

Top 10 Misconceptions That Sabotage Marketing to Mature Audiences: #7

# Older adult audiences share the same aspirations, and respond to the same motivational stimuli, as younger consumers

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## INTRODUCTION

It's no secret: from the first ad ever run in a newspaper to today's social media, advertisers have preyed on peoples' insecurities to sell their wares. Most products are positioned as having the ability to fill some sort of personal void—whether it's purported to make us more attractive, popular, and successful, or thinner, smarter, and richer.

But where do advertisers turn when these motivations alone cease to lure prospective customers? In the case of mature adults, the first thing to do is recognize the widespread misconception that older adult audiences share the same aspirations, and respond to the same motivational stimuli, as younger consumers.

As a whole, emotions energize buying behavior across all generations. One of the main challenges in reaching older adult audiences is that our motives for acquiring things change as we age. This phenomenon is largely influenced by the breadth of both positive and humbling experiences we accumulate over time. As a result, older adults tend to be genuinely more comfortable in their own skin and more accepting of who they are and their "lot in life." Aspirations are no longer focused on material possessions or physical beauty as much as on spiritual fulfillment or emotional contentment.

So what, then, *does* help marketers engage older prospects?

One is the promise of "connectedness." This resonates with mature adults because it speaks to the importance they place on being needed and having purpose—not to mention the fundamental need to have a support system in place to remain independent. Equally important is attaining emotional goals, such as happiness—which differ significantly from the more materialistic goals of younger adults.

This white paper examines research that shows that the mature market responds to a completely different set of motivational stimuli than younger consumers, clearly suggesting that marketers need to take a fresh look at this audience. When presenting their brand, product, or service to older audiences, an advertiser's competitive edge really lies in fulfilling an emotional contract—demonstrating how its product or service supports older adults' values and complements an evolved self-image.

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## WHEN YOU ASSUME...

So where did the misconception that older adults are motivated by the same stimuli as younger adults come from? Marketers have traditionally focused most of their money and energies on the 18-35 year old segment, long considered the “sweet spot” for marketing—to a fault. It was too easy to skip the listening, researching, and strategizing steps and just lump older adults under the same motivators. Hey, who *wouldn't* want to be better looking, thinner, more popular, more successful, and have more stuff? But that dismisses the fact that older adults are looking for more (and deeper) meaning in their lives.

For example, while young people may eat a healthy diet to look thinner and more attractive, older adults are more likely to be persuaded to do so for the sake of their loved ones.<sup>1</sup> Same behavior, different motivation.

Gerontology—the branch of science that deals with aging and the problems of older adults—has proven enlightening in giving marketers the perspectives of older adults whose physical and mental acuities are declining. However, marketers have too often taken that useful information and myopically focused on convincing older adults that their products and services will help them overcome their deficiencies—thereby dwelling on the *negative*.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, marketers and advertisers used to practice “sensitivity training” sessions to help them experience what it was like to age. But it elicited pity instead of empathy—the more desirable reaction that would help marketers and advertisers truly understand this misunderstood group. Clearly marketers should put a stronger emphasis on the more complex worldviews and aspirations of older adults.

**OLDER ADULTS  
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## ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Research indicates that marketers and advertisers should take the advice of an old song that their audience may remember and “ac-cen-tu-ate the positive” when targeting older adults. Seeing aging as a positive development will help marketers reach out to older adults in an effective way because older adults are more positive about aging than younger adults.<sup>3</sup>

This focus on the positive among older adults extends to making product choices, as well. One study found that when comparing products and services, older adults generally focus on positive features more than younger adults do.<sup>4</sup> They also tend to directly compare a few specific aspects of a choice—a car’s price, gas mileage, and interior room, for example—whereas younger adults take a more holistic approach and compare overall evaluations of their choices.

