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CHAPTER SIX

Why Infomercials May Be the New Boomer Advertising

IT'S THAT UGLY WORD, conjuring up half-hours of tacky, humdrum hucksterism. But it's the content that's clumsy, not the concept. If the advertising industry ever gets the message, mature, imaginative, absorbing infomercials will be an important way to reach Baby Boomers and other demographic groups.

Throughout most of the last century print was king, even during the age of radio and the early years of television. Jingles, slogans, crisp copy—and when television arrived, animation and clever visuals—were still the poor cousins of privileged print.

Beginning in the middle 1960s, dazzling cinema-like spots mixed with the succinct wit of print became the pinnacle of advertising mastery. An effective television campaign often did it all: customer awareness, imprinting, positioning, branding, and messaging.

Not so today, at least for Baby Boomers. And it isn't simply because we're not being targeted. The real reason is that our attention spans are longer. We want to know more. We need to know more for a product or service to be imprinted. A 30-second salvo will miss us by a mile. We will subconsciously (oftentimes consciously) dismiss it.

If television advertising was once the poor cousin to print, nowadays infomercials are the bedraggled outcasts of both. While there are exceptions, infomercials are shoddy also-rans in the advertising world. There is no money for production, no creativity whatsoever. The in-the-studio-with-an-audience infomercials are reminiscent of the locally produced shows of yesteryear. If it's a location shoot, there is likely to be a simpleminded script, a dull host, and a video crew with

no creativity or vision. Not surprisingly, you end up with a simple-minded, dull half-hour with no creativity or vision. *Non-infomercials*.

Okay. I admit it. If I see one more hapless, third-rate TV personality walk into a drearily framed shot, hit his or her mark, say something stupid, and walk off-screen, I'm going to kick in my plasma screen.

There have been inklings. Already, some ad agencies and their clients are taking advantage of the internet and Cable TV, including the "on-demand" format for infomercials. Procter & Gamble has a series of infomercials targeting young men: a "reality show" to promote Old Spice Red Zone body wash. Even TiVo has "created its own platform of longer-form ads with sponsors like cruise line Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. and financial services company Charles Schwab Corp."¹

For targeting Baby Boomers, this longer form opens up possibilities and techniques not normally applied to thirty-second or one-minute commercials.

Here are a few ways of approaching production:

The cliché "thinking outside the box" applies here, but with a twist: think outside the *television* box. The first TV commercials were simply radio ads with announcers onscreen holding up products. Soon, images replaced the mundane, and commercials became more like print ads; they told stories with copy and visuals. Some were mini-dramas, mini-comedies. They also were severely storyboarded. Half of the reason they were storyboarded was to initially pitch the client.

In the Sixties, many commercials became more free-form. A concept based on a slogan or jingle for a commercial was pitched, and creatives had (more or less) free reign to shoot and edit. For example, Wells, Rich & Greene's revolutionary spot for Alka-Seltzer, "No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In, " was a montage of close-up, quick-cut vignettes of stomachs. No doubt it was storyboarded, but I'll bet the final edit deviated from the original storyboard cells.

Baby Boomers are perfectly at home with a freer form of art, of

¹ "Procter & Gamble Makes On-Demand Ad," Reuters News Service, 2004.

entertainment. Many movies from the Sixties and Seventies were scripted but loose, with plenty of room for improvisation by the actors, the director, and the cinematographer. Movies were more “real.” Even some television shows (*I Spy*, *Mash*) at least gave the illusion of improvisation. Rock musicians improvised onstage more than they do now. Our comedy was off-the-cuff, or appeared to be (*Robin Williams*, *Saturday Night Live*).

Storyboards and Boomers

Special-effects movies must be storyboarded (or at least large chunks of them). Cartoons *are* storyboards. However, if you are targeting Baby Boomers, and you storyboard an infomercial (especially by committee), it will end up DOA.

Products and services are real, and you want to convince potential customers to use them in real life. Anything over-staged and lacking authenticity will seem fake. You don’t want your product or service to be perceived as simply a prop or backdrop.

