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Advertising in an ageing society

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ABSTRACT

Age discrimination is one of the last forms of discrimination yet to be tackled by legislation. Despite the call of the United Nations for older people to be treated fairly, regardless of age, many industries still overtly discriminate against them. The advertising industry is a particular offender, either ignoring older people altogether or presenting them in caricatures or negative stereotypes. The authors suggest that regulation or legislation may be required, to raise awareness of the issues surrounding age discrimination and to persuade advertisers to present images of older people which are more relevant and acceptable in today's society.

KEY WORDS – ageism, advertising, marketing, social responsibility.

Introduction

1999, the International Year of Older Persons, was the culmination of the United Nations action programme on ageing. Initiated in recognition of the growing population of older people world-wide, the objective was the promotion of the UN principles for older persons:

... aiming for a transition to a positive, active and developmentally oriented view of ageing ... a society for all ages ... the possibilities of a new age for old age. (United Nations 1995)

A key UN principle is that older people 'should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution'.

Unlike its counterparts, racism and sexism, ageism is a much more subtle prejudice and, as such, often goes unrecognised despite the frustration and resentment it causes (Capowski and Peak 1994; Worsley 1996). Advertisers and marketers are particular offenders; their work fails adequately to reflect 'real life' and their obsession with

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the youth market is well documented. Demographic and economic changes in society are signaling a growth in the size and importance of the current over-50s generation, the 'baby-boomers'. Marketers who consider youth to be the most significant market to satisfy are ignoring the opportunities which exist among a growing number of affluent, mature consumers.

A new market of older consumers

By 2021, 33 per cent of the UK population will be aged over 55 years (*Social Trends* 1997). Estimates suggest that the over-45s have nearly 80 per cent of all financial wealth in the UK, and are responsible for 30 per cent of all consumer spending (Long 1998). Similar statistics can be obtained for other countries. Moschis *et al.* (1997) argue that these are demographics that marketers cannot afford to ignore and yet older people have been described as 'invisible consumers' (Oates *et al.* 1996).

There are studies which examine the roles and characteristics of mature consumers; strategies for satisfying their needs; and the impact of promotions on this group of consumers (Peterson and Ross 1997; Buglass 1989). Several have examined the growth and size of the older market (Alan 1981) and the claim that most companies are not taking advantage of the opportunity that it presents (Peterson and Ross 1997; French and Fox 1985; Schiffman and Sherman 1991; Carrigan and Szmigin 1998, 1999). Previous work has also looked at the purchase motives and conduct of older consumers in relation to financial institutions, store patronage and retail outlets (Burnett and Wilkins 1985–86; Lumpkin and Greensberg 1982; Burt and Gabbot 1995). Other studies have examined the cognitive styles, lifestyle aspirations, attitudes and buying activities of older people (Fannin 1985).

In recent years, research has also been focused on the models used by the advertising media. These studies have revealed how younger models dominate advertisements, even for products aimed at older people (Smith and Moschis 1985; Gantz *et al.* 1998; Roberts and Zhou 1997; Zhou and Chen 1992); and that when older people are used in advertisements, they tend to be depicted in ways which suggest negative stereotypes of old age (Peterson 1992; Carrigan and Szmigin 1998, 1999).

This paper will examine evidence that the marketing industry discriminates against older consumers in favour of younger people; the reasons why this is so; the consequences of this discrimination; and both why and how these attitudes and actions should be changed.

It is not just the number of older people which is significant for advertisers and marketers, but how this population compares with the current circumstances of the traditional youth market. There are now more Americans over the age of 65 years than teenagers but, in addition, households headed by people over the age of 55 have twice the assets of households headed by people aged 45 to 54. Middle-aged American households have the most money, with the 45–54 age group spending 17 per cent more than the average household. Next in rank is the 55–64 age group who spend 15 per cent more than the average (Dychtwald 1997).

Similarly, in the UK, not only are there more householders in the population aged over 55, but their spending is rising while the spending of younger householders is falling (Russell 1997). The 45–54 age group account for 23 per cent of all household expenditure, spending just under a third more on goods and services than other households (Bainbridge 1998), and half as much again on leisure. In interpreting the significance of this, a key issue that needs to be acknowledged is the difference between today's over-50s and those of the past. In the UK in the mid-1990s, 48 per cent of this age group fall in the ABC1 social group (*Social Trends* 1997): a very different profile from the same age group in the past. Healthier diets, improved life expectancy and a widespread desire to feel younger for longer, mean that over-50s do not feel or want to be treated as old. Baby-boomers are large in number and high on spending, and yet advertisers and marketers generally do not consider them a key market (Bainbridge 1998; Peterson and Ross 1997; Wolfe 1998; Miller 1997). Instead, they continue to concentrate on marketing products and services to the younger generation.

