would be a critical mistake, however, to ignore what we have learned about older consumers and branding in the last couple of decades. While the life experiences of Boomers have been uniquely different due to the size of this cohort, the values that will guide

them in life's second half are not all that different from those of their parents and grandparents.

What most Boomers have in common, like generations before them, is that they probably have very little in common. The goal of this article is to move anyone interested in thriving in the next two decades—when older consumers will dominate the market in every developed nation—toward an ageless approach to branding.

Whether you define “old” as 65, 70, 75 or 80 years of age, the older population will be 100% Boomers for just 25 or 35 years. To focus solely on this group is the new millennium's version of *marketing*

myopia. [Ed. A concept introduced in 1960, marketing myopia occurs when a company is shortsighted and defines itself too narrowly based on its needs, rather than the needs of its customers.]

Once the business community wakes up to what market analyst and mature consumer behavior expert David Wolfe labeled the “new customer majority,” we can expect to face a new challenge: What brands and brand messages will resonate with the older consumer?

What is the ‘new customer majority’?

The first Boomers will turn 65 in 2011. Thereafter, thousands of men and women worldwide will turn 65 every day for the next 18 years, adding to the ranks of the Silent and Greatest generations.

Globally, an estimated 506 million people were ages 65 and over by mid-year 2008 (roughly 7% of the world’s population); by 2040, that figure is expected to be 1.3 billion (14%).¹ In the United States, there were 36 million adults in the 65-plus age group in 2006, approximately 12% of the US population. That number is projected to reach 71.5 million in 2030, or nearly 20% of the country’s population.² By 2011, the age 65-plus cohort will be growing faster than the US population in general—and *adults ages 45 and older are already a new consumer majority*. To ignore the combined economic power of this growing majority is to court disaster in the short term.

Older adults control 70% of the net worth of US households at a level equal to \$7 trillion. Market research further indicates that adults ages 55 and older have twice the discretionary spending of younger market segments—the coveted age group (18–49 years).³ There is a long-standing stereotype that older consumers are fiercely brand loyal and will never switch to new brands, making them less

valuable targets to marketers. While older buyers more often repurchase previous brands and consider fewer brands or models, more recent research reveals that brand loyalty is more a function of product and service than of age.⁴ In fact, those ages 45 and older are likelier to switch to a more expensive brand if the new brand better suits their needs, has a better reputation for quality, or comes from a competitor they have done business with in the past. Price considerations are more likely to lure 18–44 year olds away from favored brands in most product categories.

The sheer size and growth of the older-adult consumer segment today is changing the marketplace. Some industries—such as financial services, travel and hospitality, fitness, healthcare, and retirement housing—already understand the potential of the aging marketplace. Still, organizations and services may be limited in their potential for success due to outdated management, marketing, branding and advertising models.

Is it time to rebrand aging?

Of course, aging is a process, not a brand. But euphemisms for aging are prolific in the branding strategies of organizations and services. Let’s consider the word *senior*. We have senior centers, senior care, senior fitness, senior services, senior discounts, and so on. Those defending the term argue that the designation helps older adults locate them. If you offer a product or service that meets their needs and speaks to their values, older consumers will find you without your incorporating an *exclusionary* designation in your name.

Words matter! To keep our conscious minds from being overloaded with unimportant information, the brain sorts through billions of bits of information each moment to select things for the conscious mind to think about. If *senior* and *retirement* are perceived as negative

words to the individual, any message that uses them will not be processed consciously.

The brain also processes pictures and sensory data in context with the circumstances connected to words. Every word carries its own baggage, positive or negative. If *senior* is perceived to mean old, frail, dependent bingo player, or other traditional stereotype that does not fit, the consumer’s mind may exclude whatever is associated with that word as well. For example, an individual may not consider moving to a “retirement community” if it is viewed as a place to go when health is failing—a current stereotype that frustrates senior living marketers—yet this person may consider a planned community for adults ages 60 and older.

Traditional marketing has largely revolved around features and benefits under the assumption that customers’ decisions are rational. However, 25 years of brain research by the University of Southern California’s Antonio Damasio,⁵ in which he mapped the functions of reason and emotion, shows that decisions are rooted in emotions. Emotional responses are the brain’s way of informing the conscious mind of the relevance of information being shared.

