

Tackling graywashing:

what drives it, how to recognize and avoid it



Products that purport to ‘combat’ aging treat older adults as though they’re damaged goods—and many organizations that claim to be ‘senior friendly,’ aren’t

by Marilyn Larkin, MA

Shortly after the launch of the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)’s Changing the Way We Age® Campaign, ICAA CEO Colin Milner was researching his book chapter for the World Economic Forum when he had an “aha” moment. “In our ICAA publications and press releases about the campaign, we had rightly pointed out that Boom-

ers and their parents are finally becoming a market force,” Milner says. “But the downside to that development is that many companies are now jumping on the bandwagon with products that are completely inappropriate for older adults.” With that, he came up with a word—*graywashing*—to describe the phenomenon.

“Graywashing refers to the act of misleading consumers regarding any purported age-associated benefits of a product or service,” Milner explains. The word was inspired by *greenwashing*, a widely used term to describe “disinfor-

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mation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.”¹ More recently, and along the same lines, *pinkwashing* has been used to denote a practice by which companies try to increase the sales of their products by adopting the color pink and pink ribbons to imply support for breast cancer research while, at the same time, permitting the use of chemicals shown to cause cancer in their production.²

Resources

Internet

Advertising to Baby Boomers

<http://advertisingtobabyboomers.blogspot.com>

ChangingAging Blogstream

<http://changingaging.org>

Continuum Crew

www.continuumcrew.com

ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign

www.changingthewayweage.com

Print

Anti-Ageism Task Force at the International Longevity Center. (2006). *Ageism in America*. New York NY: International Longevity Center—USA

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“Graywashing gives older-adult consumers a false sense of security by positioning a product or service as uniquely beneficial to them,” Milner states. “Consider a health club that wants to attract more members. The club sets up a ‘senior discount’ that allows older adults to use the club during off-peak hours at a reduced rate. However, the club’s services and offerings remain the same—geared to a younger population. Putting the word *senior* in front of a discount or program doesn’t automatically make it suitable for older people.”

Rooted in stereotypes

Not all companies are purposely misleading consumers, Milner acknowledges. Graywashing also occurs when companies and/or marketers don’t understand the people they’re trying to sell to; instead, they’re led by ageist stereotypes. This unintentional (or inadvertent) ageism has been defined by New York’s International Longevity Center as “ideas, attitudes, rules or practices that are carried out without the perpetrator’s awareness that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age.”³

“I think of this type of ageism as the front end of graywashing,” says Lori Bitter, president/CEO at Continuum Crew, a marketing and advertising firm specializing in the age 40-plus consumer, based in California’s San Francisco Bay Area. “How do you not graywash a product or a service if you’re carrying around those stereotypes in your head?”

An example is the greeting cards that make fun of getting older by implying that an older person can no longer have sex or is now ready for a rocking chair. Young people may buy such cards for their parents or grandparents, not realizing that the cards are not funny or appropriate.

On the opposite end of the stereotyping spectrum are campaigns that suggest

all older adults should be superstars. “Portrayed in the media and marketing materials as healthy, wealthy and defying aging, ‘superstar’ older adults present an image that also distorts reality,” comments Milner. “Such stereotypes imply or explicitly state that ‘aging well’ requires health, independence, vitality, economic wherewithal and social connections. Not surprisingly, these are qualities we equate with youthfulness,” he states.

“By contrast, not aging well is characterized by illness, decline, and a strain on personal finances and the economy overall,” Milner continues. “What’s lost is the fact that people don’t have to look a certain way, participate in extreme sports, or be free of functional challenges to be resilient and engaged in life. That’s one of the nuances many marketers don’t understand.” (See the sidebar “How marketers can do better” on page 28.)

According to Chuck Nyren, a Seattle, Washington-based advertising/marketing consultant who specializes in the Boomer market, that’s because “so many marketing people are twentysomethings, and they simply don’t know how to market and advertise to older people. They mess it up all the time, then come back and say, ‘Gee whiz, we tried to reach Boomers, but it didn’t work,’” Nyren notes. “It didn’t work because they didn’t know what they were doing.” Indeed, research has shown that advertising agencies are overwhelmingly staffed by employees under 50 years of age.⁴

These younger marketers often don’t think about the real needs and wants of age 50-plus consumers, adds Bitter. “A company that makes mouthwash approached us about making the product more appealing to people over age 50 because their data showed those individuals did a better job with oral care

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than younger people,” she recalls. “We kept asking, ‘What is the benefit to the consumer of your product over someone else’s?’ And instead of thinking in that direction, they came up with an idea of making a ‘prescription’ that told people to use the mouthwash three times a day. But that’s not a benefit; that’s just trying to get people to use more mouthwash,” she says.

