

Advertising Targeting Older Adults: How the Audience Perceives the Message

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For years a forgotten demographic, older adults are becoming a much more targeted audience segment as the Boomers join the senior cohort in record numbers. As marketers consider strategies to approach this group, one challenge they'll face, as with any audience segment, is portraying their desired customers in ways that positively resonate with the audience.

As consumers, we use a variety of factors to evaluate advertising directed toward us — often emotional and usually considered in a matter of seconds. We do this to determine if we should give the advertising our attention, engage and ultimately take action. One factor in this evaluation process is reacting to how we, as the target audience, are portrayed in the advertising — whether we're Millennials, Gen-Xers, Baby Boomers or Seniors.

A better understanding of how today's adults 70 years of age and older perceive their generation's portrayal in advertising was the objective of a GlynnDevins consumer study conducted among 400 age- and income-qualified older adults. The research, conducted in early 2014, looked at:

- Perceptions of seniors' portrayal in advertising
- Seniors' attitudes toward advertising in general
- Perceptions of advertising in specific senior-oriented consumer categories

Seniors' Portrayal in Advertising Falls Flat with Audience

Overall, the survey findings suggest that advertising currently targeting older adults isn't well received by seniors; they don't think it presents a realistic portrayal of them. The survey, which asked respondents to rate advertising targeting them as consumers on a number of factors, found the following:

- Less than 20% of respondents indicated they "like" most of the advertising they see attempting to reach older adults.
- Only 31% of those surveyed agreed that seniors are portrayed "realistically" in advertising.
- Less than half of those surveyed (47%) felt that seniors are portrayed "as people to be respected."

- A little more than one-third (37%) felt that seniors portrayed in advertising are “people I can identify with.”
- And 60% of survey respondents agreed that seniors featured in advertising are “portrayed as stereotypes.”

Too Good to Be True/Too Bad to Be True

While there was general agreement among survey respondents that seniors in advertising are portrayed as stereotypes, there was no consensus on a single stereotype. In fact, respondents were polarized around two distinct, yet opposite, stereotypes.



“Too Good to Be True”



“Too Bad to Be True”

When asked to describe the characteristics of the stereotype portrayed, respondents generally described those featured in advertising as either “too good to be true” or “too bad to be true.”

Are Others Portrayed More Accurately?

Seniors aren't the only group being approached by advertisers, and our senior audience is exposed to messages for other consumer segments as well. As a point of comparison, and for use as a benchmark, the survey asked respondents their views on how Boomers (adults 50 to 69 years of age) are portrayed in advertising.

Scores for realism of those portrayed fell in line with how seniors view themselves in advertising, with just more than one-third (34%) agreeing that Boomers are portrayed realistically.

Perhaps generational differences affected the scores for portrayal of Boomers as “people to be respected,” as only 34% of seniors agreed with this statement, compared to 47% who agreed with the statement relating to senior portrayal.

The greatest difference, however, was seen when respondents were asked about Boomers being portrayed as stereotypes. The largest portion of the senior audience, 58%, neither agree nor disagree with the statement that Boomers are portrayed as stereotypes. In fact, only 29% agreed with the statement, compared to 60% who agreed that seniors are stereotyped.

Is Anyone Getting It Right?

To further explore the senior audience's perception of advertising directed toward them as consumers, respondents were asked about advertising specifically for the senior living, financial services and pharmaceutical categories. The seniors' cool reception of senior-directed advertising, as evident in their general responses, also carried through to their evaluation of category-specific advertising. While senior living advertising received slightly better scores, all three categories received poor grades from the respondents.

"I like the way people are portrayed."

Similar to general reaction to advertising focused on the senior audience, none of the highlighted categories seem to be hitting the mark. Senior living, at 20%, had the highest level of agreement with the statement, "I like the way people in ads for this category are portrayed." Financial services ads at 15% and pharmaceutical ads at 8% fared worse.

"I like most of the advertising I see in this category."

When asked if they "like" advertising from the respective categories, those surveyed gave senior living the highest marks of the three. Yet it was still a relatively low percentage, with just 20% agreeing they like senior living ads, compared with 13% liking financial services ads, and only 9% liking pharmaceutical ads.

However, rather than disliking advertising within these categories, a large percentage of the audience is indifferent to advertising, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement, "I like the advertisements I see" (41% - senior living, 43% - financial services). Only pharmaceutical advertising saw a majority of respondents disliking the ads, with 67% disagreeing with the statement.

"The advertising in this category is entertaining."

Advertising that provides entertainment value is often some of the most highly rated. When asked specifically about the use of humor in ads, 90% of seniors surveyed agreed that it's an effective way to gain their attention and deliver a message. However, none of our surveyed categories appear to be delivering entertainment value. Only 10% found senior living ads entertaining, with financial services ads (9%) and pharmaceutical ads (6%) doing no better.

“The advertising I see in this category contains useful information.”

While advertising in these categories, including senior living, isn't held in high regard, consumers were slightly more positive when asked about the advertising's information value. Just less than one-third of respondents felt the ads in all three categories do provide useful information — senior living 31%, financial services 31%, pharmaceutical 29%. Correspondingly, one-third of respondents disagreed that the advertisements contain useful information.

Advertising Characteristics - Likes and Dislikes

Like most consumers, the senior audience's formula for advertising that captures their attention is straightforward — **entertain me, inform me and respect me**. These were the central themes offered by the majority of respondents when asked about the characteristics of advertising they liked and disliked.

ADVERTISING ATTRIBUTES	
“I Like Advertising That ...”	“I Don't Like Advertising That ...”
Is Entertaining	Is Pushy
Uses Humor	Is Preachy
Is Factual	Exaggerates Claims
Is Informative	Insults My Intelligence
Is Honest	Is Too Wordy
Is Respectful	Demeans People

Conclusions

While seniors are generally somewhat indifferent to advertising, when the advertising is carefully crafted, they do find it useful and informative. Advertising that is respectful of the target audience, entertaining and relevant is most likely to engage them and be well regarded.

In addition, authenticity in advertising is something this target seeks, including an honest portrayal of seniors that doesn't generalize or fail to address the diverse circumstances individual seniors may face.

*Note that our study didn't directly compare seniors' perceptions to those of other generations, so we can't say they're more or less indifferent to advertising than other targets.

Methodology

A total of 402 adults age 70 years or older, chosen from a national representative sample, completed an online survey in January 2014. These respondents were further qualified to have an annual household income of \$50,000 or greater, and to have completed an education level of high school or higher. Prior to completing the survey, respondents were encouraged to consider all forms of marketing communication (print, broadcast, direct mail, email, websites) as “advertising” for the purposes of the survey.