Boomer’s Perspective on Multicultural Brand Messaging and Media Content

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BOOMER’S PERSPECTIVE ON MULTICULTURAL BRAND MESSAGING AND MEDIA CONTENT

Representing more than 79 million U.S. residents (26% of the U.S. population) and nearly $3.4 trillion in annual buying power, Boomers play a major role in the U.S. economy and have unique perspectives on marketing to them via advertising and social media, particularly through multicultural lenses. To provide advertisers and agencies direction for the development of brand messaging that speaks to Boomers and effective ad placement within media content, the Mosaic Center of the American Advertising Federation hosted a two-part, nationally simulcast discussion about Boomers’ perspectives on multicultural brand messaging and media content.

The first panel, entitled the Intelligence Panel, represented experts on multicultural marketing and the Boomer generation. Members of the Intelligence Panel included Jim Lucas, EVP, Global Retail Insight and Strategy, Draftfcb; Marta Insua, VP Strategic Insights, Alma DDB; Emilio Pardo, Chief Brand Officer, AARP; Chuck Schroeder, Copywriter/Partner, Senior Creative People; Sharon Panelo, Digital and Social Strategist, McCann NY; Doug Harris, CEO, The Kaleidoscope Group; and Stephen Hersh, SVP Planning Director, Leo Burnett. The panel was moderated by Lorraine Cortes-Vasquez, Executive Vice President, AARP. The second part of the Boomer Thought Leadership discussion was held in six U.S. cities: Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and New York. The panelists for these discussions were drawn from AAF corporate members, student chapters and professional clubs.

A key mission of the American Advertising Federation is to promote diversity in advertising by encouraging the recruitment of people of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and thought. In an effort to promote diversity and build relationships that will contribute to the overall advancement of the advertising industry for years to come, the AAF provides opportunities to explore critical issues through its Thought Leadership Forums. AARP, Leo Burnett, McCann World Group, Omnicom Group, and RPA sponsored the Boomer Thought Leadership Forum.

White Paper Framework
This paper discusses key insights attained from the seven panels that comprised the Thought Leadership Forum, “A Boomer’s Perspective on Multicultural Brand Messaging” (April 26, 2012), and from academic and trade literature that assists in providing wider context. It is important to note while reading and applying insights, that the students and professionals who participated in the forum are all affiliated with the AAF and do not represent all Boomers or all marketing and advertising executives.
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The Insights section is divided into two major components: (1) Keys to Reaching Boomers—to provide greater understanding regarding how advertisers can effectively reach Boomers in their advertising campaigns; and (2) Professional Advice—to provide greater understanding regarding the importance of collaboration, ageism in the industry, diversity and inclusion and how those concepts affect the advertising workforce.

The first component of the Insights section, Keys to Reaching Boomers, will expound upon the following themes: Purpose, Respect, Race/Ethnicity and Social Justice and Language.

• Purpose: Value Exchange, Extension of Relationships, and Brand Utility
• Respect: Differences, Experiences, and Choices
• Race/Ethnicity and Social Justice: Acknowledgement, Authenticity, Inclusion, Recognition, Representation, and Intentionality within the industry’s behavior in the following areas: Multiculturalism, Client Relationships and Research
• Language: Word Choices, Connotations, and Stereotypes

The next section compares and contrasts marketing to Millennials and Boomers drawing insights from the first AAF Thought Leadership Forum in the Fall of 2011, that addressed Millennials.

• Boomers and Millennials differ in terms of defining diversity and multiculturalism, privacy concerns and their relationship with brands
• Similarities among Boomers and Millennials include their emphasis on relevance, social causes and social media

Additionally, the Professional Advice component of this paper expounds upon the themes Collaboration and Preventing Ageism in the Industry.

• Collaboration: Interdisciplinary Nature of Advertising, and Research
• Preventing Ageism in the Industry: Workplace Issues, Intergenerational Communication, and Freshness vs. Wisdom

Background Information on Boomers

Who Are Boomers
The American Boomer generation is typically considered born from 1946 to 1964, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. They are estimated at more than 79 million individuals and make up 26% of the U.S. population (Kennedy & Mancini, 2006). With a number so massive spanning a mere 18-year time frame, it is imperative to acknowledge the considerable amount of diversity within this cohort. In fact, the heterogeneity of Boomers is one of this generation’s most consistent and defining attributes. Boomers are educated, ethnically diverse, liberal, conservative, politically active, demanding, and technologically savvy. Boomers are known for their size and their distinct social and demographic characteristics. Their varied experiences have continuously
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propelled them to challenge the status quo. Members of this generation questioned everything from fashion and education to race relations, sexual mores, and gender roles. Boomers have helped shape and redefine nearly every aspect of life they entered.

