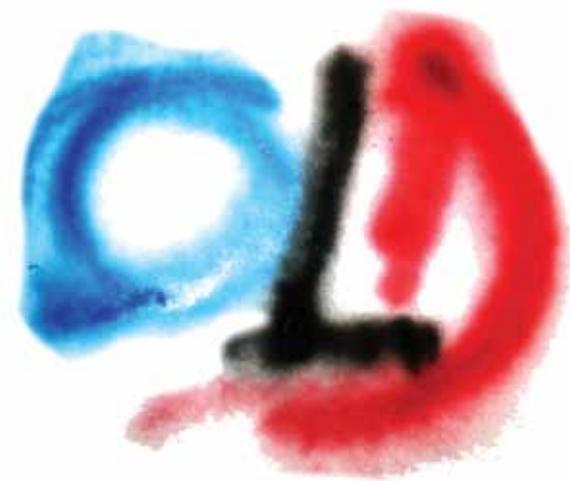


Rebranding Aging: the next chapter



As an International Council on Active Aging® initiative seeks to ‘reframe the discussion’ and provide tools for advertisers and marketers to succeed with age 50-plus consumers, two mature market experts involved in the effort share their advice for effective marketing communications

by G. Richard Ambrosius, MA, and Helen Foster

The emergence in 1989 of the “new customer majority”—adults ages 50 and older today—left advertisers and marketers up the proverbial creek with no paddle to guide them back to the mainstream consumer population.¹ From an advertising and marketing perspective, this shift meant everything learned about consumer behavior quickly be-

came irrelevant. Texts for these professions were all written to target the young that had ruled the marketplace for decades. The behavior of the youth markets of yesterday, however, was much different from that of the older consumers who now are the adult majority.

Over the past decades, we have added multiple terms/strategies to the marketing lexicon to appeal to consumers, including segmentation, one-to-one marketing, guerilla marketing, positioning, CRM [customer relationship management], and social marketing. But remember the ill-fated attempts to lower the average buyer age of one General Motors brand: “It isn’t your father’s Oldsmobile”? The problem with age-based marketing is its exclusivity. Older people don’t want a brand that reflects immaturity (Pepsi) and young people

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don't want a brand that reflects maturity (Buick—although Buick has made gains in bringing down the average age of its customer base). Thanks to the success of advertisers and marketers in connecting brands with age cohorts, people are generally sensitive to what a brand says about them in terms of age. But matters of age in the marketplace can, and should, be different.

An ageless approach

The alternative to age-based advertising is a more ageless approach—one based not on age, but on values and universal desires that appeal to people across generational divides. Age-based marketing reduces the reach of brands because of its exclusionary nature. In contrast, ageless marketing extends that reach because of its inclusionary focus.

To plan for success in serving the age 50-plus consumer majority, businesses, non-profit organizations and governments must learn to view the market through the lens of reality, not the distorted view seen through the youth lens of yesterday. For example:

- No one buys anything or uses a service solely because of their age, but to satisfy wants, address needs and enjoy experiences. New techniques must be learned and applied that connect with later-life values rather than perpetuating ageist factoids and stereotypes.
- Few advertising agencies, consultants and businesses have an understanding of how to connect with later-life values. Too many seem to have accepted current factoids rooted in aging stereotypes, myths and misconceptions. Without constructive alternatives, companies will continue to waste billions by focusing on features and benefits and using the wrong words and messages.

By adopting new strategies and tools grounded in reality, businesses and orga-

nizations will insure success in a market dominated by older consumers.

'Rebranding' aging

The International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA), with its commitment to being a leader of the change process, has launched an initiative that educates advertisers and marketers about today's age 50-plus market. In May 2011, ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign was initiated to shift perceptions of aging and tackle ageism in society. The campaign's Rebranding Aging initiative provides resources to reframe the discussion with advertisers and marketers, and shares tools to help in integrating more realistic portrayals of older consumers.