The eyes and ears of targeted consumers 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 minds. Your challenge therefore is to create messages that resonate with the values, needs and interests of older adults in order to make it past the mental screening process. If you want to create a favorable impression, use words that reflect the perception you are trying to create while avoiding stereotypes.

Continued on page 30

Suggested reading

Ageless Marketing: Strategies for Reaching the Hearts and Minds of the New Consumer Majority

Authors: David B. Wolfe and Robert Snyder

Publisher: Kaplan Business, 2003

Serving the Ageless Market: Strategies for Selling to the Fifty-Plus Market

Author: David B. Wolfe

Publisher: McGraw-Hill, 1990

The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes

Authors: Margaret Mark and Carol S. Pearson

Publisher: McGraw-Hill, 2001

Mindfulness

Author: Ellen J. Langer

Publisher: Da Capo Press, 1990

Selling the Invisible: A Field Guide to Modern Marketing

Author: Harry Beckwith

Publisher: Warner Books, Inc., 1997

Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo from Maslow

Author: Chip Conley

Publisher: Jossey-Bass, 2007

The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage

Authors: B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore

Publisher: Harvard Business Press, 1999

The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything

Author: Stephen M. R. Covey

Publisher: Free Press, 2006

Become sensitive to the power of *inclusionary* terms and shun exclusionary ones (words and euphemisms shrouded in stereotypes that people could perceive negatively). Inclusionary/conditional terms allow individuals to screen a message based on their expectations, aspirations, needs and life experiences, rather than preexisting stereotypes and perceptions. These words are more likely to be positively perceived.

No one buys anything or uses a product or service solely because of age. They buy to satisfy wants, address needs and enjoy experiences. By accepting factoids that have their roots in either aging stereotypes or Boomer myths and misconceptions, companies will continue to waste billions using the wrong words and sending the wrong messages. (For eight tips to increase the success of branding messages, see the sidebar on page 35.)

Are outdated positioning strategies eroding your brand?

Until the 1990s, the predictability of human behavior worked in creating branding strategies, as the median age of adults stayed under 40. However, the world of business and marketing has been struggling since to adjust to a new market using an old paradigm. This is analogous to a 60-year-old who has worn glasses since adolescence using a 40-year-old pair of glasses to read today's paper. The facts would be there; the reader just couldn't see them.

Relationship, database, social media and Internet marketing have replaced mass marketing. The one-stop, hard sell, *in your face* sales techniques have gone the way of electric typewriters and rotary telephones. And subjective sales and marketing methods are gaining followers.

For decades, customer segmentation—introduced by Professor Wendell Smith in the *Journal of Marketing* more than

50 years ago—has dominated marketing and positioning strategies. Smith argued for separating customers into categories defined mainly by demographic and psychographic factors. After a 13-year study of the human genome was completed in 2003, science stepped into the picture and announced that, as humans, we are 99.9% the same. Our remarkable degree of sameness casts a questionable shadow over much of traditional research, especially when it involves customer segmentation. How does one segment peas in a pod?

It would seem to be more productive to focus on commonalities. An emotional Hallmark commercial can bring a tear to the eye and a lump to the throat of young and old alike by tapping what psychologist Carl Jung called *the collective unconscious*. Companies like Chico's, Harley Davidson and New Balance have done well speaking to that unconscious. The most successful brands are those that speak to multiple segments using more inclusive or conditional language, allowing the consumers to segment themselves experientially.

In the book *Ageless Marketing*, David Wolfe illustrated this point by comparing Nike to New Balance shoes. Nike's segment-oriented branding frayed because it focused on the narcissistic values of youth ("Just Do It!"), which no longer dominate marketplace behavior. The values of middle age now dominate because most adults are over 40. Nike's revenues declined, while New Balance was enjoying double-digit growth with its tagline, "Achieve New Balance." The New Balance tag represents the common midlife shift toward a less aggressive connection to the world and a desire for getting more out of life than material gain. By tapping into shared archetypal needs, a branding message will reach multiple segments.