Undoubtedly, Boomers will redefine the aging process in America as they are healthier, more vital, and enjoy longer life expectancies than previous generations (Longino, 2005). In 2011, the first Boomer cohort reached 65. For the next 17 years it is projected that over 10,000 people will celebrate their 65th birthday each day (Kennedy, 2010). Moreover, every seven to ten seconds someone turns 50 in America. These maturing markets control more than 70% of the total net worth of American households and wield $7 trillion of wealth (Gilmartin, 1991). Boomers are the highest earners, with a median household income of $54,170; 55% greater than post-Boomers and 61% more than pre-Boomers (Kennedy & Mancini, 2006). Additionally, Boomers are the most influential investing group, with 40% of the U.S. population age 50+ controlling 75% of financial assets and 50% of all consumers spending (Kennedy & Mancini, 2006).

Nonetheless, societal and economic upheaval has caused great concern for numerous members of this cohort that will substantially shape their future for years to come. According to the National Association of Realtors, Boomers are the largest homeowner group; 80% of Boomers vs. 69% of the general population own a home. Additionally, 25% of Boomers own at least one property in addition to their primary residence (Kennedy & Mancini, 2006). Accordingly, Boomers were hit hard by economic turmoil namely the Internet dot com investment bust, the real estate crisis and the recent national recession. Moreover, Boomers came of age during the dramatic upheaval of American family life in the 1970s which was characterized by non-marital childbearing, unprecedented divorce rates, cohabitation, and delayed and forgone marriages (Cherlin, 2010). Research has indicated that such diverse experiences have impacted Boomers leaving one in three Boomers unmarried (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). Unmarried Boomers face greater economic, health, and social vulnerabilities leaving many susceptible to the vagaries of aging (Lin & Brown, 2012).

Driven by various motives ranging from financial need and entrepreneurial endeavors to strong values, second careers and self-actualization, Boomers are poised to remain a vital component of America’s workforce. Research has indicated that Boomers reject the notion of leisurely retirement and plan to work as long as they are able to physically and mentally to do so (Kennedy & Mancini, 2006). This is a promising forecast for the economy and marketers alike; such behavior indicates not only a skilled and flexible workforce but also a substantial amount of discretionary income. It is evident that this massive generation intends to continue to be a powerful consumer force well into the future.

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Why Are Boomers Distinctly Significant?
Boomers comprise a savvy and experienced consumer market. Experts agree that advertisers would be behooved not to displace Boomers from their marketing plans. Research indicates that if the industry makes an authentic effort to appeal to Boomers, they will reward them many times over. However, if Boomers feel marginalized by brands, they tend to penalize them (Hyman, 2012). As a sum total of their experiences, Boomers run the gamut of their extremes. Parents who experienced The Great Depression, WWII deprivation, or immigrant transitional lifestyles raised many Boomers. Consequently, a number of Boomers demonstrate conservative values and spending habits in harsh economic times (Nielsen, 2006). Therefore, it is important for the industry to understand passion points and be able to effectively apply them within Boomer markets.

Three points of particular interest are intergenerational relationships, experiential activities, and aging patterns. Research indicates that Boomers tend to save money and value work over leisure and savings over debt. Generally speaking, Boomers are fiscally conservative except when it comes to their children. Boomers view children as their legacy and frequently indulge them in luxury. Moreover, once one reaches age 50 and beyond, priorities shift from material items to ethereal experiences. Accordingly, Boomers are more interested in acquiring more experiences than the accumulation of items. Vacations and technologies that facilitate connectivity and unique adventures are a huge commodity among Boomer audiences (Hyman, 2012).

How They Define Themselves
Diverse & Complex, Me Through We, Confident and Living are the four key identity themes expressed by the Boomers during the AAF Thought Leadership Forum. Each theme is described next.

Diverse & Complex: Overwhelmingly, Intelligence Panelists and Boomer Response Panelists emphasize that this generation is both diverse and complex. “Age is just a slice of what we are,” says Judy Markoe, Principal and Brand Champion, Big Picture Marketing Consulting, who said that Boomers can get easily offended if brands try to label them as an age only, when in deed Brands need to understand what elements of their identity hit home in a purchasing decision which could be their race, gender, sexual orientation or some other element of diversity. Boomers thrive on their individuality and recognize differences that exist between and among them and therefore cannot be overly simplified or generalized.

“It is more of the layered kind of identity, and we’re all in agreement that Boomers are not monolithic.”
—Marta Insua, VP Strategic Insights, Alma DDB

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Me Through We: While Boomer participants emphasize their uniqueness, they believe in collective action and supporting each other to achieve individual freedoms, rights and opportunities; thus this theme is labeled “Me Through We.” Emilio Pardo, Chief Brand Officer, AARP, urges marketers to recognize this characteristic, saying, “Make ‘me’ look smart in order to do the ‘we’. So the shift is not just the ‘Me Generation.’ It’s ‘we’ through ‘me’.” Boomers have demonstrated this combination of collectivist and individualistic characteristic from their activist past from civil rights, women’s rights, anti-war, to anti-apartheid and green movements. Through their enormous population, they have created cultural, social and economic change.

“Ambition is something that characterizes Boomers and back in the 60s, … we knew we could change the world. If (Boomers) could change the world, (Boomers) did.” —Stephen Hersh, SVP Planning Director, Leo Burnett

Confident: This cohort is also very confident in their ability to create change. They are a very optimistic generation, having survived recessions, wars, overt discrimination and other challenges; they continue to thrive. Emilio Pardo, Chief Brand Officer, AARP, says, “It’s an optimistic point of view, but it is also about living your best life and trying to navigate language in the commonality of the multigenerational approach.”

