



# Old Thinking Fails to Persuade the Over 50s

A misguided obsession with youth causes many companies to ignore the Over 50s in the population. In an extract from his fascinating book *50+ Marketing*, **Jean-Paul Tréguer** explains why this potentially lucrative market is so often neglected or poorly served.

**H**ow powerful is the microcosm? In Paris, New York, London and Tokyo, some thousands of individuals look after on the one hand the marketing (the advertisers), and on the other the communication (the agencies). They rule over thousands of brands which every year spend tens of billions of dollars and euros on advertising campaigns. This is the tribe of marketing and advertising executives.

Like all tribes, they have the same origins, the same thought patterns, the same benchmarks, the same haunts. They have graduated from a large commercial college or university. They admire the rigour of Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, Danone and Colgate, and the creativity of L'Oréal or Pepsi.

They would never fail to read the latest issue of their professional press (*Advertising Age*, *Campaign*, *Stratégies*, and so on) while at the same time pretending to take a very detached view of such publications. They frequent the same fashionable restaurants, the same film previews and subscribe to the same sports clubs. They never fail to attend the 'high mass' of their profession, namely the Cannes Festival of Advertising Film.

Above all, they share one special characteristic: they are overwhelmingly young. With an average age of 28 to 35, marketing directors and group heads of marketing communicate easily with agency executives and creative staff, where it is a well-known fact that, after 45, if one has not become the chairman one is no longer working in advertising.

For example, in the UK, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising revealed that of the 12,800 people working in its member agencies in 2000, only 776 were aged over 50. In the USA, it has been shown that 82% of people working in advertising agencies were under 40, while 39% of the marketing directors were under 35 and only 10% over 50.

Should we regret this youth? Certainly not, since it is partly what enables advertisers and agencies to come up constantly with the new products and new ideas that constitute the dynamic of this industry. Nonetheless, it is also

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one of the basic reasons that explain this unbelievable 'marketing genocide' of millions of over 50-year-olds.

Living in this half-enclosed world, the advertiser and his agent naturally find it difficult to establish contact with a consumer who is

two or three times their age. It is much more convenient to communicate with people of one's own generation whose reactions and expectations are more easily anticipated and understood.

In conclusion, we should recognise that the baby boom (1946–64) and the socio-economic context created a euphoric economy that has facilitated the sale of goods and services of all kinds. The younger generations did not hesitate to buy the latest products, taking full advantage of the credit facilities offered by every store department. These cohorts of avid consumers created the good times for advertisers during this amazing development of the consumer society.

Today's scene is quite different and the over 50s could well be the lifebuoy for many markets. We should not apportion all blame for the marketing blindness to the advertising and agency executives. There is another factor that plays its part: the age of the company directors.

How many times have I observed at the end of countless strategic seminars presented to company boards the half joking, half serious response of the chairman and directors, all generally in their 50s. They had just become aware that they belonged to this age group and for those of them who were particularly concerned about their projected image, this came as a shock. It is well known that 50-year-olds are especially shy about their age (except when they can benefit from a special service or tariff).

People do not like to see themselves growing

old and, consciously or unconsciously, that markedly affects their attitude towards the strategic choices in their business. At heart, the dream of many directors is to be like Richard Branson, the emblematic head of Virgin, experienced businessman, in his 50s, but a perpetual instigator and innovator who shows himself to be younger than many who are actually younger than him. It is somewhat the myth of the boss who is forever up-to-date with the trends that is involved when one shows that the over 50s have specific needs and values that require dedicated generational marketing.

"For years, I have done everything to promote my brand with the best – a young image, a young target group, a young advertising style, and you want me to take the risk of tarnishing it by appealing to the over 50s?" That is the near instinctive reaction of advertisers when the 50+ market comes up for discussion. But, in the American market, brands popular with teenagers, such as Levi's, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Nike, Kellogg's or Pepsi, have shown for several years that these approaches are not irreconcilable.

Nevertheless, it is clear that for a very large number of companies this argument is a strong brake on the emergence of marketing strategies that include the 50+ group. This reticence comes from a tendency to caricature the strategies employed to include the over 50s in the marketing approach.

But things are not simply black or white. There is no de facto reason why the integration of the over 50s into the design of products or into the communication strategy should cause the loss of the younger market. We can even claim that, in many cases, the values produced, such as ease of use, or the communication values, such as greater rapprochement between generations, are able to bring spectacular success in both the younger and older groups.

A French study, carried out in July 1997 by IED (the Youth Institute), involving 400 young people aged 18–25, corroborates this claim. In response to the question: "More and more

companies are offering products and services and advertising campaigns aimed at people aged from 50 to 70, what do you think of this?", the replies were as follows. "I think it is quite normal for the brands to be interested in the over 50s' (36%); "I think that these brands become more attractive by taking an interest in all generations" (27%); "It makes no difference to me, it's not important" (32%); "I find it makes the brands look old" (only 2%).

On the other hand, portraying over 50s in an unfavourable or confrontational light in order to appeal to the young runs the serious risk of displeasing everyone. For a number of years advertisers have been in the habit of using laughable 50+ people to show younger generations that their brands ran no risk of being consumed by such grotesque beings. Every year, throughout the world, there are new campaigns for products aimed at the young that use over the 50s as a contrast foil. This provokes much

amusement among a few hundred advertising executives who take the opportunity of awarding themselves prizes for such work, but the commercial outcome is generally disastrous.

This is because it is persistently forgotten that the over 50s are also buyers and within the family group there is little conflict between the generations; the grandchildren love their grandparents and do not see them at all in the way that the advertisers depict them.

What interest do companies have in making enemies of millions of consumers, shocked and even offended by the negative representation of their generation? Humour is fine, but why this type? As Hege Christensen and Kristin Undheim, authors of the *Bengal Trend Report on Scandinavian Seniors* (July, 2000), write: "Seniors are the mass media's most faithful customers, but neither advertisers nor TV companies are particularly interested by them. They don't think that they will be able to make any money on seniors,

and anyway, they don't even know if they like them."

This is perhaps why brands such as Fila in the UK have no hesitation in running campaigns in which the voiceover to a picture of an old man and woman asks: "Any last request?" as though before dying the only intelligent thing they could do would be to buy a pair of Fila sport shoes. Would they have dared to do the same by making fun of gays or minority ethnic groups? One thing is certain, tackling the over 50s market requires great tact and extreme prudence, because the 50+ consumer is experienced and demanding.

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**This extract is taken from the book *50+ Marketing* by Jean-Paul Tréguer, published by Palgrave Macmillan at £25. Tréguer is the founder and chief executive of Senioragency, a specialist in marketing and advertising to the over 50s. For more information on his book, please visit [www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com)**