“Yet we have data showing that oral health is linked to heart health—plaque in your mouth could affect plaque in your heart,” Bitter continues. “That’s a rich, relevant benefit that would resonate with the market. But the

company refused to do anything like that,” she shares. “They thought older adults would be more compliant to a prescription.”

The other important aspect of stereotyping is self-stereotyping, which sets older adults up to be easy targets of graywashing, according to Milner. “Many older adults have internalized negative messages and images about aging due to repeated exposure to such messages and images in the media. Then they behave in ways that create a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he says. Take, for example, a 65-year-old woman who may believe she is too old to learn anything new. Her

friends prevail upon her to try bridge lessons. She goes to one lesson, finds she can’t take everything in, and refuses to go to a second lesson. “Instead of viewing learning as a process that happens over time,” Milner states, “she decides immediately that she can’t learn bridge because, as she thought, ‘I’m too old to learn.’ The result: She doesn’t learn anything.”

Fed by ‘anti-aging’ industry

Much self-stereotyping is fed by the anti-aging industry, which has a vested interest in keeping older adults in the role of passive consumers of pills and

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How marketers can do better

Lori Bitter, president/CEO at Continuum Crew, suggests that marketers do the following to avoid graywashing and better target their audience:

Think older, sooner. “Too many companies and organizations think about older people only when they’re getting ready to communicate about their product and service. Instead, they should be thinking about older people when they’re developing that product or service, and asking what the older consumer believes might be the value position for it,” says Bitter. “Asking after the fact is too late.”

Bitter cites fitness equipment advertisers who talk about the features and benefits of their equipment, but ignore the context. “How will I feel as a 50-year-old woman if I’m in a locker room with 18-to-24 year-olds running around naked? What is the value proposition that will resonate with me ... the equipment in a health club or the fact that everybody there sort of looks like me and I can relate to what I see in the visuals?”

Know your market segment. “We’re located in California, where there are triathletes who are in their 50s and 60s. Many companies portray these individuals thinking they will be really inspirational, and they may be in some places—but the strategy could also backfire,” comments Bitter. “People could think, ‘I’m never going to be that guy, so why should I even get off the couch and try?’”

The lesson of knowing your market segment is particularly apt for the seniors housing industry, according to Bitter. A colleague ran focus groups around images in brochures about a housing development, and one image showed an older adult roller skating in the park. “The focus groups hated it,” she notes. “They said, ‘You don’t see older people on roller skates. Come on!’ And that was true for their community.” Continues Bitter, “We found other communities where we’d show pictures of people fishing and we’d say, ‘This looks kind of sedentary.’ And the people in that area would say, ‘No, that’s our activity.’”

Place messages judiciously. “Many younger people in media departments assume that older people aren’t consuming information digitally,” Bitter states. “But when you look at younger Boomers, research has shown they’re using digital media like smart phones and tablets pretty much the same as Gen-Xers” [the post-Baby Boom generation]. “If you’re marketing to people ages 50-plus, it’s critical to understand where they are in terms of their life stage so you know how to best reach them.”

Bitter has also found that many marketers assume everyone over 50 reads a daily newspaper. “The daily papers wish that were true, but the fact is, reading a newspaper increasingly is an activity of people in the late 60s or 70-plus category.” The point is to “think it through,” she emphasizes. “A lot of younger marketers hear the word *Boomer* and see a stereotyped image of an older adult, instead of the person who is working at the desk next to them.”

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Build awareness of graywashing

“Active-aging industry professionals can help raise awareness of graywashing among their constituents by joining ICAA’s Changing the Way We Age® Campaign and sharing the campaign tools with their constituents and their local media,” says Colin Milner, CEO of the International Council on Active Aging®. “They can also challenge the media and marketers when they see blatant examples of ageist stereotypes. This will help create a groundswell for change,” Milner believes. “In addition, they can use the term *graywashing*—a hallmark of ICAA’s campaign—so it catches on, and let their staff, marketers and customers know about the practice and where they learned about it.”