Living: Finally, the participants emphasized that Boomers are not defining aging as growing closer to death. Rather, Boomers feel aging offers more opportunities to live, experience and explore life differently. The theme of living is emphasized in how they desire marketers to communicate with them. These Boomers view themselves as having more living to do. They reject the negative connotations and stereotypes of what it means to become a senior citizen or to retire. Even Boomers who once played in the NFL are redefining how they perceive themselves says Andrew Givens, Vice President of Partnerships and Growth for Kaleidoscope Group and a former tight end for the Green Bay Packers and Denver Broncos. During the 2011 NFL work stoppage, former players debated how they should be labeled, he says:

“I’m a Boomer, but the word ‘old’ Boomer hasn’t even entered into my mind. One of the conversations was about what should we be called; we don’t want to be called Retired NFL players. So now, the whole discussion was around ‘Are we former NFL players, or retired?’ What should that language be?”

Atlanta Panelist, Keith Kenner, Marketing Analyst/Managing Principal / Customer & Brand Management Consultant at Play On Words! LLC, says that 50 year-old Boomers are looking at another 25 years of working coupled with their attitude of ‘I’m not done yet,’ create a challenge for marketers. “It’s very essential to produce the right language and make sure you’re not turning off the Boomer,” he says.

AARP released a study called “The New Language of Living” that showcases how Boomers have changed the language of aging. Emilio Pardo, AARP’s Chief Brand Officer, explains:

“It doesn’t mean we’re not about aging issues. But we’re living through that frame and if the marketers and communicators don’t get the frame right…it doesn’t matter how many tactics are used, the Boomers are going to turn off.”

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Keys To Reaching Boomers

Purpose, Respect, Race/Ethnicity and Social Justice and Language were the four key themes expressed at the Thought Leadership Forums by Intelligence Panelists and Boomer Response Panelists as the Keys to Reaching Boomers. Each theme is described next.

Purpose

“The thing is, we’re still loyal, loyal to value, not loyal to brands. We’re loyal to something ... that has a purpose...Something that is interesting...Something that is a service to us...It’s not just blind loyalty.”

—Gustavo Foldvari, Group Planning Director, Lopez Negrete Communications

As the world continues to broaden due to technology and lifestyle, global perspectives become increasingly relevant. Accordingly, it is not simply about localized conceptualizations of brand loyalty with Boomers but more about a broader perspective of purpose and value. Boomer Gustavo Foldvari affirms that mobile technology has increasingly facilitated a nomadic lifestyle. In turn, Boomer consumers are shopping everywhere from Banana Republic to Wal-Mart. Consequently, Boomers question how a product or brand integrates into their lives and lifestyle. More importantly, what value and purpose does a brand or product serve. If the industry truly intends to connect with Boomers they must grasp this concept in totality. Foldvari says that purpose and respect are paramount to marketing to Boomers:

“Purpose, to me, is the one that can help really ignite and trigger the way we engage with them [brands] [as it relates to]...multigenerational ... multiculturalism, and definitely the language...but also in synergy and learning and allowing exchange.”

Notions of purpose and value exchange translate within a digital space as well. There is a common misconception that Boomers are not technologically savvy. However, that is just not the case. Experts confirm that Boomers are not uncomfortable with new technology but are uncomfortable with the idea that technology forces them to change (Rogers, 2010). Boomers accept new technologies and have been demonstrating such their entire lives. Nonetheless, Boomers are sensible adopters and exhibit sincere concerns regarding Internet security and privacy. Boomers have an expectation that industries, brands, and government will assume a greater role in assuring security (Rogers, 2010). Boomers are actually eager to spend money on technology and ease of communication devices. In fact, Boomers are the leading users of online dating services (Hyman, 2012). As Boomer Panelists affirmed, their online behavior is purposeful and experiential. Boomers spend more time and money online than any other generation in the U.S. They have come to rely on the Internet to search for information, to communicate via email, and for health and wellness (Rainie, 2009). Boomers are actively seeking communications technology that will facilitate connectivity within their lives.
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Boomer panelists also affirm they have an interest in engaging with other generations. Boomer panelists and members of the Intelligence Panel say that Boomers are accustomed to creating trends and navigating their environments and will not be easily led or influenced by other generations. Boomers are not interested in chasing perceptions of cool other than their own. Their varied experiences have resulted in more individualized relationship patterns and weakening norms regarding what is expected from intergenerational relationships. Boomers approach to intergenerational relationships and family ties may define new patterns for future generations (Fingerman et al., 2012). Therefore, Dorian Dickinson, Partner, Great River Creative, urges marketers to build campaigns that show what the possibilities are for intergenerational exchange and engagement.

“As Boomers, we want to remain relevant. We want to remain a part of the discussion. We want to communicate with the Millennials and with the younger generations. We want to know what is still possible and to be able to build off of that.”