How does this affect online advertising? Considering what we’ve just discussed, it’s not surprising that younger Internet users prefer ads that are more entertaining overall, whereas older surfers want more specific, relevant, and useful ads.<sup>5</sup>

## IS LOYALTY A THING OF THE PAST?

Here's something that may surprise you. Another long-held assumption is that older adults are more brand-loyal than younger ones—but a recent AARP study<sup>6</sup> found that 34% of consumers 18-44 expressed a preference for a single brand of stereo, while only 17% of 65+ consumers reported a brand preference. Similar (and equally counter-intuitive) results were found for other products and services. Even for categories that seniors use more often than others—such as airlines and bath soaps as compared to sneakers and DVD players—there was no significant difference in brand preference among seniors than among the younger age segments.

But does brand *preference* equal *loyalty*? The Gallup Organization believes not.<sup>7</sup> They studied brand *engagement*—a deeper brand-relationship measure that takes a customer's level of emotional connection with a brand into account. The results underscore the need for very different marketing activities by companies who want to enhance brand relationships. Among six different product/service categories—from cars and airlines to banking and online retail—customer engagement was almost universally higher among consumers aged 55 and older than either the 18-24 or the 25-34 year old age groups.

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For example, 34% of shoppers 55 and older were “fully engaged” with a mass-merchandise brand—compared to only 9% of the younger groups. Furthermore, the researchers found the trend to be linear—in five of the six product/service categories, the older the consumers, the higher the level of brand engagement.

What implications do these two seemingly contradictory research studies have for marketers? To build brand engagement among older consumers, companies simply need to *deliver* on their brand promises—as opposed to making stronger promises, or making them more frequently. Older adults are a savvy audience that has had more experience with brand disappointment than their counterparts. The research shows that while they are more likely to engage with your brand, they are willing to look elsewhere if your brand fails to fulfill its promise. You can't take them for granted any more.

## OLDER ADULTS ARE ON A HIGHER LEVEL

So why do older adults respond differently to stimuli than their younger counterparts? The answer may lie in your old college psych book. Remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?<sup>8</sup>

- **Physiological Needs:** Biological needs such as oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature.
- **Safety Needs:** Bodily security, employment, resources, morality, family, health, and property.
- **Love/Belonging Needs:** Friendship, family, and intimacy.
- **Esteem Needs:** Self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, and respect by others.
- **Self-Actualization:** Morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts.

Older adults are at higher levels on the scale as compared to younger adults—their aspirations are influenced by values, which result in different behaviors. One word of caution here: while the previous statement is generally true, just because a person is aging doesn't mean that they're *always* moving up the scale. If an older adult suddenly finds a need missing from his/her life (e.g., health), the individual will descend down the pyramid and strive to fulfill that need. But overall, older adults focus on servicing the inner self, or the “self-actualization” level of Maslow's scale.

So what are these values that influence an older adult's aspirations, and, ultimately, behaviors? Researchers have postulated that they can be grouped under five categories:<sup>9</sup>

- *Identity Values*: Older adults focus on self-preservation, self-awareness, and self-image—as compared to younger adults, who are generally more concerned with impressing others.
- *Relationship Values*: Older adults are more aware of what they put into relationships—as compared to younger adults, who focus on what they can get out of them. Older adults want to be able to give *and* receive.
- *Purpose Values*: This is the desire for validation of one's life and actions. This can be one of the strongest motivators in human behavior—but the value most often ignored by marketers.
- *Adaptation Values*: Older adults face more simultaneously occurring life events than any other group; therefore, they have a greater need to adapt than any other generation.
- *Energy Values*: These represent behaviors that promote physical and psychological health and well-being.

What can marketers learn from all this? You can reach the older adult audience if your product or service can help them achieve self-actualizing moments—satisfying their need for morality, creativity, spontaneity, and problem solving. Maslow called these moments “peak experiences”—ones that make them feel needed, productive, and fulfilled, as opposed to thin, attractive, or successful.

