

A man with white hair, wearing a purple tracksuit, is running towards the right. He is smiling and looking down at a small black object in his hand. The background is a blurred crowd of people, all tinted in shades of blue and purple, creating a sense of movement and a busy environment.

# Cutting through media clutter: five rules for communicating more effectively

**Today's consumers are overloaded and overwhelmed with information. Here's how you can cut through media clutter to reach older adults**

*by Brigid McHugh Sanner*

Health and wellness professionals want to reach consumers with useful and often life-saving communications, but they face a daunting task in today's cluttered information landscape. That's because an estimated 2,500 commercial messages bombard the average American every day. This *information overload* poses an obstacle for communicators, especially those working with tight budgets and limited resources.

The following five simple rules can help health and wellness professionals increase the effectiveness of advertising, promotion and consumer education efforts:

- 1 Clearly identify your audience.
- 2 Have a clear concept of what you want to communicate.
- 3 Target your messages to your audience's preferences.
- 4 Understand your audience's media habits.
- 5 Use a mix of media to deliver your message, but keep the message consistent.

### Clearly identify your audience

Simply stated, the target audience is the group of people a message is intended to reach. But all too often health and wellness professionals fall into the trap of defining their audience as *the general public*.

By drawing too wide a circle, communicators risk ineffectiveness. Even the use of broad demographic characteristics, such as age, will likely leave the target audience too large and undifferentiated.

For example, let's consider three adults ages 50 or above with different information needs about physical activity. Jim, 56, is training for a triathlon; Marilee, 50, is beginning a fitness program after 20 years of relative inactivity; and Esther, 86, is a regular participant in the community center's water aerobics program to help manage her arthritis. To these three scenarios, let's add the following elements:

- Jim is the CEO of a large manufacturing company, holds an MBA from a prestigious university, resides in an upscale urban neighborhood, and works with a personal trainer.
- Marilee has three teens at home, works as a customer representative for a national shipping company, completed her undergraduate degree at age 30 by attending night school, and lives in a modest suburban home.

- Esther is a widow with a fixed income, relies on public transportation or friends to get to the community fitness center, and lives in a senior housing project.

While Jim, Marilee and Esther all fall into the *midlife and older adults* category, they are extremely diverse. Their choice of media and media use habits will likely be extremely varied as well.

To develop and deliver health messages for 50-plus adults, health and wellness professionals must develop a good understanding of multifaceted audience characteristics and media habits. Today, traditional demographic markers (i.e. gender, age, race, education or income) are just part of the picture. Individuals should use marketing research to define the audience as clearly as possible *and* understand behaviors, beliefs, values, preferences and media habits that influence health behaviors.

### Have a clear concept of what you want to communicate

Even after clearly defining the target audience, communicators can still fail at developing effective messages if they do not think strategically about what they want to communicate. These individuals should ask themselves the following questions:

- \* What are the objectives of my/our communications efforts?
- What type of results do I/we want? (e.g. create program/facility awareness, educate people, increase enrollment, sell products/services, cultivate new relationships, rekindle contact with lapsed members)

A clear idea of what they want to communicate will better equip individuals to develop messages based on their target audience's preferences.

### Target your messages to your audience's preferences

Many health and wellness professionals tend to do the following: stress the importance of their message to population wellness; detail research studies that support their message; and tout the reputation and prestige of their institution. This approach is great for messages targeted to public health professionals. But messages will likely go unheard or unheeded if the target is a specific consumer audience segment, e.g. physically inactive middle-income adults, ages 45–55.

Simply put, people listen to messages for *their* reasons. So health and wellness professionals must understand what their audience cares about.

As part of the *Active for Life* initiative (turn to page 56 for information about this program), the 50-plus membership group AARP has done marketing research that provides insight into developing physical activity messages for this age group. The following points about midlife and older adults may help communicators with framing messages aimed at this population:

- Triggers that increase a person's interest in physical activity include turning 50 and declining health.
- Appearance counts, as 48% of individuals say they exercise to look good.
- About 60% of people indicate they exercise to control weight.
- Individuals say they are more likely to start and follow an exercise program if their physician recommends it.
- Three-quarters of 50-plus adults want information on how to exercise safely.
- People respond most favorably to advertising messages that show people who look like them.

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- Individuals do not respond to messages that make exercise sound like work, and images of grimacing, sweating, straining people hold no appeal for them.
- People want to do things that are fun.