—Dorian Dickinson, Partner, Great River Creative

Respect

One of the key themes expressed during the panels related to marketers and organizations demonstrating respect for Boomers by acknowledging and by accepting the differences that exist within this generation, their variety of experiences, choices and decisions in life.

“If you show respect, first of all, you are going to open that channel of communication. We’re going to have a conversation... Everybody has to be treated like an individual and spoken to with respect like another human being. It’s tough, because we’re all tribal ... We have to evolve past our wired self or DNA. (Stop pre-judging) ‘Well you have an accent. So you must be different than I am and (therefore you are) not quite as good.’ That (attitude) has to disappear.”

—Doug Harris, CEO, The Kaleidoscope Group

Respecting Differences: Intelligence Panelists and other Boomers panelists emphasize the importance of showing respect for the diversity that exists within their generation and to other people. They want to ensure that marketing images show diversity when communicating with them and show diversity in a respectful manner. A challenge in communicating to the Boomer market from a multicultural perspective is that this generation is primarily Caucasian, which comprises the 77% of the Boomers according to the Census Bureau projections. Jerry Wright, an advertising professor at California State University Fullerton and a 28-year veteran of the advertising agency business, says because about 75% of Boomers are Caucasian, they have traditionally been considered the general market; whereas younger generations have greater amounts of diversity. Therefore, too often he urges advertisers and agencies to ensure they have a multicultural strategy for Boomers because race and ethnicity do play a role in purchasing decisions among Boomers.

How respect is depicted in terms of diversity must be handled carefully. Understanding the differences in how race and ethnicity has been experienced by Boomers, as compared to Millennials, is imperative. Intelligence Panelist Marta Insua, VP Strategic Insights, Alma DDB, explains that various generations of Hispanics in the U.S. have different experiences, particularly shaped by their assimilation patterns:

“In the case of Hispanic Boomers—which is sort of a weird thing to say, we never use that (term)—they have suffered hyphenation as much as African-Americans. Although it can be a good badge of honor in our case because of language

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issues, kind of job issues, even immigration issues, it was not a very strong sense of belonging, sometimes you have to go back to double consciousness. For younger people, Millennials—Hispanic Millennials—it’s about being 100% American and 100% Hispanic. There’s no conflict there and no problems with math either. But for the older ones, for the baby booming ones, it’s been a very long road and a very hard one, and we pretty much hope that inclusion includes us.”

Los Angeles Response Panelist, Jerry Wright, explains a research study his agency completed comparing African-American and Caucasian-American mothers responses to a series of Proctor and Gamble commercials that showed the importance of understanding and respecting the complexity of identity particularly along racial demographics:

“We shot 4 or 5 commercials and tested them. Half of them had an African-American mother, and half of them had a Caucasian mother. What we found out was when the African-American mom saw those commercials, she had a greater recall and greater affinity for that commercial (with an African-American mom). When the Caucasian mother saw it, she didn’t notice the difference. She just saw a mother whereas the African-American mother saw herself as the mother.”

Respecting Experiences: Just as Boomers are shaped by diversity, they want marketers to respect the experiences they have had over the course of time. Manuel Huici, Vice President and Creative Director, R & R Partners ala Latina, says tone of communication really matters to Boomers:

“This group of people certainly changed things. They grew-up during the most interesting decades of modern history; they changed many things. The tone of voice (in advertising) should be respectful. I think one of the main messages should be knowledge and experience.”

Boomers also say they want to be treated as mature adults who are continuing to be engaged in life. Boomers have re-framed what it means to be young. Senior Strategic Planner, Wheaten Mather of Burrell Communications, differentiates it this way:

“Understand ‘young’ from the perspective of the Boomer. So, ‘young’ doesn’t mean being 22 walking into a club, in a very visual type of way. ’Young’ means having the same type of energy as you had (as a 22 year-old) and having the same types of dreams and aspirations. Kind of that, we’re still going, we’re not giving up type mentality. So it’s about understanding the different dimensions of a word that on the surface seems to have only one definition, but ‘young’ through the mouth of a 22 year-old Millennial is very different from ‘young’ for a 56 year-old Boomer, and I think it’s really taking the time and effort to understand what those nuances are.”

Marketers must also avoid showing Boomers as inactive and...
missing out on life. Miami Response Panelist Sidney Myers, Partner at Senior Creative People, explains:

“...being the oldest here, and by a long shot, I know that I want to do everything that I did when I was 21, except work. I want to go bike riding, I want to go cruising, I want to go play golf, I want to hike, I want to do everything that I did when I was 21, except work.”

Respecting Choices: Considering the importance of individuality to the Boomer generation, their desire for marketers to respect their choices. Some Boomers are early adopters of innovations, others choose not to adopt innovations like social media. Marketers must respect Boomers who choose not to use certain technologies and must use multiple channels to engage Boomers because of their choices. By communicating through different media to reach this diverse generation or by offering products in their original format as well as with certain innovations, Boomer panelists say that marketers will be demonstrating respect for this generation.

