

COMING OF AGE

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

Baby Boomer Marketing & Senior Marketing

The Parting of the Ways: Why Communicating with Baby Boomer & Senior Customers Is Different

By Jim Gilmartin

Think Sail Boating

Most communications are like powerboats – they command self-generated forces to meet their objectives. Lately however, powerboat marketing seems to be yielding diminishing returns. It may be better to think less like a power boater and more like a sailor who taps the external powers of wind and current.

The aging population is one of the reasons powerboat marketing is losing steam. The adult median age is 45, making middle age customers the dominant players in the marketplace. This has presented marketers with the most independent-minded customer population ever. In midlife, behavior typically becomes more autonomous. Resistance to entreaties by others to take various actions – like buying a given product increases.

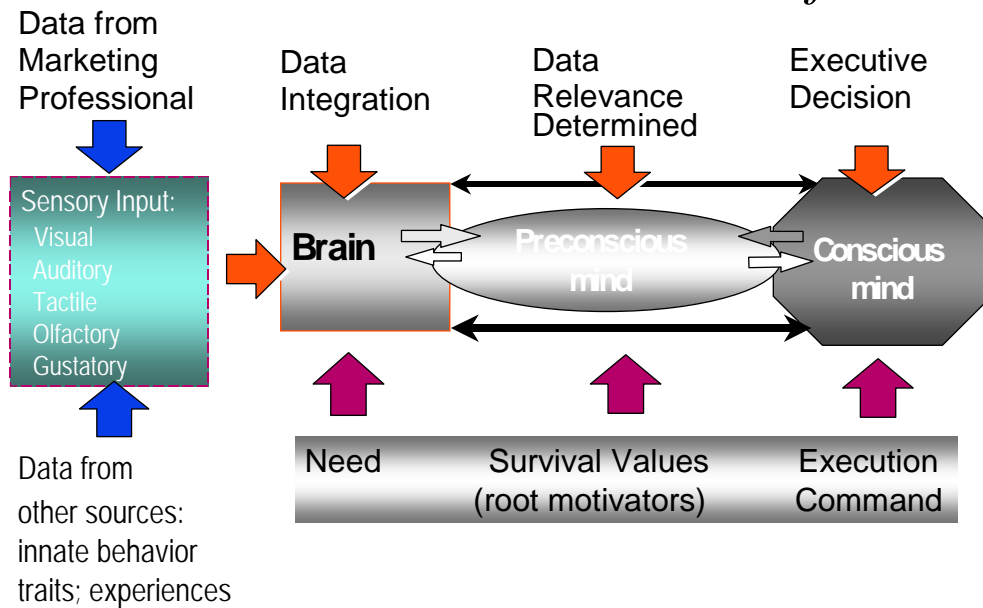
Kevin J. Roberts, CEO of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi said in a Wall Street Journal interview, “The challenge of marketing is how to bring emotion and engagement – how to bring love – to a sometimes asocial medium. Great brands can't exist just by providing information.” Because pleasure is dependent on sensory input, you should want every marketing message in every medium to be designed with an informed consciousness of the following fact:

Awareness depends on sensory arousal - the less the arousal the dimmer awareness.

Go With the Grain of the Brain

The idea is to improve selling efficiency by delivering information to potential residents tailored to their unique attributes. However, as Saatchi's Roberts said, providing information is not enough. The senses must be engaged and emotions aroused before awareness and interest develops and a customer can make a buying decision or validate a previous purchase. The challenge is the creation of an interactive platform that can infer from conversations with customers their emotional profiles.

How The Brain Processes Information



It has been estimated that only about one-trillionth of the information falling on the surface of then eyes ever reaches consciousness -- and that just addresses one of the five senses. The brain itself experiences major challenges in sorting out what's important amid all the incoming "clutter". It must do so in order to reduce the stream of incoming information to levels that are manageable by the conscious mind. What the conscious mind can handle is constrained by the limits of working memory, which actually is quite small.

As any good staff would do in preparing information for action by a CEO, the brain winnows through untold volumes of information, rating it according to its importance to the CEO -- in this case, the conscious mind. This constitutes an information triage whereby information most important to a person's survival scenario is identified and sent forward.

Thus, marketers' primary challenge in creating and transmitting marketing messages is getting marketing information across in a way that is judged by the brain and preconscious mind as relevant to customers' survival scenarios. It is common for all marketers to talk about the challenges of breaking through "all the clutter" to get customers' attention. The "clutter", of course to which they are usually referring is all the other marketing messages aimed at customers. A more challenging "system" of clutter exists in customers' mind/brain complexes.