Among the Rebranding Aging tools, the first installment of the "ICAA Guidelines for Effective Communication with Older Adults" is available on the campaign website (see "Resources" on this page). In addition, the first-ever ICAA Rebranding Aging Awards contest took place last summer to recognize excellence in marketing wellness-oriented products, programs or services to consumers ages 50 and above. (For a list of the winning entries and why they were selected, see the sidebar "Excellence in marketing" on pages 82–83.)

"Relatively few marketers focus on the older-adult demographic, and most of those who do get a failing grade," says ICAA CEO Colin Milner. "We need shining examples from people who 'get' this market so that others can look and learn from them. By recognizing these trailblazers, we are providing tools to guide the efforts of other marketers going down this path." Milner adds that the winners of the 2011 Rebranding Aging Awards "show it's possible to create compelling pieces for older markets without reinforcing stereotypes."

Unlocking older markets

The fact is, regardless of age, consumers tend to select products/services that

Resources

Foster Strategy, LLC
www.fosterstrategy.com

ICAA's Changing the Way We Age Campaign: ICAA Communication Guidelines
www.changingthewayweage.com/Media-and-Marketers-support/guidelines.htm

ICAA's Changing the Way We Age Campaign: ICAA Rebranding Aging Contest
www.changingthewayweage.com/rebranding_aging_contest.asp

International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)
www.icaa.cc

Positive Aging
www.positiveaging.com

reflect images of what they want to be, not what they are. While physiological declines are a part of life, older consumers "feel" anywhere from 15 to 25 years younger than their biological age. They don't think they "look" 15–25 years younger, however. When models in marketing pieces or ads are too young or engaged in extreme sports, the consumer simply dismisses the message because it lacks authenticity.

The key is realistic people in real-world activities. In an aging marketplace, relevance is replacing reach and frequency as the holy grail of successful branding campaigns. Consumers in the advanced stages of maturity usually have faith in their values or what they believe in. Therefore, when creating marketing messages to attract older consumers, companies must learn how to talk about them and what they stand for by aligning messages with later-life values.

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The three keys that will help in unlocking older markets are autonomy, choice and empowerment. If you apply these values to the following rules, you will do well with age 50-plus consumers:

- *Use values-based messages rather than objective logic.* In photos, copy and headlines, the first appeal should be emotional. A subjective lead increases the probability that the reader will consider the offering. When sharing features and benefits, copy should present only the facts, not the conclusions. Also avoid using urgency language (“only three left,” “limited seating,” etc.), which does not work on well-educated, experienced consumers. Likewise, directive statements, such as “act now” or “don’t delay,” threaten autonomy and independence.
- *Establish relevant context.* If consumers do not see themselves in the images you use or the story you tell, they will dismiss your offer. You can take advantage of the mind’s irreplaceable need to complete an incomplete picture by using inclusionary terms (*people, members, consumers*) rather than exclusionary terms (*seniors, residents, retired*), and conditional language, which taps into the consumer’s creativity.
- *Avoid hyperbole.* Older consumers place a high value on experiential perceptions developed through years of sorting through offers and sales presentations. They have heard and seen it all. Therefore, avoid hyperbole (terms such as *new, best, latest, unique*) in favor of positive, conditional, values-charged words or phrases.
- *Offer choices and avoid drawing conclusions.* Life experience teaches consumers to view the world in shades of gray and trust their feelings and emotions over advertising hyperbole. How

older adults read an ad or process a presentation is conditional and qualified based on their worldview and beliefs. Only then do they analyze the information in the context presented.