The advertising and marketing industries deny that they ignore the over-50s, and yet a considerable amount of evidence suggests otherwise (Carrigan and Szmigin 1998, 1999; Reid 1997; Rampton 1998). Long (1998) suggests that most UK marketers see older people as 'losers' and do not want to be identified with them. They associate them with 'stereotypes of decrepitude, imbecility and physical repugnance'. There are similar attitudes in the USA (Lee 1997). One ad agency executive, for example, has said she could not be bothered with targeting older people 'because they would all die soon' (Miller 1993). Many companies in Europe believe that if their product was known to be popular with older people, this would be the 'kiss of death' as far as their younger consumers were concerned (Treguer 1998).

Despite recognising the shift in demographics, marketers fear that appealing to older consumers would make their products less attractive to younger consumers (Thomas and Wolfe 1995; Deutsch *et al.* 1985;

Mathes *et al.* 1985; Mazis *et al.* 1992; Sawchuck 1995). Yet this has never been unequivocally proven. Gubernick (1996), for example, cites advertisements for Compaq computers and Clinique cosmetics, both depicting older consumers. These achieved positive reactions from all age groups, and appealed to all market segments. Also there is evidence that for many products older models are viewed at the very least neutrally, even positively, by younger audiences (Greco *et al.* 1997; Millman and Erffmeyer 1990). If the purchase is non-conspicuous, younger people have been shown to be unaffected, either by the use of older models or by mention of the benefits for older people (Day and Stafford 1997). Despite this evidence, marketing people remain afraid of 'contaminating their youth market' by associating their products with older consumers (Gubernick 1996).

The radio and television industry are in part to blame for these attitudes. In the USA, network television programmers focus on younger audiences because television time buyers currently pay almost \$24 per thousand persons reached aged 18–35 years, and only \$10 per thousand to reach older audiences (Garron 1998; Grossman 1998). Younger viewers are harder to reach. Adults aged 18–49 watch about 40 per cent less television than older people. For this reason, advertisers pay a premium for shows that reach younger viewers. It is estimated that over 90 per cent of all USA radio advertising expenditure is geared to people under 45 (Hamel and Schreiner 1989). Similarly, in the UK, older people listen to more radio than any other group and yet it is those under 30 who are targeted by most radio stations. Similarly older people watch more television in the UK with nearly five hours per day compared with 2.7 hours for the 16–24 age group, and yet television planners remain desperate to retain the shrinking number of younger viewers (ITV 1998; Rampton 1998; Kay 1998; Marrin 1998).

This eagerness to spend money reaching young people is based on past evidence that younger people are the biggest consumers, but this is no longer the case. Those large numbers of young baby boomers are now large numbers of over-50s (Russell 1997). Advertising budgets could be spent more effectively reaching older, wealthier, consumers at a much cheaper price. One justification given for the focus on younger people is that they are bigger buyers of products advertised on television (Goerlich and Stipp 1995), but this may be because current advertising and the products featured are irrelevant to older people. Older models, for example, either are non-existent in mainstream advertising or are depicted in stereotypical ways (Carrigan and Szmigin 1999; Long 1998; Moschis *et al.* 1997). Given their heavy use of television and their numerical size and buying power, older viewers

should be an attractive target for commercial messages (Johnson and Cobb-Walgren 1994). If advertisers targeted older people with advertising and products that were relevant to them, they might see a dramatic difference in the level of advertising effectiveness.

It is the advertisers and sponsors who are ultimately responsible for the composition of advertisements, and they continue to insist on youthful images for their commercials and the shows they support (Thomas and Wolfe 1995). The combined prejudices of advertisers and advertising agencies has resulted in a continued negative attitude towards the older population. A better understanding of the motivations and constraints upon 50-plus consumers could help them deliver more appropriate products and services. Past experience is not a good predictor of the behaviour of the new generation of over-50s, yet traditional prejudices persist and stereotypes that are culturally engrained in the minds of advertisers continue to work against the older consumer. This is a failure of the moral and ethical responsibilities of advertisers – and the commercial responsibility to recognise opportunities presented by all segments of the population.