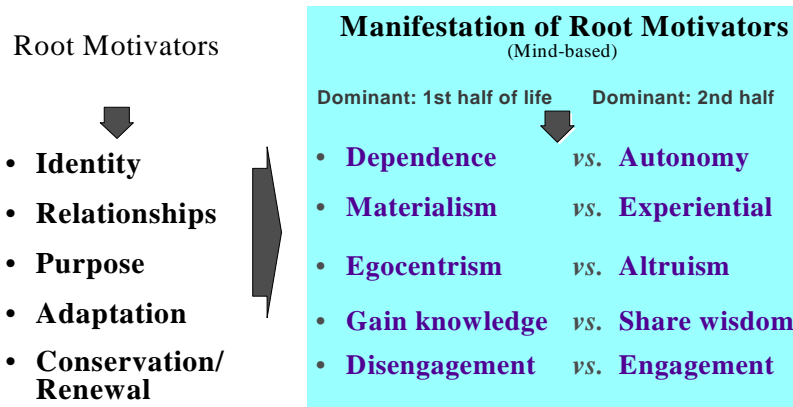
Recent brain research indicates that willful decisions are not possible in the absence of emotional arousal. That discovery validates Roberts' charge that "we're failing hopelessly -- just hopelessly" in catering to emotions. Marketing is not about getting out facts but about stimulating emotional centers of the brain. Marketers who do best will have an intimate knowledge of brain and mind -- or put their trust in those who do. The image below reflects the

basic survival values and Root Motivators common to the species. The key to effective communications is a better understanding of how they are manifested in different stages of life.

A better understanding of the dominant manifestations of Root Motivators (and how they are manifested over life), and applying that knowledge to communications will help to better connect with your target markets.

Message Considerations

Manifestation of Root Motivators



While motivators originate in biological makeup, they manifest themselves in their most individualized mode in the interplay between the biological and psychological self. How this plays out constantly changes to correspond with the needs, motivations and behavior appropriate to given stages of personal development.

In the first half of life, social development needs dominate behavior, resulting in different motivational influences than in the second half of life when inner self-development needs dominate. In addition, worldviews in the first half of life tend to have a more objective bias (except of course in early childhood). In the second half of life, worldviews tend to be more subjectively biased.

Psychological or *personal* motivators are activated by tensions generated between bipolar forces, analogously as an electric motor’s armature is “motivated” by tensions between two electromagnetic poles. While both poles throughout life influence behavior, behavior in each half of life tends to be dominated by one pole or the other: the objective pole in the first half and the subjective pole in the second half.

Fulfillment of Identity needs in the first half of life requires subordination of the self to gain social integration that is generally necessary to secure lasting intimate relationships, jobs, job promotions and a social status that aids in satisfaction of personal agenda. In the second half of life, with identity formation essentially complete and social development done, developmental changes promotes increased sense of autonomy. Around the onset of mid-life, it is common for

internal disorder to arise as the inner self begins to seek a larger role in life at the expense of the dominance of the social self. This is a large part of what is often referred to as “the mid-life crises”.

Baby boomer and senior customers are more resistant to absolutism. The young mind tends to see reality in simpler terms than aging minds do, and they tend to see things in terms of absolute states or conditions: either something is or it is not. Nuance and subtlety often create more confusion in the younger mind about a matter than understanding of it. In contrast, baby boomer and senior customers tend to have greater appreciation for the finer definition that nuance and subtlety give a matter. This bias results from a combination of experience and age-related changes in how the brain processes information.

The predisposition of baby boomer and senior customers to reject absolutism means that marketing communications intended for them should generally reflect a conditional tone. Strongly worded and delivered claims about your product or service usually work better with younger, more literal-minded adults. A softer, more deferential, conditional approach is better suited to the baby boomer and senior customer mind that sees reality in shades of gray.

Conditional positioning respects customer autonomy. It projects willingness to let customers largely define the marketing process. But, it also makes it possible for more customers to connect with the message because they, not the copywriter, determine what the message says. That is the power of implicitly wrought conditional positioning.

Baby boomer and senior customers tend to be more holistic in perceptions and thinking. They tend to be better at seeing “the big picture” – to be more holistic in their thinking, because of more right brain activity in their mental processes. The right brain sees reality in terms of relationships. The identity of parties to a relationship is dependent on the relationship. To the right brain, nothing has meaning outside a relationship. The left-brain, in contrast, sees reality as a mosaic of isolated pieces in which each piece has a distinctly autonomous identity. While the right brain “sees the forest”, the left-brain “sees the trees.”¹

Those are a few differences in mental processes in the first and second halves of life. Admittedly, they are generalities, but nothing can be said about behavior that is not a generality, but generalities can have value when they express verifiable central themes. Marketing needs to be adjusted to the facts that no two people perceive anything exactly the same way, and that genetic inheritance, experience and processes of maturation contribute to the differing perceptions that exist between people.

Information streaming in through our senses from the outside world is processed in the right brain before we become aware of it. At this point, everyone is “right brained.” In the interval between when information is detected by the senses and awareness of it emerges, the right brain processes the information to determine whether it has any importance to us. Information the right brain views as having little or no importance to us has little likelihood of reaching conscious awareness, and if it does, even less likelihood of being recallable a day or even an hour later.

