

## AGE APPROPRIATE DESIGN OF ADVERTISEMENTS: AN ECONOMIC-GERONTOLOGICAL APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

There is a marked difference as to how advertising is perceived and effects the older and the younger generations and this in turn has implications regarding the design of print advertising. This paper presents prevailing approaches regarding the design of print advertising for the elderly and recommends procedures for optimising content and layout. For this, narrative systematic publications were thoroughly reviewed and collated. The question how the elderly evaluate print advertising and what expectations they have was analysed. The outcome of this was that the elderly not only wished to have appropriate advertising but found it to be absolutely essential. How older people deal with the retailers promotional flood of advertising is still unanswered. In a next step an empirical study will be carried out how elderly people evaluate this regular flow of newspaper advertisements of the extremely active retail market in Germany, and ways of optimising and improving advertising for this age group.

**Key words:** economics of aging, communication, marketing, advertising, advertisement, demographic change

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### 1. Overview, background of the study

The demographic development has consequences on the customer structure of companies. As a result, the falling number of births means that increasingly fewer young people – the traditional core target group of many companies – are flooding into the shops. On the other hand, the proportion of older consumers is growing continuously (Meyer-Hentschel, 2008; Reidel, 2006). Haimann (2005: p. 10) states: "King Customer has more and more grey streaks in his hair". Today, half of the population of the Federal Republic of Germany is already more than 49 years old (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009; Reader´s Digest Deutschland, 2006), and hence outside the core advertising target group of 14- to 49-year-olds, which companies consider to be relevant (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006). As soon as in 2015, every fifth German will be more than 65 years old. By 2060, the proportion of 65plus will rise to roughly 34 percent. Of all the countries in Europe, Germany's society is aging most quickly (Bauer Media, 2007; Lehr, 2006; Schöffski and Esslinger, 2006; Rott, 2004; Backes, 2004).

According to a current study, 65% of German companies can already feel the effects of an increased life expectancy in their sales markets and respond to them with appropriate offers. They above all aim at adapting (59%) or extending (58%) their existing range of offers and to adjust their customer address to the changed target groups (52%). Retailers are particularly active in this respect (67%). By using increased advertising, they are attempting to bolster regressing sales (TNS/Commerzbank, 2009).

However, the basic characteristics of older people have so far only rarely been considered in the content and formal design of advertising materials<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, many advertising measures are not well suited to addressing seniors as they do not approach them appropriately for their age, treating them distantly and with relatively little appreciation (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006). For instance, a study from 2004 shows that 68% of questioned seniors do not

<sup>1</sup> Advertising means the designed, objectified version of the advertising message. It is transmitted to the target audience using advertising media. The most important traditional advertising media are: Advertisements and inserts in print media, TV and radio commercials as well as presentations, demonstrations and decorations as part of an advertising campaign.

identify with the advertising themes surrounding them (GREY, 2005). A further study comes to the conclusion that older people are either ignored or ridiculed in advertising (BBS & Partner, 2005). As a result, it is not surprising that 31% of older people feel that advertising does not take them seriously or devalues them (GREY, 2005).

Currently, there is also only very little reliable data material on advertising design appropriate to older consumers so that both theory and practice have much ground to cover. Looking through gerontological academic literature in general (Reidl, 2006; Schöffski and Esslinger, 2006; Fachinger and Schmähl, 2004) as well as through specialised business literature focusing on marketing to seniors (Reidl, 2007; Rutishauser, 2005; Hupp, 2000; Härtl-Kasulke, 1998) quickly shows that until very recently, there have only been few attempts to adapt advertising aimed primarily at younger buyer groups to older people. Added to this, previous research mainly focused on TV and radio advertising, i.e. on so-called TV and radio commercials (Özdemir, 2009; Prieler et. al., 2009). These studies provide hardly any deeper insights into the design of print media advertising for older consumers. This scientific focus on TV and radio advertising is even more astonishing if one considers that older people clearly prefer print media, as this best meets their demands on information. It allows for information to be absorbed according to individual needs and at the desired speed so that feeling overstrained becomes less likely (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006). Furthermore, older people often perceive print advertising to be clearer and more easily understandable. The quickly moving images on television and the fact that several senses are addressed at the same time can also often be difficult for older people as they require more time to absorb and process information (Hupp, 2000; Kaupp, 2000; Härtl-Kasulke, 1998). Finally, advertising in newspapers, magazine and advertising journals costing approx. eight billion EUR in 2009 – based on net advertising revenue – constitutes by far the biggest proportion of the German advertising market (ZAW, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. Advertising experts hence often refer to it as the »Queen of advertising«.