Continued on page 32

Likewise, Chico's clothing for women speaks to later-life values. The brand helps consumers fulfill their practical needs, while also appealing to values of self-esteem and individual identity. The creators understood that comfort is equally important as style as we age. Chico's innovated by changing the conventional size chart to an easy-to-remember 0, 1, 2 and 3. This new sizing chart bypasses the stigma that might be associated with traditional sizes that midlife women remember from their youth. Chico's website explains: "Focus on comfort is the reason for our unique sizing. There are many characteristics incorporated into each and every product we make, but top on our list is comfort. Chico's clothing is made to wear how you like it to fit."

Another memorable example is Oldsmobile. Evidently falling for the brand loyalty myth that youth markets offered more potential, the brand changed its positioning to attract younger buyers (Boomers) using the tag, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile!" Oh, but

Mark your calendar

Join Richard Ambrosius for his presentation "Why rebrand aging? Exploring the power of conditional positioning" at the Eighth Annual International Council on Active Aging Conference in San Diego, California. This session will take place on Friday, December 3, 2010, from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. For details, visit the "Conference" section of the ICAA website, www.icaa.cc, or call ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.

Successful branding amounts to surprising the customer by being unique, different, better, and speaking to their values

it was! As a result of this new marketing myopia, the average age of buyers continued to increase, total sales tanked, and the brand died. With an exploding older market, Oldsmobile could have capitalized on its market position. Instead it became a victim of a common ailment still plaguing businesses today: chasing the elusive "youth and Boomer" market.

Harley Davidson took a different approach by embracing the outlaw archetype to guide its branding strategy. By carefully avoiding showing the faces of riders in ads and using positioning lines like "The road starts here. It never ends," the message resonated across generations and age cohorts. The conditional messaging spoke to the importance of autonomy in later life, to the young rebels, and the outlaw in everyone. When people love your brand enough to tattoo your logo on their body, you have achieved something worthy of study.

Jung seems to have come closer than anyone else on a branding strategy by formulating a viable, workable theory of human motivation. He was the first to claim that the roots of motivation lay in the developmental status of a person's life. While a person's response to an urge may be shaped by free will, the urge originates in the realms of unconsciousness. Contemporary brain research has validated Jung's theory. It is in the realm of the unconscious that archetypes such as the Harley Outlaw reside.

Hero, Outlaw or ?

Feelings and emotions are not synonymous. Emotions originate unconsciously, while feelings arise in the conscious mind from its attempts to figure out what emotional responses signify. To understand feelings, one must delve into the roots of behavior in DNA code where the motivating forces of archetypes originate. If your messaging can make contact with the archetypal structures of the human psyche, emotions will awaken and feelings will form.

In their book *The Hero and the Outlaw*, Margaret Mark and Carol S. Pearson present a psychological framework and methodology for leveraging archetypal meanings to build successful brands. "Today, the brand is a repository, not merely of functional characteristics, but of meaning and value,"⁶ Mark and Pearson write. Those who are interested can discover a clearly structured system to follow in order to understand a deep meaning for their product category and claim it for their brand. With examples and case studies, the authors share how to tell your brand's story in every element of the marketing mix. By comparing your brand essence with the 12 archetypes detailed, you can select the one that will best help you mediate between your products and consumer motivation by connecting with the collective unconscious.

Your brand does not exist on signage, packaging or marketing materials—these are simply representations. Brands exist in the heads and hearts of all stakeholders, both internal and external. If you do not imbue your products with meaning, they can be easily copied. Others have tried without success to copy the success of Southwest Airlines, in spite of numerous books and interviews with former CEO Herb Kelleher stating that the culture is the key. Newer features and improved benefits do not a brand make;