Does this Ad work?

Obviously, the first challenge in marketing is to generate awareness of a product message in customers' minds and get them to feel it has importance to them. This only happens after there has been an unconscious arousal of emotional responses in the right brain to the product message. A recent Paine Weber ad illustrates what not to do if you want to generate emotional responses in the right brain. In the ad, a headline is superimposed over a collage of about a dozen pictures of a financial analyst. Ho-hum:

“Everybody should receive financial advice. But should everybody receive the same advice?”

That headline is a left-brain lead, a generally ineffective way to introduce a product message. The headline essentially is an abstract statement with no sensual content. It is made even less effective by the emotional neutrality of pictures and body copy. The right brain cannot process the ad's contents very easily or completely because it cannot directly process abstract concepts, that is, representations of reality by symbols.

The right brain processes sensory images, not abstract symbols. Sensory images appear in the form of sights, sounds, aroma, tastes and feels. To avoid confusion, I should point out that while words are abstract representations of reality, they could be strung together in ways that allow them to be processed by the right hemisphere. By creating word pictures, the right brain can process language. This is the specialty of poets. There is no word picture in the Paine Weber ad.

Create Empathy with the Market

The more experienced a person is the more influence gut feelings have on decisions. This is borne out in studies by psychologists Laura Carstensen and Susan Turk-Charles who have empirically determined that “The relative salience of emotion increases with age. Among aging subjects, emotional material was processed more deeply than non-emotional material.” This means that to be effective in conveying emotionally neutral information (such as retirement information) to customers who are approaching middle age or older, it is often better to send it piggyback into their brains on the shoulders of emotionally enriched information.

Tell a Story

Narratives works better for getting baby boomer and senior customers' attention than expository. Aging minds work more out of the brain's right hemisphere where engaging stories are mostly processed, so it makes sense that storytelling is especially effective in marketing to baby boomer and senior customers. Stories generally arouse emotions more readily than emotionally neutral expository. Research shows that the more emotionally neutral information is, the less likely the aging mind will give it attention. The younger mind is less discriminating in this regard and may give emotionally neutral information as much attention as emotionally enriched information.

The future of brand husbandry lies in the art and heart of storytelling. “Those who tell the best story first will be leaders in their category.” Explicit monologues on product features, benefits and value do not require storytelling abilities. However, good stories are not monologues. They are silent dialogues between the storyteller and individuals in his audience. His words will catalyze dialogues throughout a large audience *only when members of the audience see themselves in the storytellers’ tale.* If the storyteller reveals all, his audience will be small. If he drops cues and clues, he can draw legions into dialogue with him,

Good marketing is good theater. Marketing scripts play out in the auditoriums of mind where human needs eagerly await the unfolding of scripts that spread warm, and often, exhilarating pleasure – not the dread feelings of defensiveness and anxiety associated with marital conflict. The most commanding force in life is desire for pleasure. Nature gave us the chemistry of pleasure so that we might have incentives to take actions that serve our survival and well being needs. Marketing is about securing customers’ confidence that what is being offered will contribute to those needs.

Stories get our attention because stories arouse our emotions. Facts do not. Claims do not – unless they produce a viscerally counterargument, which advertising claims frequently do. When people say they do not trust advertising, they are saying they do not put stock in claims. Few people ever like an ad because of any facts it presents or claims it makes. Moreover, studies show that likeability is a key to most advertising success. People like ads that stir their emotions, not that engage their rational argumentative selves.

Ads are catalysts that stimulate the brain into arousing emotions. Emotions must reach some threshold before they are strong enough to cause feelings to arise in the conscious mind. Most emotions never reach that level. When they do, it is because the message has made contact with the person’s experiential aspirations.

Two Families of Experiential Desires

Bad Feelings Family

“Sampling of Feelings I Want to Avoid”

- **Poor Self Esteem**
- **Rejected**
- **Inferior**
- **Depression, Despair**
- **Ignored**
- **Unattractive**
- **Ill**
- **Boredom**
- **Lethargy**
- **Empty**

Good Feelings Family

“Sampling of Feelings I Want to Experience”

- High Self Esteem
- Esteem of Friends
- Equal or Superior
- Uplifted Spirits
- Recognized
- Attractive
- Healthy
- Escape From Routine
- Energetic
- Sense of Purpose

Stories Provide Access to the Good Feelings Family

Experiential aspirations are compelling desires to experience certain feelings or to avoid certain feelings. All product decisions ultimately depend on connections with customers' experiential aspirations. A customer will not buy a product, no matter how outstanding its performance, design, value or price, unless it becomes connected with his or her experiential aspirations.

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.

¹ David B. Wolfe, noted author and expert in communicating with aging customers developed a communications paradigm he calls *Developmental Relationship Marketing*. Much of this article is taken from his concepts and writings.