Baby Boomers: Neglected by Marketers

AN INTERVIEW WITH:

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Lori Bitter has spent more than 30 years in advertising, public relations and strategic planning experience, much of it targeting baby boomers. Today she is president of Continuum Crew, an integrated communications firm focused on mature consumers. Before opening the doors of Continuum Crew she was president of specialty agency JWT BOOM, where she was responsible for defining mature consumer strategy across a number of industries, including packaged goods, housing, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and others. She spoke with eMarketer senior analyst Lisa E. Phillips about how boomers use media and the best ways to reach them.

eMarketer: The baby boomers grew up with television, and got accustomed to being *the* target market. Now that most of them are in their 50s and 60s, how do they view advertising and marketing messages?

Lori Bitter: When we talk to boomers in our research, they really feel that for many mainstream products, the messages aren't being targeted to them at all. With boomers, it's not about age, it's about being able to see themselves in those brands and products. They feel disconnected from a lot of the brands that they helped make successful, like Levi's and Gap, and other mainstream brands.

"We're about a lot more than health conditions and retirement plans. There's a lot more going on in our lives."

A lot of boomers say, “We’re about a lot more than health conditions and retirement plans. There’s a lot more going on in our lives.” Yet that’s the only advertising they really see focused on them. And it’s sort of like, “Well, what about the other 80% of my life? Two minutes of my day are spent swallowing a pill for a chronic condition and after that, I’m just a person who needs to buy clothes and cars and shoes and homes and all sorts of other things.”

They’re not being messaged to and they don’t see themselves in those messages.

The baby boomer generation was the first consumer culture in our country. They were the focus of music and clothing styles, you name it. Now people in their 50s and 60s are looking around and saying, “The market was chasing me my whole life and when I turned 40, they didn’t care anymore. All of a sudden, I’m passé.”

eMarketer: That leads me to the question, are they as brand-loyal as some marketers assume? If they stop marketing to them, will boomers keep buying “their” brands because they always have?

Bitter: Boomers are no more brand loyal than any other generation of consumers. They’re absolutely not. One of the arguments on Madison Avenue about why we don’t target older adults is that they’ve made all their brand choices for their lifetime and they’re sort of done.

We have a chart in our presentation that we call the Life Stage Mosaic. It shows all the different life stage dynamics that happen between the ages of 40 and 60. Around 50, there are all these new things going on in boomers’ lives and every time a boomer leaves one of these life stages or enters into a new life stage—for instance, like caregiving or grandparenting or remarriage—all of a sudden they’re buying and considering products and services and brands that they may never have had any connection with before.

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There are many more life stages at that point in life than there are in your 20s and 30s, which is where marketers are targeting. It’s really crazy that we don’t see more time and effort going against this huge population.

eMarketer: If marketers aren’t bothering to tailor their messages to boomers, they probably don’t realize that about 80% of them are online. Do you think advertisers are really trying to reach them online?

Bitter: Not very well. I’ve been looking at the sites that I consider the usual suspects for targeting boomers, and the ads are for the antidepressant Cymbalta and erectile dysfunction. Boomers have very robust, rich lives and lots of really cool and deep interests, because all of a sudden they have a lot more time in their lives. They’re not parenting children anymore and they’ve got more time to explore.

Boomers are spending a lot more time online looking at dream travel and connecting in communities with people around their hobbies and their interests.

Brands tend to be afraid of “ageing” their brand by creating boomer/senior messaging. There are so many places and ways online to make those messages very personal, where no one would ever know other than the boomer on that site that a brand was reaching out to them.

It’s almost back to a direct mail model in online, where you could really target people very specifically with messages. I think it’s a huge, missed opportunity for companies targeting baby boomers.

eMarketer: Yes, even on Facebook, the ads that I get served are for wrinkle creams and weight loss. Some of my male friends complain about getting hair-replacement ads on their profiles. That would be a much better place for a marketer to say, “Hey, you’re a certain age. Maybe you might want a more fuel-efficient car, or a great deal on travel.”

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Bitter: The best messages are more aspirational and focused on interests and key messages, not on age. That’s probably the biggest turnoff. For boomers, it’s not about age, it’s about a mind-set. As a generation, they don’t like calling attention to age. That’s why the AARP letter at age 50 is like an insult. It’s like, “You gotta be kidding me. All of a sudden I’m interested in early-bird dinner specials?”

eMarketer: Are there any brands or products that are using ageless messaging to reach boomers?

Bitter: Yes, look at Apple’s advertising. It’s decidedly ageless. It’s about a lifestyle and a state of mind—actually, more a state of being. It’s about controlling all your media, and that appeals to boomers. That control thing is a big factor and Apple has managed not to alienate any population with the marketing that they do.

eMarketer: Do you think boomers would be really put off or feel stalked once they realize that ads are being targeted directly to them?

Bitter: I don’t have data to support this but intuitively I think that we all sort of “get” behavioral targeting and we’ve given up a certain amount of privacy in order to get things for free on the internet. It’s an exchange we’re willing to make because we want all this robust content that’s available to us online. But it is interesting how often I hear people respond to things like the ads that pop up on Facebook. It’s sort of like we’ve given Facebook *so* much information about us that the behavioral targeting is very specific. And that can feel a little stalker-ish.