Continued on page 34

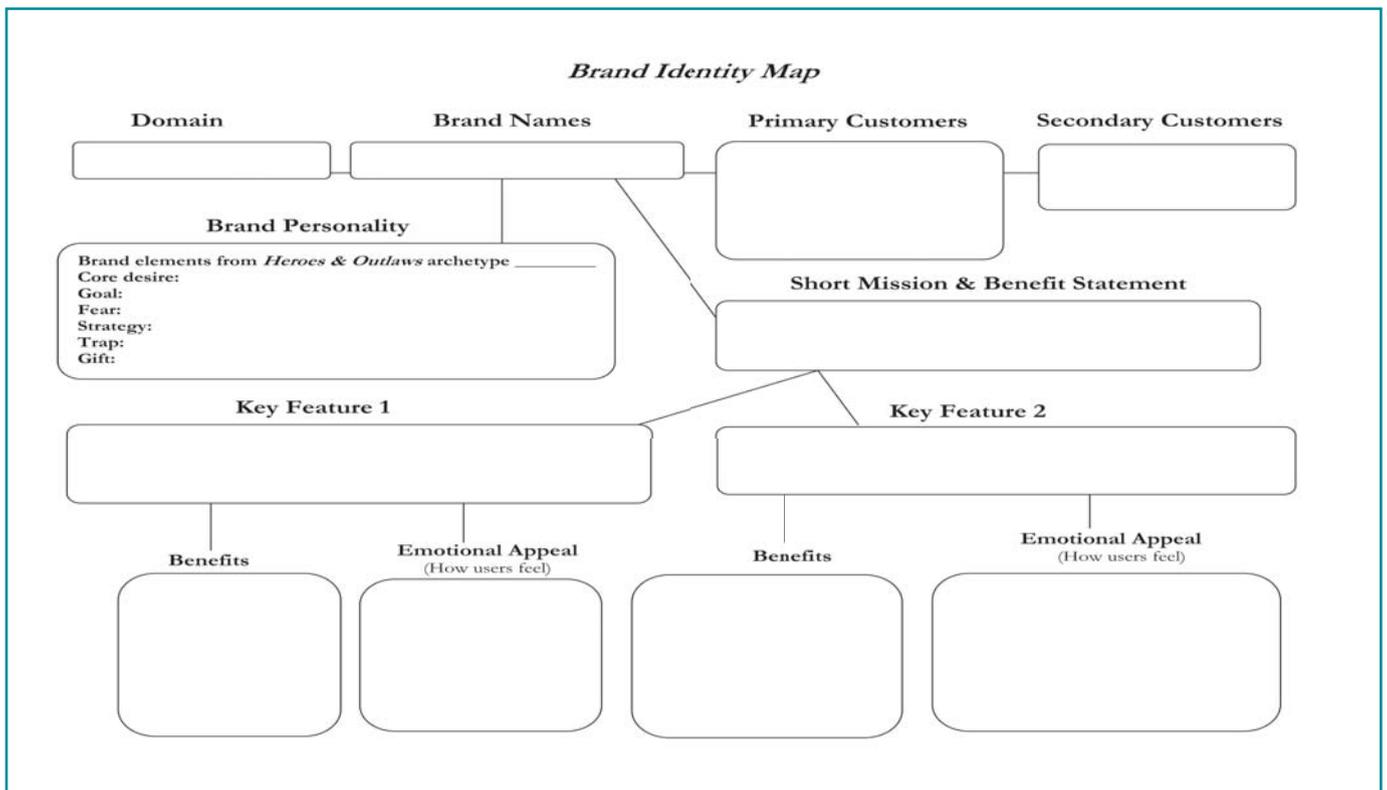
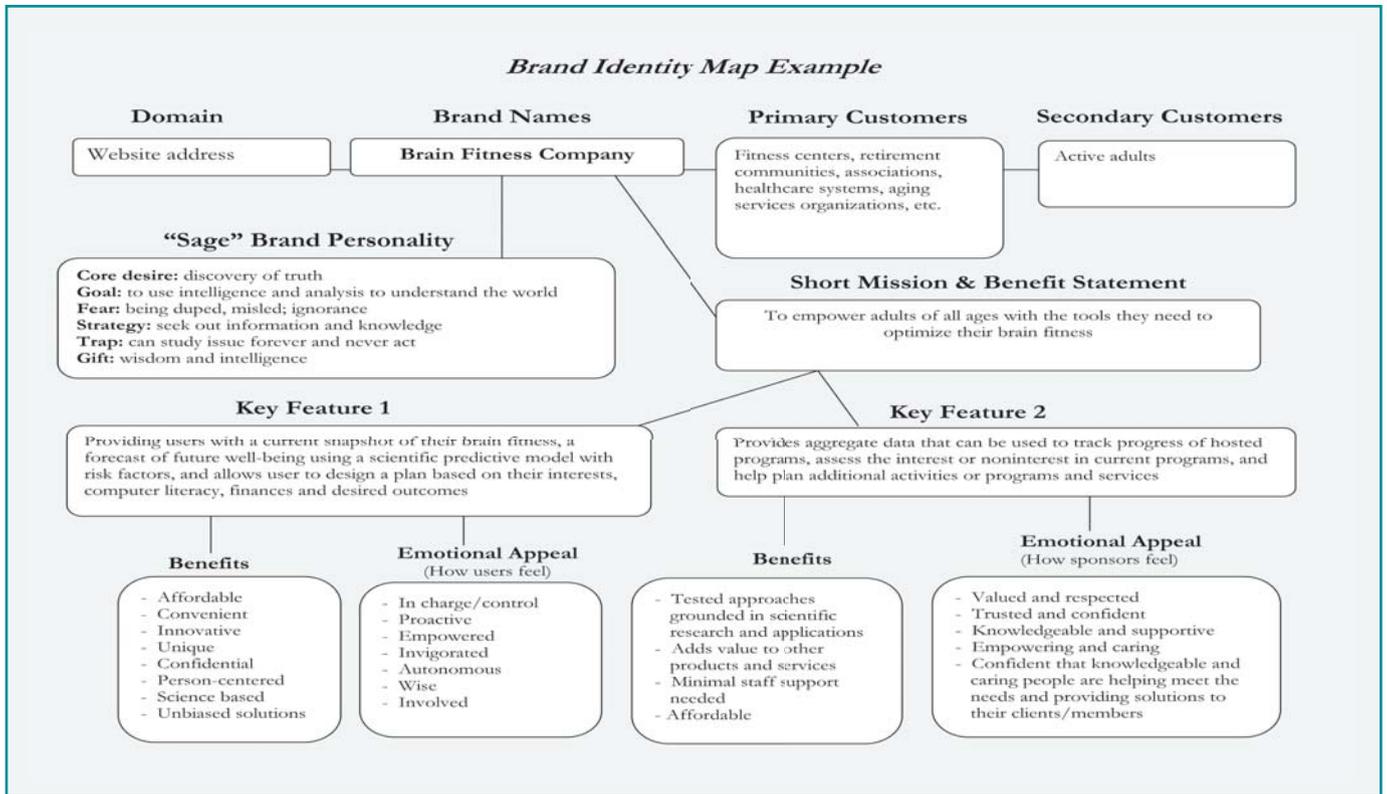