The responsibilities of advertising

Whether advertising merely reflects the values of individuals in society or is responsible for creating and influencing those values, has long been debated. In today's society, it is naïve to suggest that advertising is merely a 'source of purchase-related information' (Zhou and Chen 1992). Advertising is a means of social communication (Leiss *et al.* 1990), and plays a significant role in the socialisation process by providing visual symbolic models for learning how to behave (Lysonski and Pollay 1990; Langmeyer 1993). Past research into race and gender role models has demonstrated the positive and negative influence of advertising on social relationships (Langmeyer 1993; Hess 1974). Advertising can exert a significant impact on consumers' lives (Pollay 1986): it can discourage harmful behaviour and encourage the socially beneficial, but it can also mislead and deceive consumers (Davis 1994).

According to Smith and Quelch (1996), there are two discourses of advertising. There are legal parameters which dictate what advertisers can and cannot do: the legal discourse. And there are issues about what is morally appropriate: the ethical discourse. At the heart of the issue is the imperative that advertisers neither harm nor discriminate. The line between ethical and legal responsibilities is not immutable. It is

often only a matter of time before ethical responsibilities become encapsulated in legislation. Not only that but public opinion often recognises ethical responsibilities before the legal system acts, and expects organisations to embrace these newly emerging values. Given its prominence, advertising has a responsibility to ensure that its activities are 'socially appropriate' (Smith and Quelch 1996). General guidelines for advertiser exist both in the USA and the UK and these provide the main benchmark for advertising censure. Warnock (1971), for example, lists four moral principles for gauging advertising's role in society:

1. beneficence – do good
2. non-maleficence – do no harm
3. non-deception – do not deceive
4. non-discrimination – do not discriminate

Despite these moral discourses, Zinkhan (1994) has questioned whether such principles are followed by advertisers and whether societal wellbeing is enhanced by advertisements. Advertising is particularly remiss when dealing with age. The United Nations' guiding principles reflect those of Warnock: that there should be a positive, active and developmentally oriented view of ageing. Unfortunately, many depictions of older people in advertising provide no such thing. Negative and stereotypical representations directly contradict the first two Warnock principles. Not only do they lack beneficence but they actively harm both the self-perceptions of older people and the attitudes of the rest of society towards them (Smith *et al.* 1984). Cues in advertising provide symbolic models for the behaviour of older consumers and affect their self-image, and these same cues affect wider attitudes towards older people (Swayne and Greco 1987; Zhou and Chen 1992; Langmeyer 19). The dearth of older models, for example, suggests that older people can be ignored.

Advertising also fails on the principle of non-deception in that, when older people are depicted, many of the representations used have been found by the American Association of Retired Persons to be 'ads characterising older persons as sick, feeble, infirm, deaf or confused' (AARP 1998). Most older people fit none of these images. Davies (1996) found that some advertisers argue that advertising is not a social service, is limited in its ability to change prejudices and that it is questionable that it should even try to do so, but also reports one advertising executive admitting that advertisers 'lie about life', and arguing that this is acceptable in some instances. However, as AARP stress in the advertising guidelines it issues for its magazine *Modern Maturity*, advertising should at least accomplish its purpose 'without

making a negative statement about ageing'. If lies perpetuate social discrimination and harm, then the deception becomes untenable.

Ageism and the advertising industry

The sum of this litany of deception, maleficence and a lack of beneficence, is clearly discrimination against a substantial group within society. Given the current public demand for social responsibility and accountability in industry, it is perhaps time for advertisers to consider their contribution towards perpetuating ageism in society.

There are several possible reasons. First, several commentators have highlighted the ageist attitudes of many executives who oversee mainstream advertising (Davis 1994; Moschis *et al.* 1997; Gubernick 1996; Miller 1993; Bond 1997). Lysonski and Pollay (1990) argue that the advertising community is intransigent and chauvinistically resistant to change. Part of the problem is the 'Peter Pan' syndrome: focusing on 'the elderly' does not suit the image that advertising executives have of themselves. The reluctance of agencies to address the older market may lie in their own inherent fear of ageing. The average age of advertising executives in the UK is below 50, and this creates a lack of empathy with the over-50s (Greco 1989; Bedell 1998). The average age in the USA is 31 years and of agency representatives 28 (Thomas and Wolfe 1995); and a similar picture emerges in Europe (Miller 1997; Treguer 1998). It is telling that a recent landmark decision of the Employment Appeals Tribunal in Ireland, was in response to the dismissal of an advertising executive for being too old. Thus, part of the driving force behind the bias towards youth is the contrast between agency demographics and those of the marketplace (Lee 1997).