With a short commercial, there isn’t time to do much of anything but pitch the product—simply, cleverly, memorably. If there is a whiff of authenticity, your ad agency has gone beyond the call of duty, or you were lucky.

But with the long-form infomercial, a genuine relationship between your product or service and target market is vital, and you have plenty of time to develop one. If it’s non-stop pitch, pitch, pitch—you’ll lose them.

Another way to improve campaigns, said Larry Light, executive vice president and global chief marketing officer of the McDonald’s Corporation, is to consider agencies “as creative resources” rather than corporate entities that assign accounts to specific employees at specific offices. “That’s the future, not to assume the office you’ve been assigned to has all the creative geniuses you need.”

—Stuart Elliot, *The New York Times*²

² Elliot, Stuart, “Consumer Advice for Advertisers,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2004.

Finding the Production Talent

The longer-form infomercial has little in common with 15- and 30-second commercials. Different techniques should be used; a different aesthetic should predominate.

Infomercials targeting Baby Boomers (and probably for all demographics) also have little in common with television entertainment shows. They really should be thought of as short films: part cinema, part documentary. Also remember that more and more people are buying large screen TVs and home entertainment systems. Why give them a TV show when you can offer them a mini-motion picture?

There is a form known as *documericals*:

Often produced in the standard 28 minute, 30-second package for a 30-minute broadcast slot, documericals are one part of a growing industry trend that has blurred the lines between the commercial and the news documentary. The subject matter may not include blatant hard sells for kitchen gadgets or feature a huckster spraying black goop on his bald spot, but documericals are still used to sell a product . . .

—Greg Barr³

Start with the above concept, and expand on it. Add a cinema aesthetic. I'd call these *Cinemericals*, except that a few companies already use this term for the short commercials made specifically for movie theatres.

If you approach your advertising agency with the idea of an infomercial for Baby Boomers, here are a few things you should consider: Of course, Baby Boomer creatives should produce, as well as write and direct. Finding these creatives within an agency will be difficult, probably impossible. Even an agency's list of freelance producers, writers, and directors won't include many, if any, Baby Boomers.

There are a dozen (maybe two dozen) wonderful, accomplished Baby Boomer film writer/directors, editors, and cinematographers who haven't directed a film in ages. Some are now producers. Some

³ Barr, Greg, "Documericals Mean Big Business," © AVVMMP-Access Intelligence, Inc.

work in television. Some produce or direct commercials, or both. Some have perpetual projects in development. Some are sitting around doing nothing.

I'll mention no names, because who knows if the above paragraph might offend some of them. It shouldn't, for I admire many of these folks. They are out there, and may or may not welcome being approached for a well-produced, high-quality infomercial. (The problem, again, is *that word*. Documercial is better, but still doesn't quite define the concept. How I wish I could call them *Cinemericals!*)

Medium-to-small advertisers and agencies can successfully apply the principles above. However, there are pitfalls. Because of relatively inexpensive video cameras and computer editing software, there are thousands and thousands of professional video companies. The good news is that more true talent has developed in this area. The bad news is that there are many, many film and video companies that advertise themselves as professionals but really have no idea what they're doing, and never will. I can use a video camera. I can edit. I do neither professionally. However, I have produced, directed, and written award-winning marketing, advertising and promotional videos.

A cliché worth revisiting: Surround yourself with talented people and they'll make you look better.

I live in the Seattle area. There are hundreds of professional film and video people and companies here. There aren't as many as in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, but enough to make it difficult to track down the best talent.

After using a few companies and freelance camera and video people, I stumbled upon one whose work stood out. Why? This gentleman had gone to college and majored in still photography. By chance he ended up with a video camera in his hands and worked for many years in the news department of a local television station. What a combination. Nobody even comes close to this fellow when it comes to lighting and composing a shot.* What a find. I twice took him to Italy for shoots, and Rick Steves would be envious of the footage.⁴

* He's Jeff Erwin of Digital Production Services in Seattle.

⁴ Rick Steves has written many travel guides, and has a popular travel series on PBS.

I also went through numerous editors. One was recommended to me. I called her, we chatted.

