

Baby Boomers to Advertisers: Don't Forget About Us

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An image from a T-Mobile commercial that mocks the way competitors market phones to baby boomers.

As much of the marketing world focuses on new ways to woo and dazzle the highly coveted millennial generation, some companies are setting their sights on an overlooked (at least by advertisers) group: baby boomers.

T-Mobile, for instance, recently unveiled a phone plan aimed at people 55 and older. (Boomers are generally defined as being, at this point, between the ages of 53 and 71.)

In an occasionally profane five-and-a-half minute video [posted on Twitter](#), T-Mobile's chief executive, John Legere, said, "I'm here today to fix something that drives me completely crazy," before criticizing his wireless competitors for deeming boomers as "too old," "stuck in the past" and not interested in technology or the internet. He mocked some of his rivals' senior phone plans for focusing on "big buttons," phone call minutes and outdated flip phones instead of offering smartphones with attractive data plans for them to connect with family and friends.

"This generation deserves a little respect!" he said.

Some marketing experts say that Mr. Legere's rant was a valid one, and that brands, even outside the wireless market, should pay attention.

"The group is the forgotten generation," said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys Inc. "Marketers have gotten so hot for the millennial generation that they have essentially ignored boomers."

Larry Light, a co-author of "Six Rules for Brand Revitalization" and the chief executive of Arcature, a brand consulting company, added: "They're just as large as the millennials in numbers. And they have huge discretionary income."

Right now, it's mainly companies that make senior-related products, like life insurance, medical devices and reverse mortgages, that regularly target boomers. But a few brands, like Mercedes-Benz and Geico, have started courting boomers by producing commercials that lean on boomer imagery. In a Super Bowl ad this year, Peter Fonda reprised his "Easy Rider" persona by putting on a leather jacket — as aging bikers looked on — and drove off in a Mercedes while "Born to Be Wild" played.

Peter Fonda in a Super Bowl commercial for Mercedes-Benz this year. Video by Health Star International

But those ads are the exception, not the norm. Why?

"They want to market to the cool segment, the modern segment, the 'in' segment," Mr. Light said of marketers, many of whom are millennials themselves.

In addition, many companies see millennials as the future. Catch them early enough and you may have a lifelong customer. But that's not necessarily the case, experts say. Tastes and passions change frequently for younger people. But boomers, once they have connected with a brand, can stay loyal for years, said Scott Gulbransen, director of communications for AARP Nevada.

Technology, automobile, travel and sports-related companies are missing out the most, Mr. Gulbransen said, wrongly stereotyping boomers as out of touch and not interested in the latest gadgets.

"Boomers don't want to be left out," he said. "They want to learn and use the new technology, and they're excited by it."

Indeed, more than 60 percent of boomers owned a smartphone in 2016, according to a report by eMarketer for AARP, and 73 percent of people 50 to 59 owned a smartphone and used it daily.



John Legere, T-Mobile's chief executive, declaring, "This generation deserves a little respect!"

"If I have a millennial grandchild or child and want to keep up with what they're doing, those kids are probably not going to call me like I used to call my grandmother when I was a kid," Mr. Gulbransen said. "So they see it as a tool to connect with family and friends."

AARP even hosts classes on how to use smartphones and other technology, and sends a team to the Consumer Electronics Show each year to review the latest tech gadgets.

Doug Verb, 68, who lives in Las Vegas, rolls his eyes when he hears about the tech-phobic stereotype.

“They’re all missing it,” he said of brands. “We’re here in the millions, and we have more disposable income, time and want to spend money. Yet they don’t give us the consideration that they should.”

Automobiles is another category where boomers may feel underserved, “Born to Be Wild” commercials aside. Mr. Passikoff noted that the generation that heralded Earth Day, for instance, would be receptive to ads about electric cars.

Some say the smartest strategy is not choosing between millennials and boomers at all.

“The big mistake is marketers making an either/or decision,” Mr. Light said.

Melissa Ziweslin, managing director at the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, markets to both generations when selling condominiums.

“We absolutely like to cast a wide net knowing that it could be a boomer making a purchase for themselves or making a purchasing decision for a child,” she said. “We would be remiss not to speak to both audiences.”

With hotels and resorts, it gets trickier. Not many resort-style destinations want to showcase seniors in bathing suits lounging by their pools in ads. That’s where dual marketing comes in, in which a company uses different videos, photos and messages to market to different age groups. In some cases, a company may use a particular brand to appeal to millennials and another to appeal to boomers. In other cases, different platforms, carrying different messages, are used.

Marketing to boomers generally, for instance, often involves old-school TV, magazine and newspaper ads, in addition to digital ads.

But experts say the biggest mistake that marketers make is overestimating the value of connecting with millennials rather than boomers.

“While the millennials are sharing stuff, boomers are buying stuff,” Mr. Passikoff said. “If you are a brand, you are in business to make money, and a tweet or share or laugh online doesn’t translate into actual bottom-line dollars.”

For this reason alone, he said, “boomers are an audience that’s worth pursuing in virtually every category.”