Individuals can also avoid supporting companies that graywash by implementing these tips:

- Understand that no pill or procedure will stop you from aging, no matter what anyone claims to the contrary.
- Ask yourself if an expensive anti-wrinkle cream or cosmetic surgery will make you feel better about the way you look, or if lifestyle changes such as getting more rest and eating a balanced diet can make you feel better—and look better, as well.
- Before enrolling in a fitness or seniors center, ask for a tour. Do you see people like yourself engaged in activities that interest you? If not, look for a club or group geared to your interest, not your age.
- Does a product’s claim—whether it’s for energy, brain boosting, weight loss, getting rid of “age” spots, or some other purpose—sound too good to be true? If so, it probably is. Why throw away your money?

potions. “That industry is founded on denial,” comments William H. Thomas, MD, an international authority on geriatric medicine and eldercare, and owner of the Idea Farm in Ithaca, New York. “It’s based on the idea that the best way to age is simply to perpetuate youth and skip aging all together. Of course, this has never been accomplished by any person in all of human history; hence, it’s a fantasy,” Thomas observes. “But from the product point of view, it’s a very profitable fantasy, because you’re preying directly upon people’s fears.” That could be why, in the United States, “we have more anti-aging gurus than geriatricians,” he says.

“There’s a lot of false hope out there,” agrees Nyren. “All the research being done on longevity right now is great, but trying to sell a product or service and saying that it has something to do with longevity is a lie. There isn’t anything out there except for common sense—exercising, eating well, reducing health risks. The purported medical breakthroughs have not happened,” he states, “and when they do happen, we’re not going to hear about them through an ad in the back of a magazine.”

Yet, graywashing is growing even for products making lesser claims than life extension. Says Nyren, “The one that fascinates me is the little energy drink you can buy in the gas station or in the convenience store—the kind of drink students buy so they can get through finals week or get a paper written. All of a sudden, companies are marketing them to older people, with messages about how they can help an older person stay sharp. But,” he adds, “the product is filled with caffeine and other ingredients that just hype you up and keep you awake longer. There’s absolutely no advantage in terms of sharpness.”

Unfortunately, even people who don’t embrace anti-aging products still may fall prey to stereotypes that equate aging

with negativity and decline, according to Thomas. “Many people acknowledge that they’re getting older and say, ‘Ugh, ick, aging. Okay, I’m going to walk every day, I’m going to take my vitamins, I’m going to do my puzzles and crosswords. I’m going to do all those things that I read in the paper you’re supposed to do, to make old age as tolerable as possible,’” Thomas explains. “These individuals are like Eeyore, the gloomy donkey in the *Winnie the Pooh* books. They say, ‘It’s definitely going to be bad, but maybe it won’t be really terrible.’ And a whole industry has been built up around giving them common-sense advice about avoiding the ‘badness’ of aging.” [Ed. This is not the same as giving and embracing lifestyle changes with the idea that these behaviors will extend a vital, fulfilling life—in other words, health promotion for positive, active aging.]

“The idea these so-called ‘realists’ share with the anti-ageists is that an older person is a broken version of a younger person,” Thomas continues. “But on the positive side, I think we will increasingly see a struggle among people with different points of view on how to think about aging. That means we can have a conversation that goes beyond just fear and denial—and that’s a good thing.”

The real world: a diverse market

Those conversations about aging are likely to be grounded in the realization that older people really represent a highly diverse market, according to Milner. “On the one hand, graywashing is jumping on the bandwagon because of the huge numbers of people ages 50 and older. On the other hand, graywashing is literally ‘washing’ everyone who’s older into the same marketplace by not seeing the segments within that market,” he observes. “That’s why so many people are turned off one way or the other by current marketing messages. You’re turned

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off if you can do a lot more than the market is saying you're capable of, and if you can't do more, you're turned off by the elite stars. But there's much more to the market than either approach acknowledges."

