Do We Know Enough to Market to the Older Consumer? The Case of Marketing Correctness

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The world is undergoing a demographic transition. The 60+ age group would constitute 16% of the world population by the year 2050 as against 5% in 1970. India would not be an exception to this trend. This transition has far-reaching implications, for public policy, marketing and health care. It is doubtful whether, most marketers have adopted the concept of the older consumer. Plausibly, the number of older consumers and their composition in the total population has not been substantial enough to merit their attention. It follows that marketers lack the experience of targeting the older consumer. The knowledge essential to craft such a focused strategy is also sketchy. The evidence on the differential sensitivity of older consumers to marketing stimuli is rather conflicting. However, literature documents their several limitations, the most prominent of them being cognitive limitation. We argue therefore, that given the limitations of the older consumers to qualify as a normal market-client, marketers have a special responsibility to consider their vulnerabilities. Marketers need to ensure marketing correctness while formulating strategy for older consumers.

Introduction

… trope of ambiguity. … a phenomenological universal of old age, a time both of maximal experience and of maximal debility, simultaneously vaunted and evaded.

Cohen, L. (1994). Old Age: Cultural and Critical Perspectives. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 23*, p. 143.

The world is undergoing a demographic transition. Many nations are facing rapid growth in the 60+ age group. The 60+ group formed under 5% of the world population in the year 1970. They would be 1.5 billion large by 2050, constituting 16% of the population (refer Table 1). India and other developing nations would also confront such dramatic changes in the composition of their populations. In some of the developed nations like Switzerland, Sweden and Japan, the 60+ would make up as much as 25% of the population (Schewe, 1988; van der Merwe, 1987). Impending changes in the age composition of such magnitude have generated interest and raised questions about their nature and consequences. The larger problem of ageing has twin critical concerns. "The first is how the individual should respond to the mature years. The second is how the larger community, including the government, should respond to the needs of the old" (Galbraith, 1999).

Ageing has implications for public policy. The fiscal gaps that are widening, for instance in the US, Europe, Japan could become worse, as the baby boomers[i] retire (Engardio & Matlack, 2005). Specific issues like housing, health, employment, retirement, and consumption would come into focus; these may have added ramifications for marketers. The 60+ age group could be important to marketers, primarily for two reasons. First, this demographic segment is growing at about 2% every year, 60% faster than the total population (Engardio & Matlack, 2005; refer Table 1). Second, this segment is valuable. For instance, in Japan the 60+ aged market, referred to as the silver generation, is estimated to be worth over $1 trillion (Schewe, 1988).

However, it is doubtful whether most marketers have accepted the concept of the older consumer (refers to 60+ age group, hereafter)[ii]. This market is considered to be invisible as it is yet in the discovery stage (Bone, 1991). The number of 60+ and their composition in the total population has not been substantial enough, to merit the attention of marketers. Kennett (1995) observes that compared to other industries, the financial services industry is slow in implementing strategies targeted at the elderly. This observation may be true of other

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industries as well. Marketers therefore, appear to lack the experience of targeting the older consumer. The knowledge essential to craft such a focused marketing strategy also seems to be inadequate. The older consumers are under-represented in research on consumer behaviour (Heslop & Marshall, 1991). The older consumers have caught the attention of researchers only from the 1960's. Since then, research on the older consumers has grown steadily. However, anecdotal and inferential approaches rather than empirical methods appear to dominate the literature (Moschis, 1991).

The Indian Context

India at 117 million, would have the world's second largest elderly population next only to China; the 60+ age group in China would be 183 million strong by the year 2015 (Euromonitor GMID 2004 and 2005). India continues to be in the middle of its demographic transition. India's population has grown rapidly in the last five decades. In 1920, the annual rates for birth and death were about 48 per 1,000. By 2000 the death rate had declined dramatically to 8, while the birth rate declined to 25. The elderly population at over 100 million, would constitute 9% of the total population by 2016 (refer Table 2). The median age of the total population in tandem, would increase from 24 in 2005 to 27 years by 2015. However, the reliability of these estimates could be in question, in the event of scientific and medical breakthroughs, which could dramatically increase life expectancy (Goeldner & Munn, 1964).

