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Hitting home with baby boomers

Craig McGuire - 12 Jun 2006 11:00

Baby boomers make up a socially aware demographic, making them great PSA targets.

The first baby boomers are turning 60 this year. For an entire generation that once warned, "never trust anyone over 30," that's an important milestone.

Boomers - those born during a 1946-1964 population explosion after GIs returned from WWII - represent 28% of the US population. And with such purchasing power, boomers make an attractive audience for PSAs, especially as they comprise the bulk of the country's political, cultural, industrial, and academic leadership. At the same time, this demographic is wide, deep, and difficult to navigate.

"The most important quality for a project's success is that the issue has relevance for the baby-boomer population," says Lynn Harris Medcalf, EVP at News Generation, a firm that produced several recent PSAs targeting boomers.

Because they are maturing, now age 42 to 60, boomers are naturally concerned with healthcare, insurance, retirement planning, personal investing, and other issues, she adds.

For instance, News Generation recently produced a state-by-state PSA exploring the Small Business Health Insurance Plan and how it would make it more expensive for older workers to get health insurance, overriding state protections that keep premiums fair and require preventive screenings for diseases like cancer and diabetes.

Boomers are also a rather active, socially conscious bunch, having come of age in the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s.

"[Boomers] are extremely politically active," says Catherine Welker, AE at Strauss Radio Strategies. "Many are parents, voters, retirees, and potentially have disposable income. This is a generation most likely to get involved in a cause."

Strauss recently produced a PSA for Sister Study, a study of the environmental and genetic risk factors for breast cancer for the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

"This is compelling to baby-boomer women because they have mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and daughters who may have been diagnosed with the disease," Welker says. "It is important to know what causes would get them to take action, and play to their feelings toward that cause."

Boomers are tech-savvy, too. As such, Michele Wallace, SVP, client services at Medialink,

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urges extending your PSA into cyberspace to reach them.

"We first comb through the database to select the appropriate media targets," she says. "We digitize the PSA for Web use. We approach the online sources to gauge interest and then send it out to the appropriate target sites that caters to various segments of the boomer audience."

For the past seven years, Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide has been producing PSAs for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Screen for Life: National colorectal cancer action campaign."

"As boomers age, staying healthy becomes more important to them," says Patricia Cook, VP/executive producer. "A lot of [our] work in public health focuses on this audience."

The campaign targets men and women 50 and older, as risk for colorectal cancer is greatest in this population.

With the CDC, Ogilvy conducted formative research with the intended audiences - men and women age 50 and older, including targeted sectors such as African Americans and Hispanics. Many didn't know that colorectal cancer is the second-leading cancer killer in the US and that screenings save lives. This made the PSA all the more compelling.

"The idea of being there for your children and grandchildren is powerful," Cook says.

"Messages about how to stay healthy and enjoy life for as long as possible were found to be important to the over-50 age group."

In addition to wanting to be around for their loved ones, boomers care equally about the issues that affect them.

For instance, TAG Creative recently produced a PSA for the Liz Claiborne Foundation designed to educate boomer parents about teen dating violence, set to run on PBS this fall. It focused on what signs parents should look for, why their kids aren't speaking to them, and what to do. TAG shot real teen actresses talking to the camera about the subject.

"TAG [spoke] in the real voice of those telling the story in a simple, relatable way," says Amy Frankel, partner at TAG.

Technique Tips

DO

Select subject matter that has direct relevance for boomers

Research to produce statistics to reinforce the points you make in your PSA

Seek out real people to speak in authentic voices about the issues in your PSA

DON'T

Shock for shock's sake. Have a purpose in being provocative

Select TV or radio outlets with formats that do not appeal to the boomers

Oversell your points, as this generation is all too familiar with hype

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