I said, "I don't do much storyboarding."

She replied, "What's a storyboard?"*

I knew I'd found one of the best editors in
The Great Northwest.

*Of course she knew
what a storyboard was.
She'd edited many
videos for Microsoft.

Infomercials Need Infusions of Money, Talent, Vision

At some point in the Sixties, someone convinced somebody that one-minute commercials could be exciting, absorbing, mini-masterpieces, *and* do their jobs. If you're interested in reaching Baby Boomers, now is the time to persuade agencies and clients that this is likewise true for five-to-thirty minute infomercials.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Internet Advertising for Baby Boomers

THERE'S REALLY NOT MUCH OUT THERE in the way of internet advertising except in the obvious industries like health, travel, and retirement communities. Even *they* aren't doing it right, according to Dick Stroud, a 50-plus marketing authority in London.

His book-in-progress, tentatively titled *Age Neutral Marketing* (Kogan Page), is being written in conjunction with OMD (www.ond.com), one of the world's biggest media buying agencies, which conducted a global research program into the way age does or does not affect consumer behavior.

Dick has one of my favorite marketing blogs. The old codger (oops . . . I mean the *age neutral* codger) consistently whips up interesting quips about the 50-plus market (www.50plus.blogspot.com).

"Most older web users prefer using 'goal-centered' navigation," Dick told me. "This is a fancy way of saying that the navigation should anticipate the user's questions and provide a simple way for them to get answers.

"For instance, if you think your website user might have difficulty in selecting the most suitable product, then *provide the information to aid in making the decision*, and clearly label it (example: *Which Product May Be Right For You?*). All too often the navigation reflects the structure and priorities of the company rather than taking into consideration its potential customers."

We talked a bit about well-produced, non-hype infomercials, and if Baby Boomers would actually make the effort and sit through them on the web or on television.

“Internet advertising is the fastest growing type of advertising,” he said. “This means a lot more than just banner ads. Increasingly it means large format interactive ads, search-engine marketing (optimization and key-words), creating special promo videos for web download, supporting TV ads with online sites, and so forth.

“But to answer your question, ‘Yes.’ Baby Boomers will sit and watch five, ten, or twenty minute advertising videos, but with two big caveats: the videos have to be relevant, and they must be given the choice to watch them or not.

“Where sites make a *massive* mistake is when they do not give the user the option, or present enough information so they may make the decision of whether to exchange ten minutes of their lives to watch a web video or some other type of download.

“I know it is a much overworked and hackneyed phrase, but it is *all about customer choice* and giving them the information to make a decision.”

The problem, we agreed, was that there is usually too much garbage to wade through.

“Let me give you an example of an industry that has not understood this simple point,” Dick continued. “It’s the Cruise Industry. They persist in using rich media (mainly Flash) on their home page. Yes, you have the SKIP object somewhere on the page, but a lot of people have no idea what that is or what it does. Many are forced to watch some tacky Flash sequence.”

And they get tired of this really fast. Most of the time, it’s an immediate turn-off for Baby Boomers. *Give them the meaty options right up front.* A simple click for pictures? Videos? A quick link to copy about the cruises? It’s all they need. You’ve lost them if they first have to suffer through meaningless images and empty copy slithering and skidding every which way.

Flash intros are not like intros (title segments) for marketing or advertising videos. Flash intros are usually pointless, have little to do with (for example) a specific cruise or vacation, and are perceived as

pure hype and a waste of time. Flash presentations are vacuous branding vehicles, a technique that makes most Baby Boomers queasy and irritable

“My research shows that older people are fine with the ‘advertising stuff’ on the web” Dick said. “As long as they feel that they are getting the information they are seeking.”

Dick often runs into a brick wall whenever he tries to educate businesses about many of these subjects. “50+ advertising using conventional channels is getting a great deal of give-and-take discussion nowadays, but very, very few people are even thinking of asking the same questions about interactive channels.

“What interests me is the style and format of online advertising. In my view it is even more youth-centric than print or TV. There is still this daft idea that online equals youth, and *only* youth.”