

COLUMNS

Brands are missing a mobile opportunity with seniors

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By A LUXURY DAILY COLUMNIST

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As mobile technology enters a golden age, the United States is entering a silver age.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the older population nationwide will nearly double in the next 20 years. Baby boomers, or the generation born between 1946-1964, make up one-quarter of the U.S. population.

This represents a growing audience with more disposable income than other age groups, but are marketers paying attention? Research shows that they should be.

It is easy to assume that mobile devices are just for the young. However, seniors use mobile devices, even at age 80 or older. How they use them is different, however. It is important for marketers to understand as this audience grows.

Seniors use mobile devices for specific tasks

Unlike the trends in other age demographics, year-over-year technology use by seniors shows slow growth. The reason is that mobile devices get more complicated each year.

At one point, not long ago, phones did just two things: send and receive calls. Phones today are not so simple, with dozens of settings and features that take time and motivation to learn.

Why would mobile device consumers want such complexity? It boils down to accomplishing various tasks while on the go: entertainment, getting directions, checking a calendar. More high-level tasks take more features and settings.

But if we look at research that shows what seniors want from their mobile devices, technology does not seem so overwhelming.

Research shows that seniors use mobile technology in a more simplified way compared to other age demographics.

It is not that seniors are incapable of figuring out mobile devices. They are more than capable. Age is not a limiting factor, as 61 percent of the oldest seniors, age 80-years-plus, have a mobile phone of some kind.

Seniors' use of mobile technology is not growing at the same rate as other age demographics simply because seniors are interested in accomplishing just a few specific tasks. These tasks are family communication and shopping.

Tasks that are popular with other age brackets, such as watching videos or using location services, are not nearly as important to seniors.

Seniors' motivations should be fully understood by marketers to target this huge demographic.

Why seniors use mobile devices

Seniors say that the number one motivation for using a mobile device is keeping in touch with family, Pew Research found in 2014.

Secondly, 58 percent of seniors say a large motivation is shopping, along with bargain-hunting.

Combine shopping as a motivator with the fact that seniors have more disposable income than other audiences, and the value in mobile marketing for seniors is clear.

However, success is not as likely with smartphone applications. A Pew survey found that 77 percent of seniors use a basic mobile phone that cannot run apps.

SMS, however, is exactly what this audience uses. SMS makes keeping in touch with family easy and immediate.

SMS messaging is perfect for seniors

Research shows that seniors have embraced SMS.

American seniors who own mobile phones use them more for SMS messaging than they do for any other common function besides calling, according to a 2013 Pew Research report. They are highly motivated to use SMS for personal communication with family and

friends.

For seniors, SMS beats everything else that mobile devices offer, including Internet access, email, apps, music, driving directions or video calling.

For seniors between the ages of 50-64, 75 percent use SMS, while 35 percent of seniors over age 65 use SMS.

SMS is immediate, personal and relevant, and communicates notifications, alerts, reminders, news and sales.

Organizations in the travel, automobile, healthcare, banking, insurance and luxury industries, for example, would see results if they made an effort to opt-in senior audiences to their SMS campaigns.

Avoid assumptions about senior audiences

This year, the last members of the baby boom generation turn 50.

As the youngest of them hits this milestone, they join a very large aging population that marketers should not ignore.

Avoid falling into the assumption that this audience's interest in technology dissolves as soon as they enter their golden years.

Understand the senior audience, and include it in your SMS opt-in campaigns and overall mobile strategy.

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