The present situation demonstrates that both economically and gerontologically important design areas in print media advertising for older generations have been researched insufficiently and require further research efforts. As a result, the aim of this work is to present the current findings relating to the design of print media advertising for older consumers and to carry out a comparable analysis in order to identify precise approaches for optimisation and obtain ideas for future research tasks.

## 2. Research question, method

The main research question of this work is: How do older people over the age of 50 rate advertising in print media and what do they demand from its design? Three additional research questions can be deduced from this: Is there a target group relevant to advertising for people over the age of 50 years? What are the form and content-related requirements for ad-based advertising for older people? How can older people best be presented in ad-based advertising and with whom? For this purpose, narrative-systematically researched publications are analysed in detail and presented in their context. The answer to the questions above results in precise recommendations for actions regarding the design of print media advertising for older consumers. As a result, the present research agrees with a thesis by Bieri, Florack and Scarabis (2006, p. 28), which states that "(...) knowledge of the special characteristics of older consumers can be put to very productive use."

<sup>2</sup> Compared to this, in 2009, net advertising revenues for television were a mere EUR 3.6 billion and only EUR 3.1 billion for postal advertising (ZAW, 2010).

The systematic search was carried out in book literature, databases, online and in the scientific community between July and August 2010. Before starting, the research process was split into the following five phases of characteristic types according to time and content. *Phase 1:* Narrative research of all general search terms describing the design of print media advertising for older consumers as a large challenge for business and as an important task for management. *Phase 2:* Identification of suitable search terms and their combinations for search requests in phases 3 and 4. *Phase 3:* Search for book literature in reference libraries and through interlending (online catalogue of the German national library, dissertation databases etc.). *Phase 4:* Search for scientific publications in German and English language databases (GeroLit, EBSCO etc.) and manual search of selected journals not listed in the searched databases (Pro Alter, Das Gesundheitswesen etc.). *Phase 5:* Targeted search in the scientific community, which could be identified based on the literature found (pyramid system) or which were already known (BMFSFJ - Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, BMELV - Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, KDA - Kuratorium Deutsche Altershilfe, IHK - Chamber of Commerce and Industry etc.)

### **3. Age-appropriate advertising as a multiple research object**

Age-appropriate advertising, i.e. advertising to seniors – especially with a focus on ad-based advertising – is a highly complex area, which can be analysed and discussed from the point of view of several individual sciences. As a result, in the course of time, findings from various scientific areas have influenced this field of research, among them findings on how information is captured and processed, on the assessment and processing of text and image information, on information overload and consumer and buyer behaviour. In summary, one can however point out that the findings of the peripheral individual sciences – against the backdrop of the research area considered here – often only provide vague findings and are also quite general. Nonetheless, these findings can be considered relevant in the context of the present research since they clearly show that older people also perceive advertising as an ever-present part of daily life and as an important socialisation factor, that it is sometimes remembered for a long time and that it can have both positive and negative effects (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006).

### **4. Current studies and contributions to research**

In the past, science rarely dealt with the topic areas of advertising for seniors (in general) and, to an even lesser degree, with the aspect of the age-appropriate design of advertising (in particular) so that there is a great deficit in the accumulated knowledge. To give an example of research into advertising for seniors, one can mention the work of Burgert and Koch (2008), Kirchmair (2008), Maas and Erbslöh (2007) and Schütte (2006). These works focus less on ad-based advertising and more closely on the complete spectrum of age-appropriate advertising including TV, radio, postal, poster and online advertising. Due to the at times highly abstract manner of discussion in these works means that a more detailed discussion of them is not merited.

For the last five years, the following studies and contributions to research are worth mentioning in terms of the aspect of an age-appropriate design of ad-based advertising, which is the focus of the present research: On the one hand, Bieri, Florack and Scarabis (2006) show that older people perceive and process advertising differently to younger people, particularly in terms of the remembering advertising messages later on. In the authors' view, these differences have profound implications for the design of advertising measures. On the other

hand, Haiduk (2005) examines whether adverts for personal hygiene items and cosmetics adequately take into account the needs and desires of older people. In this context, he particularly looks at the involvement of seniors in terms of personal hygiene products and cosmetics. Moreover, he analyses the readability and understandability of advertising texts and the attitudes of older people as far as celebrity endorsements are concerned. Finally, he provides recommendations for the design of age-appropriate adverts. The research carried out by Burgert and Koch (2008) considers to what extent ad-based advertising actually takes older people into account or whether it still neglects them - compared to the rest of the population. Among other aspects, the research provides information as to whether old people prefer advertising with people from different generations. Boos's current study (2008) also discovers whether and how adverts offer older people the chance to identify and what constructs and images of age and older people creative advertisers use in their designs. Form- and content-based communicative elements in adverts for and with seniors are examined and documented. In addition, Yunus (2005) carries out a systematic evaluation of selected adverts for seniors, compiling a check list for the design of age-appropriate advertising messages. Horn (2006) also analyses the visual stereotypes of the 50+ generation in adverts. She looks at adverts featuring older people and pools their protagonists to find visual stereotypes. Furthermore, she highlights the existing image of age in advertising and considers the views of older people towards advertising and their own age. Finally, there are a number of up-to-date studies by public bodies, market research institutes and advertising agencies, which, among other aspects, also have implications for the age-appropriate design of printed adverts (TNS/Commerzbank, 2009; IHK, 2008; Reader's Digest Deutschland, 2006; BBS & Partner, 2005; GREY, 2005).