Suppose a financial company is looking to sell reverse mortgages to older adults. The evidence indicates that their message should not be, “tap into the equity in your home so you can travel the world or buy a bigger car,” but “tap into the equity in your home to help you meet your monthly expenses and remain independent.”

### **HOW ARE THE MOTIVATORS DIFFERENT?**

Research in the field of human resources<sup>10</sup> has some enlightening insights for this discussion. Replacing “Baby Boomers” in the workplace has become a challenge for many companies because they're finding that what appeals to the younger prospects isn't the same as what appealed to the people they're replacing. While younger adults feel the need to be accepted as positive contributors, older adults don't need as much affirmation from their peers. Younger workers own their solutions and hold themselves accountable, while older workers were weaned

on the “teamwork” concept. Surprisingly for some, younger adults do not work strictly for a paycheck, and view work-life balance as important as salary. Older adults grew up with the wisdom that the longer and harder you work, the more you can expect to receive—and now feel that being happy in your work is more important than achieving some arbitrary measure of success (salary, title, material possessions, etc.).

Generally, older adults focus on positive stimuli and turn away from negative stimuli—they have grown beyond the “I’ll show you” attitude of their younger days. They have faced significant losses, but want to live emotionally gratifying lives in spite of it. They direct their attention and memory in ways that help satisfy their emotional needs—and bring them closer to self-actualization.

Similar research published in the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>11</sup> concluded that while “Gen Y” and “Baby Boomers” have some things in common, five distinct facets help define the inner workings of each group:

**Gen Y:**

- *Ambition:* 84% profess to be highly ambitious (“go-getters”).
- *Loyalty:* 45% expect to work their entire career for their company—however, the researchers concluded that they are more susceptible to wanderlust than they realize.
- *Diversity:* 78% are comfortable working with people from different ethnicities and cultures.
- *World View:* 86% say it’s important that their work makes a positive impact on the world.
- *Networking:* 48% say having a network of friends at work is very important.

**Baby Boomers:**

- *Retire? Never!:* 42% project that they’ll continue to work after age 65; 14% think that they’ll never retire.
- *More Work to Do:* 47% see themselves as being at the middle of their career.
- *“Me” to “We”:* 55% are members of external volunteer networks—’60s idealism is alive and well.
- *Flexibility:* many are eager to pursue other passions while continuing to work.
- *Family:* 71% report having elder-care responsibilities. Many are feeling pressure from both sides—caring for their parents, and providing financial support to adult children.

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It’s easy to see how these findings debunk many of the misconceptions about the older adult audience as a group that just wants to hold back the years, look as young as they can, and enjoy a quiet life of leisure counting their savings and possessions. It’s a group that wants and expects to work, stay active and fulfilled, and contribute in a meaningful way to their families and communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The idea that older adults share the same aspirations, and respond to the same motivational stimuli, as younger consumers lies in stark contrast to research findings on the subject. While there are some similarities between age groups (everyone loves freebies and discounts, especially in the recent economic downturn), older adults clearly are at a different point in their lives—and see the world (and your product) in a completely different way than their younger counterparts.

Younger audiences want to be entertained by your advertising, in addition to hearing your brand promise. Older ones just want you to tell them specifically why your product will help them meet their needs and fulfill their aspirations. They have reached a point in their lives where looking young and attractive, being seen by their peers as successful, or having a large amount of material possessions isn't as important any more. Feeling needed and making a significant contribution to their families and communities are. They're looking for a deeper level of meaning when thinking about their purchases.

How can your brand help them find it? Stop making assumptions about older adults and go back to the basics: listen. Measure. Strategize. Make that emotional connection between your product or service and older adults' values and aspirations, and you will have discovered the secret to reaching this oft-misunderstood group. In reality, the answer was there all the time—unfortunately, too many companies are seduced by the lure of the 18-35 audience and don't take the time or effort to find it. With the size of the older adult audience poised to reach staggering levels (an American adult will turn 60 every seven seconds through the year 2025),<sup>12</sup> such efforts could be more lucrative than ever.

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