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Advertising and Older Consumers: Image and Ageism

In past years the market that most advertisers aimed towards was the Gen X group. Now many advertisers are shooting at the even younger Generation Y. The interesting thing is that many of these products advertised are items that all generations use, such as food, soft drinks, clothing, cars, entertainment, etc. Rarely are older generations revealed using these products in print ads or commercials.

The Issue:

This creates the issue to advertisers that they stereotype older generations and reinforce society's misconception that people over 50 are feeble, pitiable, or incompetent. In many cases advertisers do just this. Remember the commercial for Lifecall emergency alert device in the early 90's where the elderly Ms. Fletcher fell in her bathroom and, while lying there helpless, she calls out, "I've fallen and I can't get up." Despite the importance of this product to seniors who live alone, the commercial quickly became the brunt of many jokes, including skits on Saturday Night Live and the Tonight Show. Could Lifecall have designed a better advertising campaign that would not have alienated or mocked its target market?

This brings up the question of whether advertisers have a responsibility to change the mindset that being over 50 is old? Are they responsible to change the way society views 50+? Can they even change society's views of 50+? Absolutely! By utilizing cross-generational advertising, marketers can benefit the consumers, companies, advertisers, and society as a whole.

The Stakeholders:

50+ Consumers - The nature of the 50+ age group is rapidly changing. Humans are living longer and are more active than ever before. They don't feel old and feeble, so why would they want to support product advertising that makes them appear weak and vulnerable? They don't.

Advertisers/Corporations – Advertising is the primary source that companies use to inform and educate the public about their product while influencing consumers to purchase it. In the past marketers have primarily advertised towards younger generations because they have more impulsive buying behaviors. Also, according to the case, many executives in the marketing field are from younger generations; therefore, they create advertising campaigns with which they can identify.

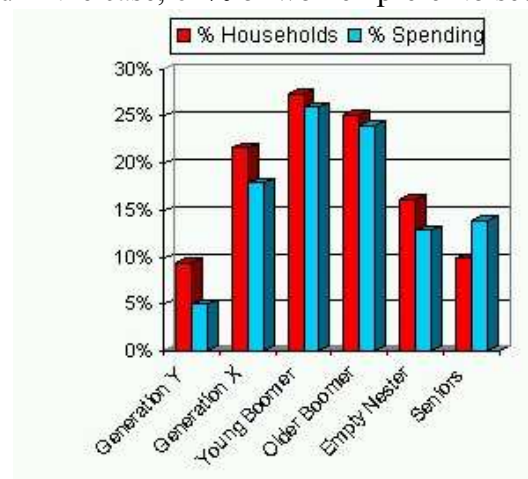
Society – The overall public, including the target market, views marketing campaigns. Almost everyone has access to publications and television that contain advertising directed at specific groups. For example, children watch the programs their parent's watch and parents watch children's programming. We are all exposed to advertising that might or might not be directed towards our generational market and it influences our opinions about those groups.

Utilitarianism Theory:

Cross-generational advertising is a method of marketing that illustrates many generations using the same products without segregating or degrading any generational groups. This will produce the greatest long-term benefits to the most number of stakeholders. First, using models from Generation Y through the GI Generation will create awareness and a better understanding of age diversity in the consumer market. In turn, stereotypes of older generations will be broken. This could lead to a social and economic breakthrough. Older generations will feel more accepted in society and will have the urge to be more active. As they become more active, greater consumer spending is generated which benefits the corporation's overall profits and its stockholders.

Free Market Theory:

According to the IPC Magazine survey identified in the case, 62% of women prefer to see women their own age advertising products towards them¹. In addition the over-50 age groups claim the majority of wealth and generate over 51% of consumer spending in the United States² (see Graph). If companies would advertise using over-50 models and actors, brand recognition would be established because the older consumers would identify with the advertisement and therefore purchase the product.



If you look at this from a company's perspective, there is a substantial market vying for cross-generational advertising. Since the company exists to make money for its shareholders, what would be better than to target the market that possesses the greatest wealth and majority of consumer spending?

Rights Theory:

Companies have the right to advertise their products to the target markets of their choice. At the same time the consumer has a right to be informed without being misled or deceived. In many cases the messages that advertisements relay give consumers misperceptions about a particular generational group. For example, the majority of pharmaceuticals are advertised using 50+ models. Rarely are these models used for products such as apparel, soft drinks, or new cars. This gives the general public the misconception that anyone over 50 is sick, weak, and unable to use the products that "everyone" else uses.

Justice Theory:

When reviewing ageism in advertising, the over-50 population is treated less equitably. A cross-generational marketing strategy would allow 50+ models to advertise everyday products while still appealing to younger markets. This would compensate for past injustices to older generations by finally giving them an accurate portrayal in the media. Marketing campaigns could also incorporate models from different generations to distribute equal time and equal representation in advertising. In the end, future

retribution will be given to millions of older Americans as age discrimination in the media is diminished.

Social Contract Theory:

In the end, advertisers need to gain the trust of their consumers. As long as they continue to mock older generations or ignore them all together, they run the risk of “punitive reactions – consumer boycott, regulation, media hostility, financial loss, and above all loss of reputation¹.” They also owe society a picture of reality when it comes to the aging population. The Baby Boomer generation, with a population of 76 million, is the largest and most economically powerful demographic group in the US³. As a majority of this group has already passed the 50-year mark and the rest are soon to follow, an accurate depiction of our modern day aging process is needed because eventually everyone will pass through these same life stages.

Sources:

1. Business Ethics: A European Review. January 2000, Vol. 9 - No. 1.
2. Let's Talk Business. September 2002, Issue 73. www.uwex.edu/ces/cced.
3. Business Ethics: A Stakeholder and Issues Management Approach. 2003, pg. 214.