

# COMING OF AGE

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

## Baby Boomer Marketing & Senior Marketing

### **The Major Mistake Concerning Communication Is the Illusion That It Has Occurred**

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By Jim Gilmartin

#### **Why We Are Different as We Age**

Although all of us have basic values and motivators that drive us, we manifest them differently as we move through the spring, summer, fall and winter of life. Selling to baby boomers and senior customers is different primarily because of this shift in values. Our need for identity, relationships, centering, gaining knowledge and growth, rejuvenation and recreation are always with us, but as we grow older, we focus more on having meaningful experiences, rather than gaining material goods.

#### **Understand How They Think!**

As important as it is to understand what baby boomers and senior customers think, it's even more important to understand how they think. When selling to these markets, focusing on product features and benefits often results in a losing strategy, especially early on in the process. Research has shown that customers' final decisions are not the direct product of the reasoning process; in fact, emotions drive baby boomers and senior customers in their purchase decisions. The reasoning process will confirm their decision, but it doesn't start there.

In the sales process, typically the salesperson speaks to the customer in a very staccato fashion. They immediately start talking about their product's features and benefits without trying to build the relationship first. This approach is not usually effective, because as we get older we become more resistant to absolute guarantees or propositions. Salespeople should allow the customer to pull wanted information; never push it at them.

When salespeople are selling to these populations, they should decrease the speed of the presentation. As we age, our minds are quicker at emotionally processing information but slower in generating rationally derived perceptions. Deliver objective information at a slow-to-moderate pace. Avoid jumping around on the issue. Maintain a steady equilibrium as you speak. Don't make long stories short or short stories long. Ask many open-ended questions that start the customer talking. Never rush the customer or patronize them. The older we get, the more we reject patronization.

## **Avoid Being “Myth-Interpreted”**

There are a lot of false stereotypes and myths about aging. The most destructive myth to business is that we become more alike as we age. If we believe it, we are prone to act it out in our communications and sales approaches. We create a “senior” market that doesn’t exist and we target the “average” senior who also doesn’t exist.

In fact, we become less alike and more independent in our thinking as we age. As we age, we develop an increased resistance to hyperbole. We move away from dependence on others and to autonomy and individuality. We value relationships and experiences that are non-material. Salespeople have a better chance of selling a product or service if the customer believes the item offers a gateway to the specific experience they are looking for.

Salespeople in their 20s and 30s have a different outlook on the world than people in their 50s and 60s. Younger salespeople should really get to know and understand how the aging audience thinks and how the mind processes information before trying to sell to them. As people get older, first impressions are very difficult to reverse and there is less reliance on reason and more reliance on intuition. Whatever images are present in your place of business can promote a strong emotional response from the aging customer.

## **Anecdotes Work Well**

When communicating with these markets storytelling works well, since today’s customer universe is more age-weighted toward mid-life values and there is a definite resistance to neutral information. Whoever tells the best story wins! Go with the grain of the brain and integrate your data into an emotional matrix to satisfy the customer’s need and gauge the potential emotional and experiential quality of the relationship before talking about the product’s benefits and features. Also, understand that the best way to transmit objective and emotionally neutral information is to piggyback and sandwich it between emotionally enriched information.

## **Honesty Is the Best Policy**

Don’t overstress a sense of urgency when selling to baby boomer and senior customers. If you say, “Buy it today, you won’t get the discount”, the customer most likely will know he or she can go elsewhere. They have plenty of choices and options, they don’t need you; you need them. Begin a sales presentation by developing a relationship. Understand you’re in an emotionally charged environment and take the time to listen to the customer. Be vulnerable, honest and open about who you really are. The more honest you are, the better your chances are of developing a good solid bond in the relationship. Show empathy and reduce your reliance on sales charts and other tools, and take more time to understand the customer has needs and wants.

Challenge your current sales approach and gain a better understanding of the physical as well as behavioral changes of aging customers. Remember that as we age, we can’t hear, or taste or see as well, and if you’re sales approach or environment isn’t user friendly to these customers; you’re often wasting your time. Small print is pejorative in nature. Ads, and other marketing communications and sales collateral that has small print because of potential liability issues is

usually interpreted as untrustworthy. Saying less is more in many instances. Let the customer use his or her imagination to interpret your communications. This approach reduces the need to use small print reducing the potential of customer dissatisfaction and litigation.

Finally, companies should sensitize and train their salespeople to the different perceptions, values and motivators we all have as we move through life. Remember what one of the most prolific of sages, Anonymous, once said, "If you have sight, you're blessed. If you have insight, you're a thousand times blessed."

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*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](mailto:jimgilmartin@comingofage.com).

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