Race/Ethnicity & Social Justice

“In some ways there is some naiveté...This is 2012, and race in many ways is still the third rail, you touch that thing and you are electrified. We’re still looking at issues, like this young boy being killed because of his apparel. We’re looking at people reacting to things because of race. Even though, Millennials are much more adaptive to people who look different from them, race is still that issue that is an undercurrent. It still drives things, whether all of us want to openly admit or not...”

—Charlotte King, President and Creative Director, Snowden King Marketing Communications

A third key theme to assist marketers in reaching Boomers is understanding the importance of race, multiculturalism and social justice to Boomers. Boomer Panelists cite a few exemplar campaigns in depicting multiculturalism and race in advertising well including the use of spokespersons to connect with not only various ethnicities, but with ages and generations. King offers two examples:

“For the first time we are starting to see diverse spokespeople that are in the mainstream, for all kinds of products. So the person that is the spoke person for Allstate is an African-American male, I thought I’d never live to see that. You have Ellen DeGeneres is now the spokesperson for both Cover Girl and JCPenney, she’s a cover girl with Queen Latifah.”

Although strides have been made, Boomer panelists acknowledge that there is still a considerable amount of work that must be done. Boomers do not want the achievements they accomplished in terms of diversity and inclusion to wan or worsen due to a lack of initiative or responsibility from the advertising industry. Boomer panelists urge the industry to work toward diversified perspectives from a diverse workforce that will dispel stereotypes, challenge norms and, authentically connect with consumers. Panelists cautioned marketers from being overly reliant on syndicated research that can lead to stereotyping. Tom Knechtel, a panelist from Atlanta and a strategist at Ogilvy and Mather says, “There needs to be an understanding with marketing professionals that we have to get out and talk to each other to really understand the market.”

Boomer panelists noted that the advertising industry used to be at the forefront of change in terms of diversity and social justice and now it lags behind. Boomer Judy Markoe, Principal and Brand Champion of Big Picture Marketing Consulting, expressed how deeply troubled she was by an ad with all white Boomer-aged people:
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“In this ad the people shown are white, with the clearest bluest eyes, every one of them. (The ad was supposedly) showing different people. (The advertiser) had an opportunity to show all of us...to represent all of us. I’m sitting there in bed watching this before I go to sleep, and I’m thinking: ‘I guess I can’t buy this product because I have brown eyes.’ What is this? Today, what is this?... And where’s (the advertising industries) responsibility to help educate about diversity and inclusion?”

Boomers cite their rich historical experiences as indicators of their desire to continue to propel social justice issues forward. Moreover, relevant social justice issues can serve as hot beds for passion points that unite communities despite their differences. Furthermore, research has indicated that both Millennials and Boomers are fervent supporters of social justice issues they find of interest. Thus, such areas could foster positive intergenerational relationships. Boomer and marketing professional King affirms:

“We are the inventors of the flash mob. When you think about us protesting the war they are forgetting that it was our generation that pressured the Supreme Court into passing Roe v. Wade. That was because the Boomer generation rallied around issues that we thought where critically important to the social fabric of the country. And we used those types of tactics. Yes, there is now new technology to provide a frame-work around (activism), but it was really our generation that had the Civil Rights amended, voters registration amendment, and we did that by being very, very passionate and by being innovative.”

Language

“There lies the shift of the Boomer mentality; it is about living, not about aging.” —Emilio Pardo, Chief Brand Officer at AARP

Respectful use of language through thoughtful word choice, understanding connotations, and avoiding stereotypes in advertising campaigns are paramount to a brand’s success in marketing to Boomers. Common terms such as senior, retirement and aging do not have commonly accepted meanings among Boomers. Intelligence Panelist Emilio Pardo, Chief Brand Officer at AARP, says that AARP had to re-label its recent study from “The New Language of Aging” to “The New Language of Living” because so many members of the Boomer generation don’t think in terms of aging but changes in how they are living as they age. Boomers having had long careers and discretionary income, continue to thirst for adventure and the financial freedom to explore that passion, says Brian Condon, Executive Vice President of Commercial Development at Scarborough.

Likewise, some Boomers do not attach the term “senior” to themselves, says D.C. Intelligence Panelist Chuck Schroeder, Partner and Copywriter at Senior Creative People. “Boomers are very familiar now with the term ‘Boomer’, but they may not be familiar with how the term ‘Senior’ rings in their ear as they get older, and sometimes that ring is not all that impressive and not all that pleasant.”
As such, some Boomers see terms like ‘retirement’ and ‘aging’ as negative. For example Chicago Boomer Panelist Dorian Dickinson, Partner, Great River Creative, had a negative response when he became eligible for AARP because it symbolized his growing older.

“Boomers are young. It’s an entirely different thought process that Boomers have as compared to previous generations... Just before my 50th birthday, I got that first letter from AARP, and it is sitting there—and at the risk of offending one of the sponsors—the first words out of my mouth were ‘bite me.’ It’s not that thought process, (AARP was probably) looking for.”

In general, Boomers Panelists agree that they do not want to be considered as old and do not condone when the industry defines them as such. Boomer Panelists say they are not forgiving of brands that misrepresent their lifestyles. They want brands to communicate within the proper framework.

