



Six steps to age-friendly advertising

What makes an advertisement more likely to succeed with the older adult market? Read on to learn the key elements of age-friendly advertising

by Colin Milner

When Philip K. Wrigley, heir to the largest chewing gum company in the world, was asked during a transcontinental flight why he still spent so much on advertising, he replied, “For the same reason the pilot of this airplane keeps the engines running when we’re already 29,000 feet up.” (What happens when you stop? You fall fast.)

The need and desire to buy and sell are integral parts of human life. But advertising does not sell, anymore than anything sells itself. Someone has to look the customer in the eye and ask a closing question to make a sale, which advertising is incapable of doing. What advertising *can* do is stir a potential customer to action and make a current customer feel good enough about his/her choice to ensure the individual becomes a repeat customer.

But advertising isn’t what it used to be, according to market researchers RoperASW, Consumers and the Center for Mature Consumer Studies.

RoperASW’s research shows that people ages 55–64 are more likely to find advertisements offensive and less likely to enjoy them, plus 31% of those ages 55 and up avoid products promoted in ads they think stereotype people. In addition, three in four mature consumers are dissatisfied with the marketing aimed at them. It sounds as though penetrating the mind of the older adult is an uphill battle. Or is it?

In reality, this research shows the need for advertising that speaks *to* the

market, rather than *at* it. By creating such advertising, savvy owners and managers can differentiate themselves from competitors.

Create ads that work

The elements of an effective, age-friendly advertisement range from the message to the type style to the image and more. But one thing is certain, according to Robert Snyder, senior partner at J. Walter Thompson’s Mature Market Group: “[M]essages that motivate younger consumers don’t always resonate with older consumers. The best ads for the mature market are those that specifically address their unique needs and wants.”

What works with the older adult?

According to marketing experts, the key components in creating age-friendly advertising include understanding the ground rules, knowing appropriate ad composition, choosing suitable models and photography, using appropriate terminology, finding the right message and delivering the message in an authentic, compelling manner.

Step 1: the ground rules

Robert Snyder states that many advertisers hope to reach older adults as a *spillover* market when they target younger consumers. In extreme cases, major advertisers use negative stereotypes of older adults to reach or humor younger audiences, he says, even when the mature market is well represented in their consumer base. While unintentional in most cases, this approach can turn off older consumers—and turning off consumers is never a good idea.

David Wolfe, author of *Ageless Marketing: Strategies for Reaching the Hearts and Minds of the New Customer Majority*, agrees with Snyder. Advertisers shouldn’t “say things that invoke the

idea that youth is the ideal state of being,” says Wolfe, “because that makes age the worst state of being.” So, what can owners and managers do?

Do tell a story. This group likes the steak more than the sizzle. “We encourage our clients not to skimp on telling their story,” says Snyder. “Take as much space as necessary to tell a mature customer why to choose you, and specifically address why they should stop what they are doing now and buy your product or service.” He adds, “Many advertisers are surprised to learn that mature consumers respond better to long format advertising.”

Do make me smile. “Ads should be designed to bring a smile, make people feel good, not scared,” says Wolfe, who cautions against using “humor that puts others down or makes others look silly.” He explains, “Out of six types of humor in a research study, put-down humor was least attractive to older people.”

Do include me. Richard Ambrosius, vice president of marketing at PRAXEIS Marketing Communications, advocates using *inclusionary* language. Avoid terms that any targeted consumers might perceive as negative or stereotypical, he says, as well as *exclusionary* language, such as *senior*, *senior citizen*, *retirement*, *retirement community*, *resident* and *nursing home*. “Just call people *members*, *customers* or other personal references,” he adds.

Do understand me. In studies by AARP, a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to improving life for people ages 50 and above, a significant number of participants identified strongly with messages acknowledging audience members’ busy lives. For example, one ad showed a 53 year-old Ohio resident named Terry

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Watkins walking briskly in a park. The ad copy stated:

“Terry Watkins takes the kids to practice. He takes his dad to therapy. He takes on a full-time job. And he takes time to stay fit at least every other day. Because Terry knows taking care of himself gives him the power to do it all better.”