Figure 1. A brand identity map details brand values, benefits and emotional appeal



a meaningful culture is very hard to duplicate. It is the meaning and values of the brand that make the difference.

Your brand and your culture if properly developed and nurtured will become your most precious asset. In the book *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark*, Bryan and Jeffrey Eisenberg detailed why: “Increasingly, customers are associating brand, not with a message, but with their entire experiences surrounding the product or service ... it is more about what you do than what you say.”⁷ The advent of the Internet has changed the world of marketing from a monologue controlled by business to a dialogue controlled by consumers. As the Eisenbergs state, “In a world of options, you are one click away from goodbye.”

Building a new brand

To communicate a brand, you must find ways to express it that tap into universal feelings and instincts. According to Mark and Pearson,⁶ “Brand identities are forged best by identifying solidly with one—and only one—archetype. The archetype

within the brand serves as a beacon for the corresponding motivation in all of us.”

Once you decide on an archetype, develop a brand map (see Figure 1 on page 33). Since the map details your brand’s values, benefits and emotional appeal, it can be used to guide marketing materials, sales presentations and promotions. To become successful your brand must both tell a story and send a message. Your brand also represents a shared perception of the product and the values of the organization that stands behind it, and its value lies in this emotional connection or association in the minds of consumers.

In his book *Selling the Invisible*, Harry Beckwith describes the highest stage of marketing as something entirely different from pitching “features and benefits” or responding to a customer’s needs by offering a product.⁸ The highest stage of marketing amounts to innovation. In *The New Pioneers*, Thomas Petzinger, Jr., warns, “Businesses that fail to engage the eyes, ears, minds, and emotions of

every individual in the organization will find themselves overrun by obsolescence or crushed by competition.”⁹ As you develop your branding strategy, avoid this fate and speak to middle-aged and older consumers using values-centered metaphors and storytelling, rather than hyping features and benefits. Replace the photos of airbrushed models with real people making meaningful contributions, enjoying life, and staying connected to family, friends and community.

