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The Misunderstood Generation

By Lumping Them Together, Marketers Fail to Understand Baby Boomers

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- They comprise nearly 24% of the population, have a buying power of \$3 trillion, and include many of the country's current business and political leaders. But marketers misunderstand -- and inefficiently target -- this country's 78 million baby boomers.

That's according to a new 22-page survey of 1,320 baby boomers from Edelman shared exclusively with Ad Age. Conducted with the agency's in-house market research subsidiary, StrategyOne, the study was undertaken after a group of senior Edelman executives (many who are boomers themselves) decided to test a theory that says marketers are failing to connect with consumers born between 1946 and 1964.

And indeed, the results found that marketers overgeneralize, misrepresent and sometimes ignore the generation, lumping them together and, in the process, alienating them. "We really set out to blow up some myths," said Jody Quinn, exec VP-general manager of Edelman's Boomer Insights Generation Group. "The longer that marketers keep treating [boomers] as a huge mass as opposed to individuals, the longer it's going to take them to enter the market."

Many resent generalization

Only 71% of those surveyed defined themselves as boomers, which means 22 million Americans -- generally those over 60 years old and under 46 -- don't even consider themselves as part of the demographic, said Laurence Evans, president of StrategyOne. While advertisers may think they're appealing to a wide audience by using the term baby boomers, they're in fact distancing those who resent the generalization.

"It would behoove marketers to consider that boomers are not a widespread demographic," said Marilyn Mobley, senior VP-strategic counsel at Edelman. "Baby boomers have always been considered the 'me-generation,' and that doesn't change with age. We're still just as self-centered and we want things very customized."

The study also found that boomers don't show a lot of brand loyalty. At least half surveyed (50% of the males and 60% of the females) said they were "not at all set for life financially," which supports the notion that brands don't always matter to a generation looking to save rather than spend.

"I've presented our findings to a few Fortune 500 companies," Ms. Mobley said. "For the first time, they understand the

connection between a boomer's concern for finances and their willingness to spend money on brands."

A gap bridged by Leno?

Those weren't the only glaring gender differences that the study found. After weighing several questions, the study concluded that men were more optimistic and enthused about the future ahead, while women were more stressed and concerned about the direction of their lives and finances. And then there was a gender gap in how they consume media.

According to the study, men consume media with their heads, seeking information on sports, news and business from AM radio, online and print news sources such as the Wall Street Journal. Women seek information with their hearts, choosing to read home, food, fashion and travel magazines and newspaper sections to find practical, do-it-yourself advice and heart-warming, inspirational stories rather than straight news. Despite these differences, they did agree on one thing: "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno."

Given the variance of the generation, the study suggests marketers need to identify and target influential "bull's-eye boomers," a term Edelman coined to describe boomers whose opinions are well-respected and often solicited. The study showed that bull's-eye boomers are typically wealthy, highly educated empty-nesters who are actively engaged socially, tuned-in politically and heavily involved in their community. Acting on research that indicates boomers listen to other boomers, Edelman believes bull's-eye boomers carry a lot of influence.

Targeting bulls-eye boomers

"It's really important for a brand to understand who my brand's bull's-eye boomer is," Ms. Mobley said, "and the way to do that is to determine what those 'bulls-eye boomers' consume from a media standpoint."

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents felt misrepresented and neglected by the advertising industry (54%), the media and entertainment industry (91%) and politicians (76%).

"This is a generation -- because of the sheer size of their demographic -- for which the world has always changed to meet their needs," Mr. Evans said. "Now [boomers] are finding that they're feeling a little left out by political campaigns, media and TV that are focused on younger groups."

So how do marketers cater to the boomer generation's needs? "Good marketing is ultimately about targeting segmentation," he said, "[so] just recognize that boomer is a description of a birthday, not a generation."