“Senior and retirement are not very popular words. The big word ‘retirement,” how many definitions of retirement do we have today? There is a whole new life stage forming somewhere between working and this thing called retirement. Boomers either can’t retire, don’t want to retire or retired but are still working. And what is that middle stage and what is that language?... If you’re a marketer and you are marketing to the old frame, you will not get the hearts and in this case, the wallets of the Boomer population.”—Emilio Pardo, AARP Chief Brand Officer

Dorian Dickinson, Partner, Great River Creative, uses AARP’s rebranding from “American Association of Retired Persons” as its name to just using the abbreviation “AARP,” as a positive example of how to proactively address Boomers’ different perspectives on aging, retirement and living situations. Many Boomers reframe retirement as an opportunity to do something different not just stop working for pay.

Chicago Panelist, Wheaten Mather, Senior Strategic Planner at Burrell Communications, urges marketers not to over use labels, even though doing so helps to simplify the world. Instead, Washington, DC Panelist Tony Hill, Principal of TH Consulting, suggests using effective storytelling informed by extensive research so that the message has an effective way to be inclusive and meet the needs of multiple audience members across generations and ethnicities.

Comparing Boomers and Millennials

Multiple similarities and differences exist between Boomers and Millennials, and advertisers must be cognizant of these differences to ensure messages are targeted appropriately and media choices complement the nuances of these groups. Millennials and Boomers have several major commonalities that enable intergenerational campaigns to be effective and media buys more efficient.

A key area where Boomers and Millennials differ relates to how they define diversity and multiculturalism. Boomers most often equate diversity and multiculturalism to issues involving race, ethnicity, respect and representation. While Boomers value diversity of thought, those who participated in the Thought Leadership Forum did not want to reduce the emphasis on improving representation of diverse races in advertising with

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an emphasis on lifestyles that might account for diversity of thought. On the contrary, the Millennials who were represented on the Boomer Thought Leadership Forum Response panels and on Millennial panels from the Fall 2011 Thought Leadership Forum focus, state that lifestyles trump racial and ethnic diversity. Boomers emphasize that achieving diversity of thought comes from increasing representation of diverse races and ethnicities in advertising, in media buys and on teams that build the campaigns. Boomers seem to be more cognizant of the differences that exist among races and ethnicities and efforts to create greater equality among races and ethnicities. Even in conversations, Boomers from racial and ethnic minority groups are more curious about the racial or ethnic background of people. On the contrary, most Millennials are not. While both feel race and ethnicity still matter in America, Boomers feel that race and ethnicity matter more.

Another major difference between Boomers and Millennials is the area of privacy. Boomers are more hesitant to share personal information with companies and users on-line, while Millennials share more freely.

Millennials and Boomers desire a brand’s ability to relate to their lives and respect their choices. However, Millennials emphasize a brand’s ability to relate to them more than Boomers. While Boomers emphasize respect to a greater degree. Millennials feel strongly that brands must relate to their lifestyles and build a relationship interpersonally with them through events, in-store experiences, philanthropic causes, and through virtual relationships on-line. The big question brands must ask when targeting Millennials is “Do we relate to them?” On the contrary, the main question brands should ask when targeting Boomers is “Have we demonstrated respect for them?” Boomers prefer tactical, practical, and personal communication. They desire brands to show respect for their experiences, their individuality, as well as their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender.

While Boomers and Millennials may differ in many ways, marketers should capitalize on the similarities between them, particularly an emphasis on relevance, linking brands with social causes, and the use of social media. Recognizing the complexity of Boomers and Millennials, panelists urge marketers to use language as a tool to unite ethnicities and cultures while connecting with brands. Emilio Pardo, AARP Chief Brand Officer, states:

“Don’t be afraid of doing a multigenerational approach in your communications and don’t feel that you are going to alienate the Boomer population. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. We have never seen the connection so strong between the Boomer population and the Millennials, which is enormous. I think social media opens up an entire way of coming of age into the Boomer conversation, which is peer-to-peer. You know, Boomers don’t trust a lot of people other than peer-to-peer, right? But in many ways, that peer-to-peer check-in is valuable to whatever brand you’re trying to peddle into the marketplace. Because, they’re going to check in with their peers now in ways that we have never seen, before they make their purchase decision …. That peer-to-peer...is huge.”

Brands that understand the language and lifestyles of Boomers and Millennials will be most successful. Both
groups are somewhat egocentric in that they believe that brands should utilize respectful and appropriate language while speaking to them. Boomers and Millennials believe in brands that are socially responsible and support causes. When brands authentically support causes that these generations feel are important in a meaningful manner, these two age cohorts are more likely to be brand loyal. Finally, social media is important to both groups. While they may use social media for different reasons, they value social media and expect brands to be on-line when they are. Therefore brands should engage both groups via social media.

Likewise both Millennials and Boomers urge marketers to focus more on the purpose of using social media and other technologies to reach audiences than just using the newest technologies in campaigns because the technologies are new. Washington D.C. Panelist Frederick Peevy, a student at George Washington University, asserts:

“I think it’s not a revolutionary idea by any means, but it’s something that the advertising industry needs to come back to and that’s purpose. With the new emerging media, social media, digital media, as it becomes more integrated into people’s lives, we’re becoming obsessed with how to deliver the message...We need to focus and give as much importance to the message as we’re actually delivering.”