State-wise, gender-wise and rural area-wise variations in the proportion of elderly to the total population are seen. The proportion of the urban elderly increased marginally between the census years 1981 and 1991. The elderly form a marginally larger part of the rural population, vis-à-vis the urban. Overall and in urban areas, the proportion of elderly females has been marginally higher than that of males, in contrast to the situation in the rural areas. The joint family system in India has been on the wane. The joint family as a traditional social unit took care of the elderly, sick, widows and orphans. The old age dependency ratio[iii] has seen a marginal increase between 1981 and 1991. The dependency ratio is somewhat higher for females than for the males and much higher in the rural areas, than in the urban areas. The higher ratio for rural areas may be explained, by the migration of individuals in the working age population to urban areas. A NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation) survey on the elderly in 1995-96 estimated that, 30% of the males and 70% of the females were economically fully dependent on others. This survey also reveals that, nearly 53% of the elderly in urban areas, and only 37% of the elderly in rural areas possessed some financial assets (Planning Commission, 2002).

In the next decade, India would add 150 million to its population, a growth of 14%. During the same period, the age group 60+ would grow by 30 million at 35% (refer Table 2). 'Older' Indians may yet account for a quake in life-cycle spending patterns. Their spending is expected to rise faster than in any other age group, fuelled by a more educated and affluent generation turning older (Euromonitor, 2004). It is not enough to anticipate such trends. It would be more important for marketers to prepare for their consequences.

Given this context, we summarise the evidence from received literature on the behaviour of older consumers and argue for the case of 'marketing correctness'. The remainder of this paper is organised into 4 sections. Section 2, considers the role of demographic variables in the formulation of marketing strategy. Section 3, outlines the concept of vulnerability. Section 4, discusses the evidence that credits the older consumer with vulnerability. Section 5, briefly makes the case for marketing correctness and prescribes responses of marketing to the older consumer given their vulnerabilities. The References and Tables are appended last.

Demographic Variables and Marketing Strategy

Ageing is a multidimensional process. Age differences are only partially related to chronological age. Perceptible age differences could result from changes in biological, physical and psychological conditions, as much as from environmental factors, like the social ageing phenomenon (Moschis et al., 1997; Phillips & Sternthal, 1977). The large number of segmentation models proposed for the older consumers may be indicative of the large differences within the segment.

Demographics need not be a good predictor of actual product preference. Sorce et al. (1989) observe that demographics (age, marital status and socio-economic status) account for, only a small proportion of the variance in predicting consumer behaviour. For instance, younger consumers may be more likely than older consumers to prefer high calorie soft drinks. But it is less clear whether age would be predictive of taste preferences. Basic demographic variables, such as age and gender, can discriminate well in certain markets, but they often exhibit heterogeneity within the group. They are highly reliable in measurement terms but have generally failed to explain consumer behaviour (Moschis et al., 1997). Segmentation methods based on demographics are also handicapped, as they are based on ex post facto analysis of the kinds of persons who constitute the various segments of the market. These segmentation methods rely on descriptive factors rather than causal factors. They are not very useful to generate insights about customers. Benefit segmentation seeks to remedy this anomaly. True market segments exist when the benefits sought by consumers in consuming a product are evident (Haley, 1968).

Demographic profiles are however, relatively straight forward and a great deal of information is available on the characteristics of various demographic segments, for instance, size, spending power, habits. It also lends itself relatively efficiently to media targeting, since data is available on the demographic characteristics of TV watchers, radio listeners, and readers of periodicals (Schewe, 1988). Age as a segmentation variable is operationally easy, intuitively logical and many a time effective. Macro influences like demographics, economic conditions, culture, and legal framework nevertheless have an effect on marketing to the older consumer. Despite its limitations marketing has a well-established tradition of using demographic profiles and variables to target segments (Sherman & Schiffman, 1984). Bone (1991) has identified 33 such segmentation methods in literature.