The following print standards are also recommended:

- *Type should be no smaller than 12 point*, with the rare exception of footnotes (10 or 11 points) and copyright notations.
- *Avoid excessively large, uppercase or ornate typefaces* (Old English, Bertram or similar fonts). For body copy, use serif type fonts such as Times New Roman, Garamond or Courier. Limit sans serif type, such as Arial, Century Gothic or Impact, to headlines and captions.
- *Body copy should be justified left with a ragged right margin* in newsletters, correspondence, direct mail, editorials or articles. Flush left text, with even spacing, is acceptable for ads and brochures.
- *Color and contrast are critical.* Older consumers tend to favor pastel shades, while negatively perceiving browns and grays. As the eye ages, the retina begins to yellow colors at the blue-green-purple end of the color spectrum, so these colors become difficult to distinguish, especially if used in contrast.
- *Avoid using a photo or detailed graphic as a background for copy.* Print placed on a photo is difficult to read, and may cause consumers to ignore the message.
- *Avoid enamel or other glossy paper stock.* Eyes become increasingly sensitive to glare over the years. A non-glossy, matte stock is best for brochures, with limited use of spot enamel on photos.

The ICAA communication guidelines also offer information and guidance on basic language and imagery topics (see “Resources” on page 78).

The power of words

Word choice is another key to improving your marketing communications. Why? To keep the conscious mind from being overloaded with unimportant information, the brain performs what might be called “information triage” when processing incoming messages. Billions of bits of information are sorted in less than one second to select what the conscious mind thinks about.

The brain does not process words, however; it processes pictures and sensory data in context with the circumstances. Consumers’ eyes and ears may detect what you are trying to tell them, but unless the brain senses personal relevance, little of the message content will reach their conscious minds. For example, if the word *senior* is perceived to mean old, frail and dependent by someone who does not relate to this stereotype, the individual’s mind may “exclude” whatever is associated with that word from conscious consideration. Your challenge, therefore, is to create messages that resonate with the prospect’s needs and interests.

You can begin the slow change process by sensitizing all team members to the power, both positive and negative, of the words we use, and subsequently start using more inclusionary terms and avoiding exclusionary ones.

Inclusionary/conditional terms allow people to screen a message based on their expectations, aspirations, needs and life experience, rather than on preexisting stereotypes. Such terms are more likely to be positively perceived. A few examples follow:

- *Facility/unit.* Unless used in a board or team meeting, cold real-estate

terms such as *facility, unit or dwelling* should generally be avoided. Instead, try *community, neighborhood, residences or homes*.

- *Seniors, senior citizens and elderly.* Avoid such labels. In communications, try *customers, people, members, citizens* or similar terms of inclusion.
- *Titles.* Avoid incorporating stereotypes into titles. For instance, instead of “retirement counselor” or “activity director,” try “planning advisor” or “events coordinator.”
- *Retirement.* Use terms like *retirement* only to establish a context. Retirement is the act of leaving a full-time career or leaving one profession after years of work; it is not an accurate descriptor of a life stage. “Retirement” once lasted only a few years, but individuals now frequently enjoy two or more decades of productive life after age 65. Since this word suffers from many common aging stereotypes, avoid using it if possible and explain why.

Here’s a simple test as to whether or not your marketing materials are perpetuating stereotypes: Delete all exclusionary terms such as *senior, elderly, retired* and the like. Now reread the copy. You will be surprised at how little impact there is on the overall message when you make the copy more inclusive.

A new image

By mindfully pursuing an ageless approach to marketing communications, we can promote a new image of later life—one rich in possibility and positive experiences, which acknowledges the uniqueness and worth of each individual regardless of age. As part of ICAA’s Changing the Way We Age® Campaign, the Rebranding Aging initiative is engaging advertisers and marketers in this change process. All of us in the ICAA community can help write the next

chapter by providing “shining examples” for others. We believe that, through such efforts, society will once again come to revere the wisdom and life experience of its elder members. ☺

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Helen Foster, principal of Foster Strategy, LLC, is a nationally recognized marketing and development strategist in the United States who specializes in age-qualified real estate. Foster consults with clients to identify Boomer-plus market opportunities, and her experience includes active adult developments, continuing care retirement communities, master planned communities, urban planners and retailers. She also served on the ICAA Rebrand Aging Work Group and as a judge for the 2011 ICAA Rebranding Aging Awards. For information, visit www.fosterstrategy.com or call 504-897-2236.

Reference

1. Wolfe, B., & Snyder, R. E. (2003). *Ageless Marketing: Strategies for Reaching the Hearts and Minds of the New Customer Majority*. Chicago IL: Dearborn Trade Publishing.