Focus group participants felt inspired by Terry's story. They liked that he was trying to be more active and doing it for himself, despite other responsibilities demanding his time and attention. Terry looked like a nice person, which made it easy for participants to accept that it was neither selfish nor uncaring to take time for physical activity, despite a busy schedule.

Do be realistic. In testing materials, Melane Kinney-Hoffmann, AARP's director of health campaigns, found that many 50-plus people really appreciated a booklet that was *tolerant* or *realistic* about their level of activity and did not condemn or criticize them for being inactive. They also responded well to ads and booklets that acknowledged it can be difficult to commit to being active. She believes empathy and encouragement are key ingredients in communicating successfully with people ages 50 and older about exercise.

Do show your credibility. “Authenticity is critical,” says Wolfe. Ambrosius echoes this sentiment by outlining “good ways to lose your credibility with the market.” He suggests owners and managers stay away from strategies that rely on fear (“I've fallen and I can't get up”) or urgency (Act now before it's too late; limited supply or seating). “Exaggeration and hyperbole in headlines and body copy—newest, best, number one and similar hype—are overused and fall on deaf ears,” says

Ambrosius. And avoid directive language, such as *the right choice for you* or *the best address in town* or *for the wise consumer*, he urges. Instead, use more conditional language, such as *perhaps this will be your best decision in years* or *consumers that share your values and concerns*.

Do reflect my values. “Ads reflecting altruistic values can play quite well,” advises Wolfe. “Save ads that project self-indulgence for younger audiences.”

Step 2: delivering the message

“Don't lecture,” says David Wolfe. “Tell a story.” According to Wolfe, stories generally arouse emotions much faster and deeper than reciting facts. He also suggests breaking lengthy documents into short sections to help with comprehension, as “the mind processes objective information more slowly with age, although vocabulary and conceptual skills continue to increase.”

According to Richard Ambrosius, prospective consumers must see themselves in a story, because they will dismiss an offer if no context has been established. He offers the following tips as a guide to copy development:

Values and experiences influence consumer behavior. The use of more open-ended, deferential copy is more likely to connect with the experiential backgrounds of multiple consumers. Likewise, seek balance in the use of photos of couples and singles. Widows and widowers will not see themselves in an ad made up of couples. The same is true for racial/ethnic mix in images.

Older brains screen messages. Older consumers place a high value on their experiential perceptions developed through years of sorting through offers and sales presentations. They have heard and seen it all. Avoid hyperbole in favor

of positive, conditional, value-charged words or phrases. Although their initial response is emotional, older consumers will spend more time examining facts and figures once you gain their attention than younger consumers. To be effective, lead with the emotions and follow with the facts.

Avoid drawing conclusions. Life experience has taught mature consumers to view the world in shades of gray and to trust their intuition. They have grown to trust their feelings and emotions. How they read an ad or process a presentation is conditional and qualified based on their worldview and beliefs. They then analyze the ad or presentation in the context in which it is presented. Generally speaking, mature consumers tend to use right brain functions (intuition, visuals, creative, emotions) to screen messages before processing them rationally. If a message does not get through the screening process, the offer will not be considered.

Do soft sell me. Owners and managers should create emotional connections with an audience, leave a lasting positive impression of their brand and always include nonthreatening reasons to call or visit their facilities.

Step 3: use terms that work

The key to penetrating the hearts and minds of older adults is to speak their language, as AARP discovered early in its research. The association tested a variety of words to assess their effectiveness in communicating the message of physical activity to the older adult. The feedback was illuminating:

Active: very positive response

To study participants, *active* meant engaged with life, family and community. They did not equate *active* with exercise. For people at the older

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end of the age spectrum, *active* meant going to church or playing bingo. They too did not connect the word with exercise.

Exercise: very negative response

Exercise is not a word to use in an advertising message. Participants saw *exercise* as too hard and difficult.

Physically active: very positive reaction

The study's participants liked the term *physically active*, because it implied they could do a wide range of activities to be physically active, not just go for a walk. They intuitively understood the health benefits.