Moreover, intergenerational relationships can benefit tremendously from purpose and value driven techniques. Panelist and a senior at George Washington University, Maryam Bami affirms, “What’s also really important is that value exchange and that synergy...There’s a lot that both generations can give to one another.”

Professional Advice

This final section addresses measures agencies, media companies and advertisers can utilize enhance outreach to Boomers and while doing so, improve outreach to other multicultural markets. Two major themes arose: (1) collaboration by addressing the interdisciplinary nature of advertising; and (2) preventing ageism in the industry through proactively addressing perceived youth culture obsession, improving the workplace, through intergenerational communication, and through balancing being fresh and having wisdom on a team.

“It’s very important that culture doesn’t die with numbers.”

—Wheaton Mather: Strategic Planner, Thorow Communications

Collaboration

Professional Panelists indicate that analytical numbers are beginning to overwhelm qualitative research. They urge the industry not to take a total market approach toward advertising. Mather insists that, although today’s consumers may experience a more multicultural environment than previous generations, it is human nature to retain individual culture. Mather insists that culture lives strong and it is imperative that people retain who they are:

“To overlook that simply because numbers are converging to be more of a multicultural landscape, I think is one of the greatest mistakes in today’s marketplace and could potentially be a very huge detriment in the future to civil rights.”

Experts agree that the industry needs to respect and preserve culture not just for humanity but because passion points lie within these traditions. Freelance Brand Strategist Gene Darado, affirms that cultures and subcultures exist far beyond ethnicity, age, income, and gender and that these characteristics unite communities despite
differences. Within these cultures and subcultures is an opportunity for brands to build platforms and integrate within varied markets. To complete such an undertaking successfully, Darado urges the industry to allow culture to define itself on its own terms:

“It is important to remember to allow culture to define itself. Sometimes marketers are limited to defining culture along ethnicity. There are other cultures out there that need to be taken into consideration.”

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Panelists urge the industry to harness the interdisciplinary nature of advertising to achieve these goals. Unfortunately, there are still companies that are getting it wrong when developing cross cultural strategies and approaching ethnic markets. Often times it isn’t blatant racism but rather misinformation and a lack of perspective and expertise at leadership levels. Panelists insist that effective branding, strong messaging, experiential components, and company transparency can counteract many of these issues and help create better solutions. Mather contends:

“...The thing that continues to come up today is the art of storytelling. Let’s think of brands as human relationships. What do you stand for as a brand? If you stand for something really strong then it is probably going to address a lot of this cross target type stuff...if you really know who you are and you stand real firmly behind it...It’s about that core brand and what you stand for...”

Collaboration Through Research: Moreover, panelists affirm that some of the most effective solutions can be found through research and collaboration. Agencies must pull together data that presents a salient case that things must change because things have changed in the marketplace. Panelist Dorian Dickinson, Partner at Great River Creative, suggests that leadership is needed to propel objectivity in order to go above and beyond insular thinking to bring the voice of the consumer to life. Dickinson asserts:

“Having real agency leadership to make that decision to move this process forward and being able to provide measurable results...to give them (clients) that explanation.”

Research is further affirmed as a method to show clients the groundwork from a practical standpoint. Case studies, documentaries, biographies, ethnography, focus groups, narratives, and cultural anthropology were cited as ways to educate, help loosen stereotypes, evolve conversations, and address taboo subject matters. Professionals assert that the marketplace has changed and the ad industry cannot continue to lag behind due to risk aversion. Wheaton Mather, Strategic Planner, explains:

“It’s very easy for us to become very insular in our own world. ...Talk to academics on the matter. Poll students. There are so many other experts ... psychiatrists and psychologists. The beauty of advertising is that it combines a million different fields and ways of thinking. So poll some of those outside resources. Get some of that objectivity that we are talking about...Recognize that advertising goes far beyond the traditional ways.”

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Preventing Ageism In The Industry
Panelists across generations generally feel advertising has the power to proactively change ageist images in the media and change what many feel is a youth obsessed culture.

Youth Culture Obsession: Advertising tends to thrive off of pop culture and define (or refine) what is hot and trendy. Panelists representing Boomers, GenX and Millennials generally agree that too often trends, that advertisers and media focus their attention, are more closely related to youth culture. Some Boomers agree that some aspects of youth culture resonate with their generation, but if the industry obsesses over it, then the industry will miss prime opportunities to capture and create more challenges by offending this Boomer market. For instance, Atlanta panelist Charlotte King, a Boomer who owns Snowden Marketing Communications, explains it is critical not to confuse youthfulness with wanting to be young again:

“Well I think as Boomers, the issue becomes why is youth defined as something that we’re not? We can appreciate exactly where we are today, and that’s the issue. We’re not trying to be 20 again; I wouldn’t be 20 again if you paid me. But I think that it’s possible for us to be interesting and vibrant and sexy and influencers right where we are now. I think if you have marketers that look at us as trying to be a Millennial, that is not our goal. Our goal is to be exactly who we are right now because we have so much going for us.”