## **5. Results, recommended actions**

All in all, the investigated publications show that a consideration of age-related aspects in the design of adverts is not only desirable but also urgently necessary from the point of view of older people. This is because old people neither accept the lack of regard for their needs in adverts nor accept all types of portrayal in advertising. Their sensitivity to the exploitation of old people for commercial purposes is relatively high and the limit of what is considered bearable is fairly low (Femers, 2007). The following most important results in terms of addressing old people in advertising can be summarised as follows:

### **5.1 Target group relevant for advertising**

In advertising, you are old if you are beyond the core target group of 14 to 49-year-olds considered relevant to advertising. At 50, according to advertising practice, you are old. German terms like 50plus or Ü50 (lit. over-50s) are based on this age differentiation of advertising practice. However, taking a closer look at advertising, the borderline between young and old is actually not defined that clearly. For instance, in the cosmetics industry, age already starts at the third decade of life. In addition to this, marketing for the 60plus- or even 65plus is also mentioned. As a result, ad-based advertising does not have a clear limit determining age. This means that adverts should be based less on age groups and more on needs, lifestyles and consumer habits [9]. As a challenge to marketing, Michael (2006, p. 95) points out the following in terms of dealing with these groups: "Products should focus on each of them sensitively and precisely and address them in a tailored fashion so that they in no way feel that they are receiving special treatment or are even being excluded." Seniors do not want to be old or different. Instead, they prefer to be part in a natural way and represented authentically.

## 5.2 Formal design of adverts

With increasing age, changes occur in the biological functions of perception, which can have negative influences on visual performance. Reduced visual acuity means that smaller writing has an unfavourable effect on the readability of texts, which is why they should be avoided in advertising. In this context, Reidl (2006, p. 397) stresses: "Small writing is commercial suicide." Furthermore, the exclusive use of capitals should also be avoided because they make it more difficult to perceive advertising messages. Fonts using serifs should also be avoided to improve readability. Standard fonts such as Arial, Futura or Helvetica should be used. Backing up the advertising text with a graphic, such as a photograph, drawing or symbol, is also advantageous. This is because the visual back up of texts allows emotions, impressions and textual descriptions to be visualised directly. Since the perception of colours changes, greens and blues should be used less frequently. Graphics with a bright background and strong brightness contrasts can be recommended. Since many seniors also suffer from a visual red/green dysfunction, the combination of the colours red and green must be avoided. Limits to the biological functions of perception also mean that adverts should have a clear and simple design. This includes avoiding complex sentence structures. Too long sentences, missing paragraphs, unfamiliar abbreviations and too many foreign terms and Anglicisms can often make understanding more difficult for older people. Given possible limits to working memory, adverts over several pages should also be avoided. The same applies to passive clauses, negations, rhetorical questions and leaving out letters (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006; Boos, 2008).

## 5.3 Content design of adverts

Older people want to be acknowledged and taken seriously as competent customers. Behaviour towards them must not be characterised by prejudices and clichés (Krieb and Reidl, 2001). They are often particularly critical, self-confident and do not react well to product promises (Reidl, 2006). In addition, older people are very brand-oriented. Whereas younger target groups can be tempted by discounts, pricing offers and low prices in the long terms, the older generation prefers quality and brands (Jaeggi, 2006; Rutishauser, 2005). The VA consumer analysis 2006 also confirms the growing importance of quality and brand to seniors. According to this, 42% of 50- to 64-year-olds pay more attention to the brand than the price in everyday shopping, and 66% are happy to spend more for quality (VA, 2006), which is why these attributes should be the focus of the advertising address. It is however important to keep in mind that older people might be aware of brands but that they do not necessarily stick to a single brand throughout their lives (IHK, 2008). Furthermore, in adverts, older people should not be addressed as "seniors" (IHK, 2008; Gassmann and Reepmeyer, 2006; GREY, 2005; Härtl-Kasulke, 1998) since this term often has a negative connotation – at least in German. Synonymous terms with a more positive association such as Best Agers, Silver Surfers, Busy-Fit-Oldies, Generation Gold, Future Seniors or Baby Boomers are not really suited to an older target group because in the end, all of these names are a rather distant way of addressing the target group and show relatively little appreciation (TNS/Commerzbank, 2009). As mentioned previously in terms of the formal design of adverts, complexity should be reduced. This also involves focusing on only a limited number of core messages and selected product features (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006). In addition, referring to the ease of use of the product also positively affects the advertising effect on older people. Furthermore, readers should be given an opportunity to make further enquiries. It is particularly important to stress strengths such as independence, vitality and joie de vivre (Michael, 2006). "Promise health and beauty, fun and enjoyment of life with your products". (Verheugen, 2004: p. 30) as these are the attributes of youth. This is because: "Youth is still a symbol of the future but it shifts and presents itself as older" (Jäckel,

