

COMING OF AGE

I N C O R P O R A T E D

Baby Boomer Marketing & Senior Marketing

How Emotions Drive the Sales Process When Selling to Baby Boomer & Older Customers

By Jim Gilmartin

Introduction

David B. Wolfe, noted author, lecturer and expert in marketing to baby boomer and senior customers has developed an approach to marketing he calls “Developmental Relationship Marketing” (DRM). His approach to communicating with baby boomer and senior customers has as its foundation writings of behaviorists Abraham Maslow, Eric Erikson and other noted authors. The approach and concepts developed in this article are taken from several of David’s unpublished papers.

Marketing and sales communications has a purpose - to stimulate awareness, interest and desire in customers' minds that lead to decisions to buy. We typically direct our communication to the “average customer”. An implicit presumption in marketing is that customers' minds -- at least adult customers' minds -- process information more or less the same way.

However, information processing varies considerably across the life span. If a sales presentation is not keyed to the information processing styles that generally characterize customers within an age group, the presentation will likely fall short of achieving its objectives. The message must resonate with the cognitive styles of the objective targets of the message.

The Beginnings

Beginning in adolescence and throughout a good portion of the first third of the normal adult life span, we see the world through cognitive lenses that highly differentiate the makeup of reality. We neatly parse reality into finely distinguished categories that delivers to our conscious minds images of reality sharply defined in black and white clarity. The superior clarity of differentiated thinking in young adulthood is why great breakthroughs in science usually flow from the minds of people in their 20s.

Sometime after our 20s, we begin to change our image of reality. Our thinking starts becoming more holistic as we start seeing subtle connections between the contents of reality that we cannot

see earlier in adulthood. Nothing can be defined categorically, that is, outside some context. Now, nothing stands alone.

Moreover, because context continuously changes, nothing can be defined absolutely. Further, because differentiated perceptions are highly subjective (we typically see things a bit different from everyone else), truth is not an objective quality, but a benign attribute of a matter that is individually determined. Truth is more emotionally-originated than reason-originated, and this becomes more apparent with age when we more readily regard something as True simply because "it feels right." Feelings are consciously experienced representations of underlying emotions that we apply labels to in order to make sense of them. Emotions play a larger role in customers' decision-making in midlife and beyond than in early adulthood as is indicated.

Emotions - Driving the Sales Process

The experience of emotion motivates individuals to act. This obvious notion has become even more significant with the recently published findings in neuroscience concerning human motivations. In particular, published findings from research conducted by Antonio and Hannah Damasio (reported in part in A. Damasio's "Descartes' Error", Grossett/Putnam, 1994) suggest we are unable to make decisions having personal relevance unless we have been motivated by our emotions. Reason, according to the Damasios, plays an analytic role, not a decision role in matters of personal significance. The experience of emotion is necessary to motivating individuals to act (on matters having personal relevance).

Some research suggests that age is associated with positive emotional development. The writings of Abraham Maslow and many others examining later-life perceptions of people are filled with observations supporting this statement. "Positive emotional development" in this case does not mean "positive outlooks". Instead, it refers to the generally greater skill of baby boomer and senior people in managing their emotions and extracting more from emotional processes than do younger people do.

Cognitive operations in later life reflect a shift from the dominantly objective mode of younger minds to a blended mode that reflects increasing amounts of subjectivity. Simplistically speaking, this means there are less rationally-derived content and more emotionally-derived content in the fully formed perceptions of baby boomer and senior customers.

Emotionally Neutral Sales Presentations Are Less Effective

Empirical studies have shown that older adults are relatively superior to younger adults in understanding emotional states. This observation is consistent with the notion that has gained considerable credibility from other studies suggesting that older minds often get the gist of a matter faster than younger minds. They will generally "get the picture" with less being said, if what is said is capable of quickly stirring emotional responses. On the other hand, it appears that older minds tend to be slower in getting the picture when the information representing it is emotionally neutral.

“Relationship” selling is more important in older markets than in younger markets. Research suggests that evaluations of prospective relationships are determined more emotional than rational readings. For this reason, it can be said, “the emotional quality of a prospective relationship is more important than features and benefits in the early stages of bonding between customer and seller.”

Therefore, to focus on functional competence in the early stages of a customer-provider relationship is to place emphasis on the least important issues in the customer's mind. Older customers generally are inclined to pay more for the value-added benefits of a rewarding relationship. Further, once they are in a solid relationship that gives them pleasure, they will be more forgiving of company and product shortcomings.