Other marketing data from SGMA International, the Florida-based association of sporting goods manufacturers, says the *no pain, no gain* approach to fitness no longer attracts the Baby Boom generation. Instead, Boomers favor gentle, low-impact exercise that mixes flexibility with cardiovascular benefits.

What messages should communicators avoid? People do not want to hear they are getting old. A RoperASW survey done for AARP reveals that half the Boomers feel depressed about aging, and 18% admit actively resisting it.

With these types of insights into audience preferences, health and wellness professionals can consider how to stress messages that resonate positively with the 50-plus audience.

## Understand your audience's media habits

Consumers demonstrate preferences for sports, exercise, clothing, food, music, and just about everything else. In fact, when it comes to media use, consumers have a wide variety of preferences and habits.

**Newspapers.** This medium offers one of the best opportunities for delivering information to 50-plus adults for the simple reason this age group reads newspapers. In fact, 55.5% of people ages 45–54, 57.9% of those ages 55–64, and 61.3% of individuals ages 65 and older read a daily newspaper—with readership slightly higher among older men than older women. Newspapers are also the choice of 73% of adults ages 55 and older when it comes to advertising

information, according to the nonprofit Newspaper Association of America.

Slightly more than 50% of Caucasian adults read the dailies. Among ethnic adults, daily readership totals 45% of African-Americans, 44% of Asians and 33% of Hispanics. Targeting ethnic media may be a way to reach specific audiences. For instance, African-Americans tend to read urban African-American newspapers thoroughly and to keep the publications for several days. And a study by New York's Simmons Market Research Bureau found that 53% of Hispanic consumers remember more about or pay more attention to products and brands advertised in Spanish, while 45% say they are much more loyal to companies that advertise in Spanish.

College graduates and those with family incomes in excess of \$50,000 are among individuals most likely to read a newspaper.

**Television.** The typical American home has a television turned on (although not necessarily watched) an average of 7 hours, 13 minutes per day. By age 70, most people will have watched television for seven to ten years of their lives.

While much of entertainment television programming targets younger audiences, news and news magazine shows reach large segments of the older audience. Just 17% of people under 30 watch nightly network news, compared to 50% of people 65 and older. And a similar pattern exists for local news.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based PEW Research Center for the People and the Press, "News magazine shows such as '60 Minutes,' '20/20' and 'Dateline,' as well as the network morning shows, also draw in a disproportionate number of older

viewers. In addition, these programs hold much more appeal for women than men. Among the most loyal group of viewers of these shows are women over the age of 50."

Also worth noting, 25% of English-speaking Hispanics watch Spanish television regularly and another 25% tune in occasionally.

**Radio.** Thirty-four percent of people wake up to the radio, and 78% listen to it as they drive to work. In the workplace, 31% of people play the radio in the background. But music, not information, is the number one reason people tune in: 58% of radio listeners select this medium for music, 21% for news and just 7% for information.

Health and wellness professionals should consider radio station formats and work with those that attract older listeners. For example: adult contemporary, soft adult contemporary, urban adult contemporary, smooth jazz and classical likely have a large older audience.

Communicators must engage program hosts or personalities to position messages about physical activity for the 50-plus audience. Invitations to come and see the work being done with older adults may lead to hosts sharing information through on-air chatter.

**Internet.** Nearly 70% of Americans use a computer occasionally, and almost 60% have a computer at home. As the Baby Boom generation moves through midlife and into old age, they represent a significant and growing portion of the *wired* market.

Health is a huge topic of interest for Internet surfers. According to the American Telemedicine Association, an organization that advocates for access to medical care via telecommunications

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technology, about 30 million people went online for health-related materials in 2000.

There are hundreds of thousands of websites dedicated to a broad range of health and wellness topics. For example, a Google™ search in September 2003 yielded 1,050,000 hits on the inquiry “fitness over 50,” 651,000 hits on “senior fitness” and 400,000 hits on “exercising and aging.”

The Internet as a communications vehicle holds excellent potential for reaching the midlife and older audience, but a critical success factor will be attracting people to a website. Once people come to a site, its ease of use, content quality and visual appeal become critical. Many design principles for the print media apply to webpages targeted to 50-plus adults. A larger type size, good contrast, lots of white space, copy broken by headlines and subheads, and clear photos and graphics are all important to effective communication.