A stark illustration of this was seen in 1995. Advertisers of Muller yoghurt decided that they no longer wanted to use the actress Joanna Lumley, then 48, for their new campaign. They were looking for someone 'newer and younger' to be 'the face of the nineties'. Lumley was described by one executive as 'getting a bit old ... she must be in her later 40s or 50s by now' (Deevoy 1998). Despite acknowledging their importance, many people in marketing do not want to associate themselves with older people. Joe Anderson, creative director of J. Walter Thompson and Co., is quoted as saying: 'Too often we do ads we like, rather than what our customers like, and that's especially true for the senior market' (Miller 1993).

It may be that the limited creative imagination of the industry is also at fault. Without a substantial economic motivation to justify the effort,

it is easier to use the shorthand of stereotypical messages than to face the creative challenge. This pattern of response is summed up by Dawson (1981) as the cynicism of advertisers who 'accept that stereotypes exist, that they are unreal, but that they are part of the advertising game'. The ageism of the industry may be symptomatic of creative inertia rather than malice.

The consequences of discrimination

As a result of negative attitudes towards old age and an overwhelming interest in youth, the advertising industry effectively discriminates against older people. One aspect of this is the *disinterest* shown in older people as consumers. Most surveys are limited to the 18–45 age range and the opinions of older people are rarely sought. It is unusual for an advertising message to be directly relevant to their interests or purchase intentions. Some agencies can see the value of older consumers in commercial terms and do talk about 'tapping into', 'plumbing' or 'capturing' the older market, but reaching them is more often the by-product of a campaign aimed at younger people.

The concept of societal marketing talks of 'sensitively' serving consumer needs (Kotler and Zaltman 1971), but many marketers are still rooted in the traditional marketing concept of gaining profits regardless of the social costs. For them, offending or ignoring older people is an unfortunate but irrelevant consequence of reaching other 'more important' consumers. Discrimination, however, may be costing the marketing industry access to the wealthiest group of older consumers who seem to be particularly sensitive to and offended by advertising. It is the age-old mistake of selling rather than marketing. This strategy directly contradicts the call of the United Nations for older people to be valued independently of their economic contribution. As the public desire for accountability grows, marketers need to incorporate deontological principles into their activities. Consumer satisfaction must be achieved, but by ethical means.

The second issue is *alienation*. Advertising is a symbolic resource which shapes personal identity and social interactions. Advertisers remain shy of showing us old people, because in their mind age correlates with death and decay. They imagine that age is in some way offensive to the 'non-old'. These attitudes, reflected in advertising copy, serve to further alienate older people.

Many advertisers will deny that they lack empathy and understanding of the older market. They will cite recent advertisements which do use older models: 79-year-old Josephine in her Levi jeans,

and 50-year-old Diane Moran advertising Oil of Ulay, and so on. Some advertising campaigns have managed to use older people in a more integrated way. Marks and Spencer, for example, have used a mother and daughter to model the same jeans; Persil have used an older couple in an age-irrelevant way in a series of 'talking heads' advertisements; and Donna Karan and Armani have recently used a female model who does look over 50 years of age.

But there are problems with these advertisements. There has been criticism, for example of the Age Concern campaign ad using 56-year-old Pearl Bailey:

I'm glad that Age Concern is lobbying forcefully against all this (ageism), but I still find the sight of Pearl in her uplift bra depressing, not because of stereotyping, but for what the image implies. (Riddell 1996)

What that image implied, and many others in advertising, is that it is all right to be old, as long as you remain physically young and attractive. These models are chosen specifically because, although chronologically old, they are not visually old. With these particular images, the advertising industry is still perpetuating age discrimination. It seems unable to communicate that an older person can have value and dignity without hyperbole.

The social discourse of identity – our points of reference on ways of living, the resources through which we give ourselves social identity – needs to accommodate the transitions of ageing. To avoid discriminating against older people, marketers and advertisers need to legitimise ageing as a state, rather than as a problem. Unfortunately, despite their good intentions, there remains a tendency for them to depict older people such as Pearl Bailey as especially youthful, or as caricatures, rather than as legitimate member of society. This serves as an oppressive form of structural and interpersonal ageism (Hearn 1995). The reality is that advertising still focuses on age more than on the person's value in their own right. 'Oldness' is the issue, it is tokenism versus real integration. If you take the older person out of the advertisement, does the integrity of the message remain? If not, then the message is that person's age, not their value as a member of society.