Successful branding amounts to surprising the customer by being unique, different, better, and speaking to their values. It can be summed up in the maxim, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” Use the light of creativity, conditional positioning and ageless marketing to help you build a memorable brand.

Once you create a memorable brand, tell your story. A few years ago, at a meeting of professionals on the topic of storytelling, Trappist abbot Francis Joseph shared his thoughts on the importance of storytelling. “Storytellers,” he observed, “help us process our lives.” Joseph’s comment says it all. Whether a for-profit business or a nonprofit organization, you will have greater success building a memorable brand if you think less about results and more about helping consumers process their lives. 

Richard Ambrosius, MA, is the vice president of outreach and group programs for NeoCORTA, a Washington, DC-based brain fitness company. For 30 years Ambrosius, an ICAA Visioning Board Member, has been educating companies, nonprofit organizations and public agencies on how better to communicate with and serve middle-aged and older adults. He was among the first in the United States to realize the potential of the “new consumer majority” and specialize in older markets. Ambrosius has delivered keynote addresses and motivational workshops in 49 states,

and is the author of *Choices & Changes: A Positive Aging Guide to Life Planning* (Xlibris Publishing, 2006). He can be reached by email at dambrosius@neocorta.com.

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3. De Asis, K. V. Tapping the Gray Market. Retrieved from http://www.brandchannel.com/papers_review.asp?sp_id=1261.
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5. Antonio Damasio is a leader in neuroscience. His research has helped to make clear the neural basis for the emotions, and has shown that emotions play a central role in social cognition and decision-making. His work has also had a major influence on current understanding of the neural systems, which underlie memory, language and consciousness. Damasio directs the USC Brain and Creativity Institute.
6. Mark, M., & Pearson, C. S. (2001). *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes*. New York NY: McGraw-Hill.
7. Eisenberg, B., Eisenberg, J., & Davis, L. T. (2006). *Waiting for Your Cat to Bark?: Persuading Customers When They Ignore Marketing*. Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson.
8. Beckwith, H. (1997). *Selling the Invisible: A Field Guide to Modern Marketing*. New York NY: Warner Books, Inc.
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Eight tips to increase the success of your branding messages

Whether you are in the process of rebranding, managing an ongoing brand or creating a new brand, the following tips will increase the probability your message will be heard:

- Depend more on values-based messaging and less on objective logic. A subjective lead paragraph is more likely to capture a prospect's attention and increase the probability that the reader will consider the offering. Lead with emotions and follow with facts.
- The older mind is context sensitive. If consumers do not see themselves in the story you are telling, they will dismiss your offer. By using inclusionary terms and conditional language, you take advantage of the mind's irrepressible need to complete an incomplete picture as viewed through the lens of the individual's personal worldview—not the copywriters'.
- Open-ended, deferential copy is more likely to connect with the experiential backgrounds of multiple consumer segments.
- Avoid hyperbole ("new," "best," "the only") and urgency strategies ("act today," "limited seating," "limited time") unless they are factual. Older consumers place a high value on their experiential perceptions developed through years of sorting through offers and sales presentations, making directive language a turnoff.
- Avoid drawing conclusions. Life experience has taught mature consumers to view the world in shades of gray and to trust their feelings and emotions. They read an ad or view a presentation conditionally and process the information based on their own values 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, creativity, and emotions) to screen messages before processing them rationally.
- Master the art of storytelling. With age, the mind processes objective information more slowly even though vocabulary and conceptual skills increase. Therefore, text should be developed using a clear, easy-to-read, personalized narrative style, and involve the reader. Present information using short sentences and positive statements in the active voice. Narrative storytelling reduces the number of inferences that must be made.
- Become a mirror of later-life values. You can't expect to be successful using older models while projecting the values of a youth culture, or by using emotional visuals and objective copy that focuses on features and benefits. Take time to learn about later-life values and how to communicate those values in your branding and messaging strategies.
- Use words, images and stories that resonate across multiple segments by tapping into the zone of human commonalities. Age segmentation allows marketers to develop a better understanding of specific markets, but it often shrinks a brand's potential by excluding people in other segments from comparable attention. "Salience has replaced reach and frequency as the critical piece of branding."⁶