### **Use a mix of media to deliver your message, but keep the message consistent**

Health and wellness professionals will rarely meet their communications goals by using only one medium. A successful communications campaign requires a mix of media (see “Planning a campaign: media considerations” on page 48). But it is important to get the mix right.

Communicators must select the media that will reach their target and communicate their message effectively. Perhaps most importantly they need to be consistent in how they deliver their message. Health and wellness professionals may want to tell their audience *everything*, because everything is important. But by developing an array of messages and disseminating them through various media, they will likely overload or overwhelm the audience and fail to communicate *anything*.

Top commercial marketers understand and keep in mind the following rules—and effective health and wellness communicators do the same:

- Keep your message clear. Know what you want to communicate, what result or response you want, and who your audience is.
- Stick to three or four main points, and use these same points in all your messages related to a particular communications campaign.
- Repetition is a good thing; consumers need to hear and see the same message repeatedly for that message to break through the communications clutter.
- In print or Internet communications, more photos, graphics and white space appeal to readers.
- When using photographs, select images of people who look like the audience you are targeting.

Health and wellness communicators will find that a well-planned campaign,

executed with an understanding of the media and the target audience’s specific media preferences, will yield the desired results and provide the biggest return on time and money invested. ▼

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# Planning a campaign:

Media	Reach/audience	Considerations
Newspapers	<p>Mass audience</p> <p>High percentage of midlife and older readers</p> <p>Skews slightly higher towards men</p>	<p><i>Advertising</i></p> <p>Cost for ad placement in major metropolitan daily may be high.</p> <p>Most newspapers offer minimal public service space.</p> <p>Ads are most effective if they run in three or more issues.</p> <p>Sunday papers have higher readership, but advertising costs are generally higher.</p> <p>Many newspapers do special sections during the year. Find out if the local paper is planning a seniors section and consider placing an ad at that time.</p> <p>When placing an ad, ask about the section in which the ad will appear.</p> <p><i>Editorial/news</i></p> <p>Employ media-relations tactics and engage a reporter to do an article or series on your program. This approach is generally more effective if you can tie in with a news event.</p> <p>Weekly and community newspapers have smaller circulations, but placing articles is easier. Also, their advertising rates are generally lower than metropolitan dailies.</p>
Television	<p>Mass audience</p> <p>Local and national news programs attract high percentage of midlife and older viewers</p> <p>News magazine shows attract older female audience</p>	<p><i>Advertising</i></p> <p>Cost per impression (ad) can be high. Effective programs generally require a large advertising budget to assure enough frequency to make an impression.</p> <p>Public service ads generally run during very low viewership times (e.g. very early morning).</p> <p>Cable or non-network stations may offer attractive pricing. Find out about audience reach and frequency and be sure these match your target audiences.</p> <p>When buying ads, find out when they will run (day and time) and get viewership information to match against target audience.</p>

# media considerations

Media	Reach/audience	Considerations
<b>Television</b> <i>(continued)</i>		<p><i>Programming/news</i></p> <p>Approach local news-talk producer and pitch story ideas about your program. Outline why the story is of interest to a broad range of people. Consider how the story can be visual.</p> <p>Invite local celebrities such as weather or traffic reporters to your site. They may tie in your story as part of a local report.</p>
<b>Radio</b>	<p>By carefully selecting the right format, you can reach your target audience effectively</p>	<p><i>Advertising</i></p> <p>Generally, radio ads are less costly than television.</p> <p>Public service ads run during times of low listenership.</p> <p>Radio ad production costs are low, as stations will accept live copy advertising (which is copy you write for a radio personality to read live on-air).</p> <p><i>Programming/news</i></p> <p>Consider having an expert on a call-in program.</p> <p>Invite a local radio personality to your facility to see what you are doing.</p> <p>Radio news directors prefer a fact sheet in addition to news release. The fact sheet should cover who, what, when, where and why. Provide one sentence to explain each of these points.</p>
<b>Internet</b>	<p>Health information is a significant topic of Internet searches</p> <p>Lots of competition for audience in this medium</p> <p>Site must be designed so people can find information fast</p>	<p>You have control over your website content.</p> <p>You need to develop a solid strategy to draw people to your website and keep them coming back.</p> <p>You can ask your intended audience if they want to receive information from you and thus build a contact list. (Do not send people unwanted email.)</p> <p>Generally, the Internet is a low-cost medium. But you need to invest in keeping your information refreshed to keep people coming back.</p>