Certain executives have argued that there is no need to adapt advertising messages for older people, that the idea that they require different messages is in itself patronising and ignorant. Moschis *et al.* (1997), however, suggest that this defensive stance is symptomatic of an ignorance of the over-50s market. In the main, as we have seen, most advertising culture remains youth-oriented and even those who are working against discrimination in later life still use stereotypical

depictions (Carrigan and Szmigin 1998; Gubernick 1996). Those researchers who have interviewed over-50s respondents find that they do feel misunderstood by marketers:

I don't think my age group is represented in advertising, and I notice that they are likely to put things in an advert that I am not interested in. (Miller 1997)

We go and shop for washing powder just like them, but they never show anybody *our* age. (Long 1998).

Given the evidence of discrimination in the advertising industry, in marketing in general and in society as a whole, what might be the way forward to 'a society for all ages'? Marketers and advertisers need to be made aware of the issues and, as a first step, of what they can do to redress the balance in favour of older people as consumers.

Regulation versus legislation

Throughout the world, ageism has been given a low priority by legislators and regulators. The UK government has recently shelved plans for legislative protection against age discrimination, favouring a voluntary approach (Norris 1998). In contrast, in the USA, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act was passed over 25 years ago, although even that has not always proved effective. France bans age limits from recruitment advertising, some Australian states have age discrimination legislation, and there are limited regulations in Austria, Canada, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, and Spain.

As with many industries, there are those who believe that the most effective way forward is through voluntary regulation, citing the problems of bureaucracy and other enforcement difficulties as reasons to oppose legislation. History, however, demonstrates that the passing of legislation was an important milestone in battles against racism and sexism. Without the weight of legislation, ageism is not being given the same priority (Worsley 1996; Smith 1996; Riddell 1996).

Self-regulation in advertising has worked reasonably well both in Europe and North America, but there is a need for specific guidelines outlining the issues related to ageism. One potential benchmark of good practice is the group of guidelines issued by the AARP which it uses in screening advertisements for its magazine, *Modern Maturity*. It will only accept advertisements that do not 'foster stereotypes' and which do not include 'a negative statement about ageing'. The magazine only accepts advertising that stresses positive messages. The effect of this has been to exclude many familiar advertisements for health-related and remedy products that are targeted on older people. Roberts and Zhou

(1997), in a study of the use of models in *Modern Maturity*, confirm the positive results of its guidelines: the majority of advertisements are favourable and use older models. A comparable study of UK publications aimed at the over-50s – *Saga*, *Goodtimes*, *Active Life* and *Choice* – found a higher level of positive depictions of older models when compared with mainstream UK magazines (Carrigan and Szmigin 1999). The majority of the advertisements, however, were for a limited category of products related to health and remedies. Regarding their editorial policies, they all conform to the British Code of Advertising Practice, but this refers to discrimination only in terms of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and disability – there is no mention of age. None of the magazines follow any advertising guidelines specifically relating to older consumers.

The evidence suggests that, without specific guidelines against ageism and stereotyping, most advertisers will continue to target older consumers in a consistently ageist manner. Although magazines for older people may be less ageist in the copy they carry, too many mainstream advertisers and magazines are still guilty of perpetuating ageist myths about the older population. Examples such as *Modern Maturity* demonstrate how guidelines can make a difference. Voluntary advertising codes should contain wording to the effect that causing offence on the grounds of age should be avoided. Not only will this raise awareness among marketers and advertisers, but it should create grounds for tackling offensive advertising.

Power to the consumer

Another way forward, independent of legislative or regulatory interference, is the exercise of consumer power. The demographic trends clearly show that older people are gaining in number and economic strength. Baby boomers in the US, according to the National Council on the Aging, are likely to make age discrimination the civil rights issue of the next decade (Capowski and Peak 1994). As a group, they have many years experience in lobbying for equal opportunities, and age is now another cause that is attracting their attention in a very personal way. They learnt in the 1960s that ‘consumers have a right to be heard’, and now ageism is making them increasingly vocal (Tybout and Zaltman 1974). Increasingly, the AARP are involved in policy-making on age-related issues in the USA, and Age Concern and other groups are becoming more active in the UK.

When consumers are offended by advertising, this can have an

increasingly deleterious effect on brand image and credibility (Lysonski and Pollay 1990). Similarly, when consumers are unable to identify with the roles portrayed, this reduces the attention, credibility, retention and later recall, of any advertisement. At the very least, the inappropriate portrayal of old age risks ridicule, but it also risks erosion of brand attitudes, brand images and brand loyalties (Lysonski and Pollay 1990). Either advertisers recognise that there is a need for change, or they will continue to offend and alienate an important and valuable group of consumers.