Boomers use the internet a little bit differently than other generations. It tends to be more of a tool and such an integrated part of our lives that we sort of expect that exchange. We’re going to get targeted with some things we don’t

want to see and frankly, we ignore 'em.

eMarketer: Is anyone doing a good job, do you think, reaching boomers online?

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Bitter: I don't see a lot of great stuff. Some sites do a good job with baby boomers without overtly saying, "This is about baby boomers." There's a site called WowOwow.com, which I think is a very New York-centric site, based on some of the women who put it together. I see some great things from advertisers like Bloomingdale's and Barneys and some of the retailers in New York that tell me they really understand who the consumer is on that site.

There are some community sites online that are very specific, targeting life stage for baby boomers like a Caring.com or a Grandparents.com. Just from a pure aesthetic—design and usability—they're doing a great job with their target. I think Caring.com does a fantastic job targeting what you could call a niche, but it's a huge issue with the baby boomer population.

Some of the more general interest stuff, all you're really seeing are things like drug ads. You see a little bit of lifestyle stuff, but not anybody who's doing a great job. I look at brands like Talbots and Chico's, for example, and I wonder why they're not online, why I'm not seeing any digital advertising for these brands.

eMarketer: I happen to know that Talbots uses a lot of email, to the point that it feels like overload. As much as I like them, I just can't respond to that many emails, free shipping or not.

Bitter: Exactly. And that begs the question, do marketers to this age group think, "Older people are heavy users of direct mail, so can we get boomers to respond to email"? I need to go into my email and unsubscribe to a lot of things because like you, I get bombarded.

eMarketer: It seems to me that boomers have reached the stage in life where they've accumulated most of the things they wanted as a young adult. They're not buying a lot of things to replace what they already own. Do you think marketers are going to have to work extra hard to get boomers to buy things, to keep buying, or give them reasons to buy?

Bitter: The empty-nesting life stage is a huge one, just for that reason. People go one of two ways. They either downsize and start getting rid of things or they decide to do home improvement, finally, now that all the mess-makers are out of the way. "What can I do to make this space uniquely ours?" We see people going off in two completely different directions.

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really compelling consumer moments. If people are downsizing, then they're looking for storage solutions and ways to get rid of things. Where are eBay and craigslist?"

Either way, the empty-nest time creates some really compelling consumer moments. If people are downsizing, then they're looking for storage solutions and ways to get rid of things. Where are eBay and craigslist? Why aren't they reaching out in big ways to empty-nesters to help them get rid of their stuff?

eMarketer: What has popped up in your research that surprised you?

Bitter: The last study we did showed baby boomers falling into two really distinct segments around age: leading boomers, who are 55 to 65, and the trailing boomers, who are late 40s to mid 50s. The older boomers are much more like senior consumers and trailing boomers much more like Gen Xers.

In terms of how they're using media, boomers and seniors are still reading local newspapers in much higher numbers than younger boomers or Gen Xers—almost double. Most of them still have landlines in their homes and a lot of younger generations don't. They're still reading magazines in much higher numbers. But we're also seeing a much bigger shift into consuming digital media on smartphones for all of the generations, even seniors.

So we are preaching to our clients that, while traditional media still works for the older end of the boomer segment, we'd like to see them move more dollars into digital media and start connecting with boomer consumers online—and then using the traditional media that we know works as support around those campaigns.

So, we create some digital advertising to place on a boomer-focused or high-indexing site for boomers. We create a landing page for them to come back to, we may send them to a blog about a particular topic. And we're supporting all that with print advertising or maybe radio, and television if they have the budget. But online remains at the center of the campaign. That's where we're seeing our clients really get the most traction.

eMarketer: Do you get much pushback from clients about that?

Bitter: The most pushback we're getting is around how to use social media and how to enter into conversations in the social space, and how they should be spending against that. It's not so much about online advertising or blogs or landing pages or those sorts of things.

Most of the clients that we work with know they need to be there or that they need to be moving in that direction. It is very hard. We have some very traditional direct mail clients, especially like in senior housing and things like that. It's very hard to get them to change their minds because they know they have sales forces sitting there waiting for leads to come through the door and they know direct mail works.

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One of the problems we have is helping marketers to understand that an online lead is just as good as a direct mail lead, and helping them to value those leads. They just have to be treated a little bit differently in terms of CRM, but they're still valuable leads. They're still people who've held up their hands and indicated an interest for a product or a service.

But for clients who have seen that online advertising, that search and online campaigns can work, it's not that hard.

The big hurdle for a lot of people right now is how to navigate in the social space. A lot of clients want to do it by being really, really promotional and it's very hard to get brands to understand you have to be what people are interested in and not talk about what people are interested in. It's subtle, and sometimes it's hard to help people connect with that idea. Frankly, I don't think social media is right for every brand. There are some brands that really shouldn't go there.

But social media can work for many sectors, like housing, where you have a chance to build community online before people are ready to move into a physical community. Social media can be really successful at helping them understand the lifestyle and the people.

eMarketer: I'm thinking of brands on Facebook, such as Ford, which recently launched the new Explorer entirely online. An Ad Age article said they were targeting boomers through Facebook and social media and that felt odd to me; that's not how I use Facebook. How successful do you think that effort is?

Bitter: Yes, well, you just said it, that's not how boomers are using Facebook. We're not using online—our Facebook time—as entertainment as much as we are as a way to connect with people. And so I think if brands don't understand the difference between entertainment on Facebook and the tool that is Facebook, they're not going to be successful.

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