Kochhan and Rick, 2002: p. 688]. Moreover, age-appropriate ad-based advertising must not be discriminating. Instead, it should be authentic and credible. At the same time, it must not put off younger recipients by confronting them with undesired fears of the future (Femers, 2007). "Marketing and advertising (...) must make age their own by providing an opportunity to identify" (Koll-Stobbe, 2005: p. 243). According to Kühne (2005: p. 272), it is about "(...) finding symbols that enable a multi-layered and realistic image of age." Finally, old people react strongly to emotional adverts even though an emotionalisation using humour is not a good idea as humorous elements in advertising can result in a reduced advertising effect on seniors (Bieri, Florack and Scarabis, 2006).

#### **5.4 People in adverts**

Old people like adverts showing people with life experience, who offer their advice and present a positive image of age (Kühne, 2005). Statements made by representatives of particular prestigious professional groups such as doctors, pharmacists and solicitors are seen as convincing. Recommendations by these groups of people engender a feeling of trust in older people and reduce the subjectively perceived risk of a bad buy (Federsel-Lieb, 1992). Since old people also often suffer from a fear of isolation, the number of people presented should be increased, since people shown by themselves can often create a strong impression of autonomy, thereby appearing socially isolated (Röhr-Sendlmeier and Ueing, 2004). Since old people want to be integrated in society, intergenerational ad-based advertising can be recommended (Burgert and Koch, 2008). The graphic presentation of several generations convey positive values and strengthen the self-confidence of older people (Härtl-Kasulke, 1998). Femers (2007) also recommends focusing adverts on a generally positive attitude towards life by presenting old people who participate in social life because the positive stimulus of this is more likely to trigger an advertising effect (Horn and Naegele, 1976). Old people are best able to identify with actors in advertising if the age of the person shown corresponds to their subjectively perceived, i.e. cognitive age. The persons presented should be roughly ten to 15 years younger than the aimed at target group (Reader's Digest Deutschland, 2006; Gassmann and Reepmeyer, 2006; Jaeggi, 2006) even though there is also empirical evidence that old people are starting to also accept old people in advertising (Löffler, 2006). Furthermore, celebrity endorsements are very popular (Haiduk, 2005; Härtl-Kasulke, 1998; Lewis, 1997).

#### **6. Conclusion**

In terms of their perception of advertising and the effect of advertising, old people differ greatly from younger people, which in turn has an effect on the design of adverts. The present work systematically presents approaches relating to an age-appropriate design of printed ads and identifies precise recommended actions for a form and content-related optimisation. Based on the findings of current studies and contributions to research, it answers the question of how older people from the age of 50 years perceive adverts in newspapers and what they demand from them. In this context, the authors did not aim at showing questionable or even dishonest advertising and sales practices, but instead at presenting opportunities of addressing older people in a fair manner appropriate to their age. In addition, this paper cannot take into account all the gerontological needs of seniors. Instead, this research wants to increase the awareness of the problem of those responsible for marketing and of advertising designers. In summary, one can point out that the perception and effect of printed adverts on older people has received insufficient scientific attention.

## 7. Limitations of study

A significant limitation regarding this research is, that its focus is placed mainly on Germany, as the country with the fastest aged-population growth rate and which at present has the second oldest population in the world.

## 8. Recommendations

Although there are initial promising research findings for individual industries and segments, there is an urgent need for a more intensive debate of this scientific and gerontologically important area of research. In particular, the studies carried out so far do not provide an answer as to how seniors rate the mass of adverts of the extremely active retail market. Among others, the question of how old people rate the regularly published newspaper ads of large food discount shops and which aspects of an age-appropriate optimisation they can identify would be interesting from a scientific point of view. In order to cover this ground both in science and in practice, the authors are currently investigating this question empirically. By combining this theory-based analysis of literature with a subsequent qualitative survey, the findings collected so far can be checked against practice in a targeted manner. As soon as empiric findings are available, they will be exclusively presented here.

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