Yet the task is not insurmountable; all that is required is a more informed and empathetic approach in targeting the older generation. Instead of channelling most of their talent and energy into youth-targeted campaigns, advertisers should be persuaded to take a more upbeat view of old age. They should take a risk with their clients in demonstrating innovation with older models rather than the perennial under-35s. By positively reconstructing images of ageing through more acceptable and more numerous depictions of older people, advertisers can fulfil their ethical responsibilities. They can play a significant part in the socialisation process and in challenging age discrimination, without threatening their commercial goals.

The way forward

Figure 1 presents an ethical self-regulatory framework for dealing effectively with older consumers. Based on Collins' matrix of corporate responsibility (1993), four strategies are identified.

The defensive approach. Advertisers who claim that they do not discriminate against older consumers and who, when the industry is criticised, will act in a more proactive way 'to help the cause'. They demonstrate an awareness of the issue of ageism, but do so with tokenism rather than integration.

The reactive approach. Advertisers who only act when a complaint is made or when they are legally compelled to do so. They fail to recognise that ageism is an issue and will continue to play safe on the basis of past experience and practice.

The accommodative approach. Advertisers who only act if everyone else does too. They too do not recognise the issue, but they follow the lead of the industry. These tend to be firms who do not consider older consumers in their advertising but who, if they detect a trend, will try

		Short term rewards	
		High	Low
Long term rewards	High	Proactive (Saints)	Defensive (Cynics)
	Low	Accommodative (Pharisees)	Reactive (Sinners)

Figure 1. Matrix of corporate social responsibility (source: Collins 1994)

to get on the ‘bandwagon’ – in much the same way as advertisers took up ‘green’ marketing issues.

The proactive approach. Advertisers who act in anti-discriminatory ways, regardless of the strategies of others. They recognise the value of older people in society, over and above their economic value as consumers. We have already cited examples of this approach: advertisements that value older people as individuals rather than as shorthand symbols of age.

Clearly the most successful and acceptable strategy is likely to be the proactive approach. Not only will advertisers gain in the long and short term, but society will also benefit from their actions. This achieves the ultimate goal of the societal marketing concept: to benefit society’s long-term interests as well as those of the consumer and the firm. In contrast, those who continue to discriminate and offend are likely to become increasingly condemned and, by their actions, may well prove the catalyst for a legislative response to control their worst excesses. The lack of integrity in the accommodative approach is unlikely to win much public conviction, particularly with older consumers who seek a more principled set of values in the firms and brands that they deal with (Thomas and Wolfe 1995). The defensive approach may win limited, short-term approval, but this is likely to diminish if the portrayals of older people remain patronising and tokenistic.

Conclusion

With old age and ageism featuring on the agenda of the United Nations and of many national governments, societal attitudes to age are changing rapidly. If marketers and advertisers fail in their duties of beneficence, non-maleficence, non-deception and non-discrimination towards older people, then society will seek to control those marketers

who 'by imposing substantial harm on consumers, violate this special responsibility' (Pincus Hartman 1998). Ethics is an area which requires not only each individual to take a stand (Zinkhan 1994), but also each organisation. Advertisers need to be able to justify their actions. It is becoming increasingly untenable for advertisers and the advertising industry to continue either to portray older people in a negative and stereotypical manner or to ignore them completely. Whether or not advertisers respond to this without the added persuasion of regulatory or legislative force is debatable. Voluntary guidelines set by advertising regulators could be a catalyst for change, and have been seen to work. Our conclusion is that, both in the USA and in Europe, advertising regulators need to incorporate AARP-style guidelines into general advertising regulations, in order to raise awareness of ageism and to encourage more socially acceptable advertising.

Those of us involved in research also have a role to play, in demonstrating to advertisers that the public can perceive old age in a positive way, and that associating products with older models does not raise negative connotations for the consumer. If advertisers can be persuaded by research that using older models will not alienate their traditional markets, then we shall be one step towards reflecting the reality of a useful and active old age, rather than the traditional image of a useless and passive one. After that, it is really down to advertisers and marketers themselves to abandon the stereotypes in favour of more innovative, better researched and less patronising campaigns. Certainly the vociferous tenacity of older consumers in the USA has begun to change attitudes and responses among marketers, and elsewhere similar groups are beginning to make themselves heard. Are advertisers willing to take up the challenge and act as Saints rather than Sinners? Do they want to contribute towards a society for all ages? Only time will tell.

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