

Targeting The Over 50's – Psychology Versus Chronology

Contributed by The Research Centre Ltd
Thursday, 25 June 2009
Last Updated Thursday, 25 June 2009

In his sixty sixth year actor Jack Nicholson noted "our generation are the new old. I remember how someone of sixty behaved when I was a kid. They were not like me".

He probably sums up how most people between fifty and seventy view themselves today. But a trawl through how marketing treats the over fifties suggests not everybody agrees.

In our youth obsessed culture being over fifty is considered as something that should be pitied. Worse still is to look or act like you are over fifty, easing off the gas and taking life a little bit easier.

There is a big no man's land between forty and seventy as far as marketing is concerned. One minute you are still rocking as in rock and roll and the next you are rocking as in chair.

The period in between has almost been written out of the marketing lexicon. We either sell you something to help you be more attractive to your chosen gender preference or something to ease you into your dotage.

Many over fifties experience affluence due to maturing investments, private pensions and low financial commitments. Happy days!

They may drive newer cars, refurbish the home, go on more leisure breaks and buy premium priced labour saving devices for use around the home and garden.

If they dressed stylishly in the past they are likely to continue doing so but the type of clothes bought may change as they downshift to a less formal lifestyle.

Many marketers for some reason seem to view this age group as far less attractive than their younger, less cash rich counterparts. This might in part be explained by the fact that frontline marketing tends to be the domain of the under forties.

A study by Barak and Gould provides evidence that there exists a large group of Cognitively Young people who act younger than their chronological age might lead us to expect. On the other hand we all know people who are "Cognitively Old" despite being in their twenties.

People carry their attitudes and beliefs throughout their lives. If you were a pessimist when you were twenty you will probably be a pessimist when you are sixty.

Cognitively Young people have higher morale and self-confidence. They are more outgoing and have contact with a wider variety of media than others of their age. They are more socially mobile, risk positive and opinion leading amongst their peers.

Advertising that communicates with the Cognitively Old will ultimately fail to maximise the potential of the over 50's market because it is targeting a group of people who do not have the skills to change, who are negative in their thinking and who have no opinion leading value in the marketplace.

In short nobody wants to be like them any more than anybody aspires to be like a negative thinking twenty five year old. But twenty five year olds are never portrayed that way.

Over 50's are not often used in advertising for general mainstream products of which they, as well as younger people, are mainstream consumers.

This leads to a situation where the use of over fifties in advertising has the affect of communicating that a product is targeted exclusively at them, often in a ghettoised manner.

The use of over 50's in advertising can lend some positive values. These people are perceived as having been around the block and as less easily impressed by slick sales patter. They are powerful influencers in the motor, finance and property sectors.

We often fail to empathise with them. We treat them as vague and uninteresting. We emphasise the negative aspects of aging rather than the positive aspects of experience. Even when we try to be positive, we end up being patronising.

The cognitively young require a dynamic, approach that emphasises growth, new opportunities and optimism. The cognitively old require an approach that reassures; emphasising familiarity, security and low risk.

This approach demands a twin track strategy based on the psychological make up of the target consumer rather than an approach based solely, or even primarily, on chronological age.

So maybe we could take a leaf from Jack Nicholson's book and look at people the way they are rather than as we think of them. That way they might listen.

Colm Carey (colm@theresearchcentre.ie)

Managing Director Of Dublin based Qualitative Agency The Research Centre Limited.

www.theresearchcentre.ie