Tom Knechtel, Strategist, Ogilvy and Mather Atlanta, says that this youth obsession is perpetuated by hiring practices:

“Marketers that are the old guard -- those Boomers in marketing -- are obsessed (with) and are creating this youth culture. Then add to that, Millennials moving into the marketing industry who also are obsessed with youth culture. Then you have the brands wanting to take the lead from the marketers and go after the youth culture. It does sort of leave the Boomers out there without getting anybody to speak with them or connecting with them.”

Workplace Issues: Some of the panelists express concern that more senior talent is not seen as vital to the industry’s success and the industry loses its institutional knowledge and wisdom when Boomers are not retained. Indeed a lot of emphasis is often placed on recruiting more junior multicultural talent than on recruiting more senior multicultural talent. Charlotte King says that the industry needs to balance the freshness of Millennials with the wisdom of Boomers. She explains:

“It could be because of the economic down turn at the moment. But you’re seeing corporations losing experience at almost a frightening rate. ... What that means is, we’re losing institutional intelligence. So yes, it’s great to have Millennials come in and have fresh thinking, but they lack experience.”

With that challenge in mind, panelists encourage having real intergenerational conversations in the workplace and encouraging reverse mentoring relationships. Tom Knechtel, Atlanta panelist and Ogilvy and Mather Strategists, states that the conversations about and between Millennials and Boomers must be integrative and overcome negative prejudices:

“(Boomers and Millennials) are all working in the same companies now. We have to figure out how to work together, but it seems there’s still an animosity, almost a love-hate toss in the water, you know? How do we work together? What do we give up? What do we get?”

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Intergenerational Relationships and Communication: Today, the greatest age diversity exists within the U.S. workforce as compared to previous eras (Glass, 2007). While much attention is paid to Boomers and Millennials as they are beginning to comprise the largest proportion in the advertising workplace, GenXers, the smallest age cohort, are active in the workplace too. Glass (2007) explains that companies need to understand that each generation possesses unique characteristics that affect work ethic and relationships, how change is managed, and the perception of organizational hierarchy: defining events in each generation’s life all occurred between the ages of 5 to 18, the developmental years. The different backgrounds and life experiences result in four areas of potential workplace strife surrounding their differing expectations, distinct work ethics, deep-seated attitudes, opposing perspectives and diverse motivators. Intelligence Panelists urged the advertising industry to rethink concepts of “paying your dues.” Due to the large size of the Millennials and the different attitudes toward work and entitlement that are often attributed to GenX and Millennials, real conversations concerning these issues need to occur to avoid power struggles in the workplace. Millennial panelist Wei Wong, says:

“Before (Boomers) were getting eleven job offers... The workplace isn't the same anymore. And so what we're facing as Millennials is we have to go through internship after internship — and not saying that Boomers didn't have to work for it— but we have to work for it in a different way.”

Marianne Petillo, New York Panelist and President/CEO at the Studio, describes her work relationship with Millennials:

“I find it ironic that one of the most interesting things that I'll usually hear from my (Boomer) peers is how this younger generation is so entitled when in fact that was actually what we were. So, I just think that these are probably the two most similar generations in terms of the change that we've seen in our lifetimes. The types of things that we've had to adapt to, it just seems like we're incredibly similar and that's why I think that (adaptation to the workplace) goes both ways.”

Petillo goes on to say that many Boomer parents have much closer relationships with their own children, which carries over into the workplace, where Boomer employers have closer relationships with their Millennial employees. She says:

“I am extremely close with people in my company that are in their early 20s ... They share things that they probably only share with their closest friends ... That probably was not that common 10 years ago. I don't think I've changed. I think (my employees) have changed because of their relationship with their own parents.”

Marta Insua agrees, “We have to remember the mutual influence that always existed, that exists between Boomers and Millennials, and the Echo Boomer (a term used to define children of Boomers)...We are mutually learning from each other or coaching each other.” Doug Harris, CEO, The Kaleidoscope Group, uses Steve Jobs as an example of a Boomer leader who was able to create excellent intergenerational teams:
“He (was) a power player, or an influencer. Once he got power, he got a whole bunch of smart people working for him ... He may be driving the vision ... from a power place and still saying, ‘Let me get this vision, get the minds around me that can influence that real change that I see in my vision.’ That’s generational synergy -- let me do what I do. And if I can do what you do with you, then we can do it together, we’re so powerful collectively versus thinking we’re in a different place.”

Conclusion
This Thought Leadership Forum aimed to assist advertising professionals, educators, and students to better understand diversity and marketing to Boomers more effectively. The Intelligence Panel concluded with the words of AARP’s Chief Brand Officer, Emilio Pardo:

“The “R” word (was thought of) as retirement but think of relevance. How can I be relevant to my generation? ... (It) is about language and it’s an optimistic point of view, but it is also about living your best life and trying to navigate language in the commonality of the multigenerational approach. Don’t miss the fact that the wallet is quite large in the generation.”
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