Fit, being fit, staying fit and being in shape: very neutral response

Some [participants] liked these terms because they did not sound as hard as *exercise*. Although okay to use in advertising, these terms are not necessarily winners, like *active*. As AARP heard time and time again, words are extremely important in developing messages.

AARP also tested words like *moderate* and *vigorous* to see if participants understood them in relation to exercise. *Vigorous* meant nothing to people, because they could not figure out what it meant in terms of physical activity. But they understood *moderate*, especially when it equated a brisk walk. People probably had some sense that *moderate* relates to pacing and pumping a little harder.

The association also tested the phrase *most days of the week* versus *almost all days of the week*. Research participants showed much more comfort with *most days of the week*.

Five days also proved an important threshold for study participants. If people were told the message *Exercise five days of the week*, they protested and

said five days was way too much. But they responded positively to *more than four days* and *four or more days*.

Terms that don't work with this group.

June Hussey, vice president of public relations for the Fountain Retirement Communities, says, "I personally like to avoid using the term *senior*. I don't believe people like being labeled...unless of course it means a discount of some sort." Hussey tells about going to breakfast at a national chain and being appalled to see a whole section of the menu for *seniors*, e.g. Senior Omelette and Senior Toast. "It offended me," she says. "Just because you're targeting *seniors* doesn't mean you have to do so overtly."

Every word counts. Ambrosius advises owners and managers to focus advertising on health and well-being—being productive, the importance of autonomy and involvement—plus the importance placed on relationships and being responsive to the wants, needs and aspirations of consumers and stakeholders. "Remember that a prospect's mind will consider your

initial message *from 0.2 to 0.8 of one second* (your cognitive window of opportunity)," says Ambrosius. "[It's] not much time to make a first impression. That is why *every word* and image is so important."

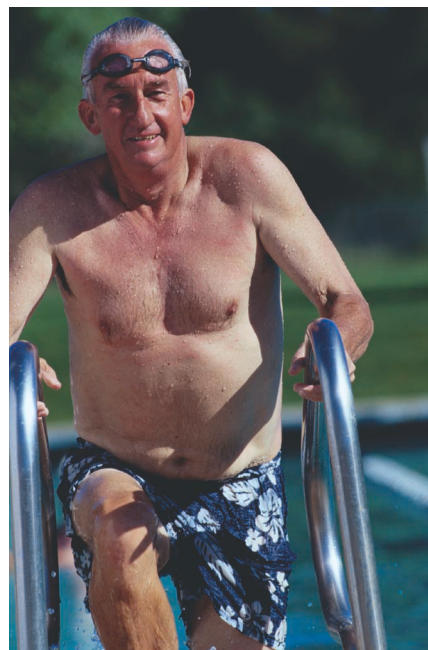
Step 4: choosing the right models

Identify with me. "Older people strongly reject images that show superfit, model athletes—even if they are of their own age group," says AARP's Melane Kinney-Hoffmann. "Rather, they want to see people with *normal* bodies that are less than perfect." Hoffmann adds that using older elite athletes as role models has limited appeal. "Elite athletes may be used for very selected applications, but are not generally effective," she says.

This age group also rejects the image of cute or perfect matching exercise clothing, according to Hoffmann. The 50-plus adult is more likely to identify with an image of someone in a T-shirt and sweatpants or regular shorts. This audience universally abhors spandex, she says.

However, consumers *feel* 15–25 years younger than their biological age, adds Ambrosius. And they tend to choose products or services that reflect images "of what they *want* to be, not what they are."

Who better than my friends? Believable testimonials for the older adult age group include a doctor, family member or friend. People perceive these individuals as trusted sources of information. Then there is the celebrity testimonial, which Mary Swanson, president of HealthCare Dimensions, believes may not be the best use of advertising funds. In Swanson's experience, peer testimonials are more



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valuable, as they give the sense that “if they can do it, I can do it.”

But, Ambrosius cautions, “[O]lder consumers are much less ego-centered than younger consumers, so they do not buy products or services because someone else—or everyone else, as a teenager might claim—is doing something.” He says older consumers buy because something meets their needs.