Products and services need to be geared to the needs and wants of older consumers. If the needs of the older market are not being fully served currently, and if the segment is substantial and profitable the marketer may choose to offer new products targeted at older consumers, a niche strategy. Offerings could be for instance, refurbished bathrooms with handrails for the elderly, special tour packages for the retired, cosmetics, healthcare, retirement homes, and pension funds. Life Insurance Corporation of India plans to enter the retirement home market as have some organisations like Dignity earlier.

Marketing efforts could also be focused at repositioning, existing products for the older consumer. Products typically targeted at the younger consumer like chocolates, could be repositioned as an ‘older’ consumer offering. The offering may thereafter become unattractive to the current ‘younger’ customer franchise. This is a critical issue that cannot be glossed over, since for many marketers the younger customer franchise is the predominant segment being served currently. The option for differentiation also exists, if product and brand extensions are offered for the older market; distance the ‘older’ brand from the mother or parent brand. Alternatively, the marketer could identify appeals that could be attractive across segments – older and younger and successfully adopt a multi-segment strategy. The success of marketing strategy hinges on the understanding of consumer behaviour and subsequently on segmentation, targeting and positioning. It is therefore, critical for marketers to formulate responses to the needs of the older consumer.

The Concept of Vulnerability

With the escalation of competition, social responsibility has become a means for product differentiation and a vehicle for building equity (Bart & Roy, 1994). Cause-related marketing programmes are illustrative of this trend. Concern for the vulnerable sections of the market would further demonstrate such responsibility.

What constitutes vulnerability? Being susceptible to being wounded and liable to harm makes one vulnerable. Vulnerability could be a permanent or temporary situation, due to characteristics of the individual and the marketer. Vulnerability is of several kinds – physical, cognitive (prominent among the elderly), motivational, and social. The vulnerable lack control, real or perceived (Brenkert, 1998). Cohen (2004) lists three types of vulnerabilities Constitutional, Developmental and Situational. He further points out that the elderly suffer from cognitive limitations, like affect comprehension, knowledge development, reasoning and judgment. Motivational factors, like anxiety and concerns for safety, security and health are also highly prominent.

Which sections of the society are vulnerable? All consumers at some point of time are members of some sensitive group (children, elderly). There could be large variances within such groups, due to the situation specific to the individual (health, income, education for instance), and the nature of the marketing environment. Individuals may belong to several such sensitive groups at the same time (Bart & Roy, 1994). The older consumers are most susceptible to being victimized by marketing methods and may not even realize that they have been victimised (Mathur & Moschis, 1995). Vulnerability is a four-place relation; the Person (market client) vulnerable to the Agent (marketer) with respect to Harm in a particular Context. If the Person's interests are vulnerable to the Agent's actions, the Agent has special responsibility to protect the Person's interests (Goodin, 1985 as cited in Brenkert, 1998). The marketer's responsibility therefore, lies in not harming those interests that may be affected by the marketing program.

Evidence of Vulnerability among Older Consumers

Suggestibility and Persuasion

The older consumer indulges in lesser information search, indicating a satisficing vis-à-vis maximising strategy. Such a satisficing strategy, could lead to dissatisfaction at a later time period. A paired study (supermarket and laboratory settings) in the search and use of nutritional information found that, older consumers are less likely than younger to search intensely for information. They are also less likely to select the cereal with appropriate nutritional information. However, in laboratory conditions the subjects wrote down all nutritional information obtained in the search, and the age-related differences were less pronounced. Older consumers perform poorly in product choice situations of information overload, and are unable to ignore irrelevant or redundant stimuli. They therefore use their own experience as a basis for abstracting stimulus input (Cole & Balasubramanian, 1993). Quicker the pacing and presentation of information, greater is the learning deficit. However, if the presentation of information is self-paced, the deficit disappears (Phillips & Sternthal, 1977; Tynan & Drayton, 1985). Consumer education may help them filter puffery in advertisements (Smith & Moschis, 1985).