Nyren adds that "Boomers were a perfect example in the 1960s and '70s, that when you're younger, many of the people who are your age have the same interests. There was a huge bulk of people at that time who were doing the

same things, listening to the same music, and so on. But as you get older, people go in their own directions; they change economically, politically and culturally. So if there's any group of people that is unwieldy and disparate," he says, "it's the Boomers. There's more variety among people over 50 than in any other age group."

The scientific word that describes this phenomenon is *pleiotropy*, explains Thomas. "The word isn't used much

outside the laboratory, but essentially it means that something comes in many different forms. Human beings live a life span that goes from low pleiotropy to very high pleiotropy," he says. Newborns in a nursery have very low pleiotropy; they're generally all around the same size and weight. "But as life goes on, pleiotropy increases tremendously," Thomas observes. "You see this when you go to college reunions, for example, when you knew someone previously when the pleiotropy was low and then you see this very different person years later, when you have high pleiotropy. It's something that drives marketers crazy," he adds. "They want to use the same tagline to sell to everyone in a particular age group, but the fact is, there is no monolithic older-adult market. One size does not fit all."

According to Bitter, "What's funny about all of this is that five years ago, when we were all trying to get people to listen to us about the market power of the Boomers, we had trouble getting attention for older consumers. Period. I couldn't even imagine that something like graywashing would be a problem," she says. "So in a sense, we can also be saying, 'Look how far we've come. Now companies are taking all these products and strategies and services and trying to put an older face on them, just for the sake of attracting people.' It's tragic, but it's also a kind of milestone."

And that, adds Milner, "is why ICAA's Rebranding Aging initiative, a part of ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign, will have value for marketers over time—because we will help them better understand the diversity and complexity of the age 50-plus market, now and in the future." 🌀

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When graywashing can turn deadly

Researchers recently called on the clinical and scientific community to help discourage "stem-cell tourism," an "industry that sells false promises of miracle cures to patients," many of whom are older adults. Published online on July 29, 2011, in EMBO (European Molecular Biology Organization) reports, the article notes that thousands of people with diseases that are unresponsive to conventional treatments have gone abroad to receive stem-cell therapies that are not only unproven, but also unregulated, potentially dangerous or even fraudulent.

The authors, Zubin Master of the Health Law Institute, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, and David B. Resnik of the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, note that while stem-cell research is making considerable advances, only a few stem-cell based therapies have so far been approved for clinical use. "However, this has not stopped unscrupulous individuals from exploiting patients' desperation by advertising questionable clinical procedures, often charging upward of US\$20,000," they write.

Master and Resnik argue that stem-cell researchers have the responsibility and means to help prevent the exploitation of patients and healthcare systems, since the clinics and physicians who offer such therapies need to obtain stem cells and other materials from basic researchers. They say that by checking the credentials and background of researchers and physicians who ask for stem-cell lines and by requiring Material Transfer Agreements, responsible scientists could curb the abuse of stem-cell research.

Separately, an article called "Peddling hope," published in the spring 2011 issue of *Stanford Medicine* magazine, also outlines the flaws in the current system, which has no standards for stem-cell research and no sanctions for those who publicize its use. Unscrupulous practitioners "don't show evidence that their treatment works; they just say it should," Jeanne Loring, PhD, director of the Center for Regenerative Medicine at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, is quoted as saying, "It's really hard to argue when there are no facts involved."

Rebranding Aging: ICAA's initiative at a glance

Director and a regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging®.

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Spearheaded by the International Council on Active Aging®, ICAA's Changing the Way We Age® Campaign aims to shift society's perceptions of aging. The Rebranding Aging initiative, one of the campaign's two streams, focuses on the media and marketers. This initiative is:

- Creating an ongoing public relations campaign that highlights the untapped human potential of an aging population and the opportunities it represents for society—for example, volunteerism, intergenerational and peer education, new ideas and businesses.
- Creating and sharing communications guidelines that more effectively reach people 50 years and older. The guidelines encourage the media and marketers to provide a

more realistic and complete picture of what it means to become and be old in North America.

- Creating a clearinghouse for best practices, guidelines, resources, images and references for use by the media and industry.
- Providing presentations, best practices and research to show business leaders, associations and organizations that many older adults lead full lives. This reality has significant implications for a company's bottom line and how it markets products and services to this population.

For more information, visit www.changingthewayweage.com or call ICAA at 866-335-9777 (toll-free) or 604-734-4466.

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