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Looking for the right employee?



Post your job opening on the ICAA Career Center—your online link between people and positions. Gain access to the more than 9,000 organizations and professionals served by the International Council on Active Aging®, and find the ideal candidate for your needs.

For information about the ICAA Career Center, call toll-free 866-335-9777 or 604-734-4466. Or go to www.icaa.cc/careercenter.htm

Excellence in marketing: winners of the fir

ADVERTISING

In 2011, the International Council on Active Aging® launched the first annual ICAA Rebranding Aging Awards competition as a way to begin identifying effective marketing communications materials and the organizations behind their creation. More than 70 entries were received. All were reviewed based on the following four primary criteria:

- message and imagery resonates and/or evokes positive aging image
- call to action is clear and compelling to the intended audience
- ad layout and graphic standards are appealing and appropriate for the target market (generally complied with the “ICAA Guidelines for Effective Communication with Older Adults”)
- overall uniqueness and creativity (advancing the principles of ageless marketing)

The winners in the Advertising, Brochures and Direct Mail categories are shown on these two pages. While entries were accepted in a fourth category, Websites, the judges chose not to extend awards. In the words of one judge, “Sites that were great technically were not as strong with regard to messaging and visuals, or vice versa, and there was not a sufficient pool from which to draw winners.” With the growing importance of online efforts in the age 50-plus market space, the field is wide open for 2012.

a. Gold award: Ground Zero Marketing/Revera, TV Spot 2 Edna—This entry stood out by effectively using humor and actual community members to counter “retirement” community stereotypes. Historically, finding positive, values-centered television messages has been all but impossible. This entry was definitely on the right track. The judges hope others will continue to explore this medium, both as paid ads and through the use of social media vehicles.

b. Silver award: Shannondell at Valley Forge, Inspiring—These ads focused on community members, rather than features

and benefits, to position the community. The focus was on storytelling by profiling community members who inspire others. For future success, organizations must become better at storytelling, and Shannondell’s ads excelled at telling the community’s story through the eyes of community members.

c. Bronze award: Atria Senior Living, NY—Like the Shannondell ads, Atria made consumers the focus of this colorful, eye-catching ad series. The specific ad selected for award used “Fascinating” as the headline to communicate that community was really about the members that called it home.

a.



b.



c.

1st annual ICAA Rebranding Aging Awards

BROCHURES

a. Gold award: Touchmark, The “Full” Life—This entry was clearly the best-of-show choice of the judges. The entry employed a creative use of color palettes and wordplay—such as Meaning(FULL), Joy-(FULL), Flavor(FULL)—to tell the story of community. The brochure also blended nature photos and copy to put member stories into the foreground and features into the background.

b. Silver award: Vivante on the Coast, Hard Cover Book—Vivante was selected for its design and layout using digital pictures. At first look, the reader would assume this was an existing community rather than a digital picture of a planned community. The coffee table book offers exceptional shelf life and demonstrated the potential of today’s technology.

c. Bronze award: Immanuel Communities, Welcome—Using a Welcome Mat icon, the entry effectively focused on life in this Midwestern community. Clean design and clear call to action were also noted.



DIRECT MAIL

a. Gold award: Shannondell at Valley Forge, Talk About Inspiring Stories—Again, Shannondell stood out for its creative storytelling, using inspiring member stories and a question-and-answer format to gain the reader’s attention.

b. Silver award: Haskell Senior Living Solutions, Arbor Ridge postcards—This entry is an excellent example of how to effectively use postcards to promote a community through lifelong learning—

Arbor Ridge U. The postcards used authentic, realistic photos and creative headlines to capture the attention of prospects.

c. Bronze award: Wellness Institute, Passport to Active Aging—The Wellness Institute’s direct mail package creatively used a prototype passport to promote its Active Aging Day program. The package incorporated a guest pass as the call to action, detailed a program of classes, and included a postcard for a prospect to invite friends.