One reason celebrity testimonials have little appeal for mature adults is believability. Says Ambrosius, “Does anyone believe a high-profile celebrity receives their prescriptions through the mail or is worried about living on their social security payments?”

Step 5: photography

When it comes to photography, owners and managers should keep in mind what AARP researchers discovered: exercise that looks like too much work turns off older adults. Grimacing, sweaty, straining models won’t entice many 50-plus adults to become active. In fact, AARP’s study participants felt uncomfortable with ads of a male biker exercising at a level they felt was far too strenuous and potentially dangerous. *Fun* was much more inspiring to these individuals, who liked images of people who were smiling and chatting with their exercising companions.

“Intergenerational photos can also be a powerful tool,” says Richard Ambrosius. “They help to communicate...altruism, which is so valued by most mature consumers.” [Ambrosius refers to maturity in the psychological, not chronological sense.] He adds, “Find pictures that tell a story and use metaphors that key positive emotions, i.e. the flag, babies, helping hands and similar positive images.”

Step 6: ad composition

David Wolfe advises that changes in visual acuity among older adults need special consideration when it comes to choosing an ad’s font and font size and the color of paper and inks. “Reverse type (white type on a dark background), which is commonly used...to get attention, is especially problematic,” says Wolfe. “An ad may win an award for creative excellence, but fail in its primary purpose if type size and ink choices...discourage a person from reading it.”

Color. According to Wolfe, it’s important to remember that the slowing down of information processing in the central nervous system reduces an older adult’s capacity for distinguishing between colors and light intensities. “Subtle gradations in color will not be detected by most people who are in their 60s and older,” he says. “Visual responsiveness to pastels and combinations of colors at the green-blue-violet end of the spectrum also declines.” Wolfe sees the need to educate people who prepare print and broadcast advertising about the older market’s changing visual acuities.

The marketing experts agree that an effective advertisement for the older market uses bright colors in high contrast (black on white/navy on light gray), which is usually best for readability.

Text. Distinguishing color is just the start. To ensure a potential resident or member can read an ad, type size should be at least 12–14 point, with lots of white space—even for footnotes. “The background of the ad should be clear, so you can actually read the copy,” says Mary Swanson. “There should also be a clear contrast between the font size of the body copy and the font size of the headline (18–20 point or larger).”

She adds that narrow margins and condensed leading create difficult-to-read copy, so are best avoided.

What about typeface? According to Richard Ambrosius, owners and managers “will want to use a serif type for body copy and headlines, i.e. Times New Roman, Georgia or Garamond.” He advises staying away from “excessively large, all uppercase or ornate typefaces, i.e. Old English, Bertram, Edwardian Script or French Script or similar fonts.” And popular Sans Serif typefaces, such as Arial, Century Gothic or Impact? Ambrosius says these are harder to read and should be limited to headlines and captions.

Headlines. Highly conceptual or abstract headlines “don’t usually stop mature consumers as well as [headlines] that are more direct,” says Robert Snyder. Short and pointed headlines in serif typeface are ideal.

Background. Pieces targeted to older adults need clean and clear backgrounds to enhance readability, so background screens of images or copy are unadvisable. And “white space is important in creating an avenue for the reader’s eye to follow,” says Swanson, who also agrees that backgrounds should never distract from the message.

Advertising that speaks to the market

For organizations that serve the mature market, getting advertising right can mean the difference between a desired return on investment and a puzzling lack of response. By following the six steps to age-friendly advertising, owners and managers can create appealing ads that stir their target audience to action:

Continuing education will advance your career

1. Understand the ground rules;
2. Know appropriate ad composition;
3. Select suitable models;
4. Choose appropriate photography;
5. Use positive, inclusionary terminology;
6. Find the right message and deliver it in an authentic, compelling manner.

Age-friendly advertising speaks *to* older people, rather than *at* them, and shows that the advertiser understands and respects mature adults. Organizations that create age-friendly ads appeal to older adults and increase their likelihood of succeeding with this market. ▼

Colin Milner is chief executive officer of the International Council on Active Aging.

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