Memory for prose containing a well-structured, coherent story line appears to be least affected by the aging process. This is a critical point. Among other things, it means that older minds will have more difficulty recalling the contents of marketing communications and sales presentations that are highly objective (emotionally neutral) and that lack an underlying narrative theme (as opposed to an expository or didactic theme.)

Typical marketing literature and sale presentations tend to be linear presentations of benefits and features. Marketing messages generally lack coherent story lines. Rather, they project information fragments, often delivered in somewhat staccato fashion. Yet, less is often more in older markets. The message doesn't have to say a lot in terms of measurables, such as details on the company and the products offered.

Weaving information into an attractive tapestry that integrates “facts” into an emotionalizing matrix can satisfy the need of older customers to gauge the potential emotional quality of the relationship before considering the product. Relationship quality cannot be measured; it can only be felt; too many facts too early in the customer-provider relationship dampen feelings.

The relative salience of emotion increases with age . . . emotional material was processed more deeply than nonemotional material. This suggests that often the best way to transmit objective, emotionally neutral information to older markets is to piggyback it on or sandwich it between emotionally enriched information.

The Crux of the Matter

Whereas our findings add to the considerable literature documenting age-related decrements for neutral information, they suggest that a similar toll is not taken on memory for emotional information . . . thus . . . emotional material may come to occupy relatively more thought over time.

This observation is the crux of the matter. It suggests that the traditional focus of marketing communications and sales presentations on product features and benefits and other objective

information reaches a point of diminishing returns more quickly among older customers.

Emotional information is retained and recallable in detail. The more limited experience of younger people deprives them of the higher level of ability that baby boomer and senior customers have to bring intuitive processes into their cognitive operations. Consequently, there is often a tendency among younger people to "oversell" baby boomer and senior customers. Baby boomer and senior customers generally don't need to be sold. After they get the basic picture if they decide to consider a company and its products they mainly want unadorned information.

Wisdom entails the coupling of large bodies of procedural and factual information about the world with an appreciation for the uncertainties of life and the relative status of facts. This observation relates to the much-written about character of baby boomer and senior customer's outlook on reality as painted in "shades of gray." Seeing reality in such ambiguous tones tends to depreciate the value of the clear-cut, black-and-white propositions that dominate marketing messages. Tolerance and even preference for ambiguity in communications styles largely derives from a shift away from the linear styles of youthful minds to a more circular, less cause-and-effect oriented style in which direct reasons for events lose in importance.

The fact that most studies of memory do not use emotional stimuli suggests that they may inadvertently place older people at a disadvantage . . . Results of this study suggest that the typical nonemotional quality of experimental stimuli themselves may favor younger age groups over older.

This observation has enormous potential importance. In the first place, it proposes that memory deficits ascribed to baby boomer and senior customers may be overstated because of the nature of the instruments used in measuring memory capabilities. This and other research show that older minds can remember items of categorical relevance to them as competently as younger minds. What seems to be at work here is the higher dependence on emotionality in constructing mental renditions of reality in later life.

Conclusion

Emotion, of course, is only one of several key factors in perception-building. However, in some ways it is the most important factor: it is the device the brain/mind complex uses to determine the relevance of a matter to a person's interests. There are considerable differences in how younger and older brain/mind complexes process information, with variances in the use and management of emotions being central to those differences. Sales presentations intended for people in mid-life and beyond will benefit from respecting these differences in message content and style by delivering high-grade results more often.

Effective and successful sales presentations begin with creating an emotional environment that reflects:

1. A desire to listen to the customer
2. A process that eases the qualification process
3. An understanding of the customers needs and wants
4. An understanding of the changing communications process in older customers
5. The development of a bond, a trusting relationship (vulnerability, honesty and integrity)
6. Ease in the processing of relevant facts and information
7. Continued expressions of empathy throughout the presentation
8. This will Result in more efficient and sustainable closes

For more information on concepts and practices of Developmental Relationship Marketing, please visit <http://www.idrm.com/>

Biographical note: Jim Gilmartin is president of Wheaton, IL based *Coming of Age, Incorporated*. Established in 1991, the full service integrated marketing firm specializes in helping clients to increase leads and sales in baby boomer and senior customer markets. The firm provides clients' marketing communications, full advertising agency services and public & media relations' services. The firm also provides clients sales and service improvement training and turnkey Customer Loyalty/Affinity Clubs.

Jim is a frequent speaker at sales and marketing conferences, leadership/management retreats and association meetings. He currently teaches marketing and management seminars at the *University of Chicago* and is on the faculty of the *Bank Administration Institute's Graduate School*. He can be reached at 630-462-7100 or e-mail him at jimgilmartin@comingofage.com.