Suggestibility, Persuasion and Conformity are three paradigms, used to investigate the relationship between age and the ability to be influenced. Suggestibility increases until the age of eight, declines sharply until adolescence and then levels off. Being suggestible would mean that the recipient adopts an attitude or behaviour consistent with the marketing advocacy, when presented repeatedly. Such advocacy is typically presented without providing for the reasons, and requires little cognitive skill. Persuasion on the other hand, implies that detailed arguments be presented and requires higher levels of cognitive skill of the recipient. Persuasion is seen to decline consistently with advancing age. But it is not known if its levels off at a later stage in life. However, there is no systematic relationship between age and conformity (Phillips & Sternthal, 1977).

Sources of Information

Newspapers, followed by word-of-mouth, have been ranked as the major sources of information unlike the other age groups (Mason & Smith, 1971). Gilly and Zeithaml (1985) agree with this role of direct contact. But, they found that unlike the other age groups, publicity and word-of-mouth have no impact on older consumers. They tend to focus more on information, rather than on entertainment, unlike other age groups. They also tend to rely on informal sources of information (Tynan & Drayton, 1985; Phillips & Sternthal, 1977).

In a study of the influence of advertising on the older consumers, Smith et al. (1985) found a strong negative relationship, between age and exposure to mass media advertising, and age and social motivations for consumption. Mass media advertising is positively related to exposure. The older consumers rely less on personal sources of information. Economic motivations for consumption are negatively related to age among the older consumers. A post hoc analysis of the differences in information sources, used in apparel shopping and psychographics across age groups, reveals that the older consumers typically do not get dissatisfied. There is consensus that younger consumers are most negative toward middlemen (Bearden & Mason, 1979; among others, as cited in Lumpkin et al., 1985).

Behavioural Variables

Older consumers are laggards in adoption and are negatively inclined toward adoption of technologies, and are low users (Botwinick, 1973; and several others, as cited in Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). A study of responses to technologies, (scanner-equipped grocery stores, electronic fund transfers (EFT), ATM, custom telephone calling services) found, the percentage of the older consumers to be low in trial and adoption vis-à-vis other age groups. However, they are more likely to adopt electronic fund transfers and the like, when newer technologies meet their needs and is effectively communicated (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985).

The older consumers are active shoppers (they use the same store choice criteria as other age groups), they shop together with spouse, they are not concerned with special amenities, and they do not use in-store information (unit pricing). There appears to be general population trend, toward electronic media though reading vis-à-vis television, offers the opportunity for self-pacing. The determinant segmentation variable could be, retirement at whatever age it may be. The older consumers do not favour direct advertising approaches, and do not like to be reminded that they are old (meta analysis by Tongren 1988).

Attributes unique to a store and important to consumers, are determinant. Attributes may be salient, but not determinant (Myers & Alpert, 1968; among others, as cited in Lumpkin et al., 1985). Thirteen attributes were tested – price-quality, product related, every-day-low-pricing, sales, sales returns and the like across the sample (<59, 60-64, 65-74 & 75+ age groups). Three of those attributes, (ability to return unsatisfactory products, availability of sizes and styles suited to their age, and the availability of advertised products) were determinant across all age groups. The age differences were pronounced, between the first group (<59) and the last two age groups (65-74 & 75+) (Lumpkin et al., 1985).

Responses to Marketing Stimuli

Munn (as cited in Goeldner & Munn, 1964) suggests that brand perceptions of older consumers, are no different from that of other age groups. A large-sample empirical study of repeat purchase of new automobiles, provides evidence for the hypothesis, that older consumers have a fewer consideration set of brands, dealerships and models (Lambert-Pandraud & Gilles, 2005). They tend to buy long-established brands more often. The authors draw a distinction, between national brands (long-established like Renault, Peugeot, Citroen) that have been around for a century, and foreign brands (like Fiat, Toyota, Daewoo) that were introduced more recently. The study is based on four age-related theories – biological ageing, cognitive decline, socio-emotional selectivity and aversion to change.

Advertising and stereotyping, learning difficulties, role of personal selling, use of appeals, endorsements, and promotional incentives could have implications for promotion decisions. In the area of pricing, focus on price segments, role of credit cards, price sensitivity, price-quality associations, odd-even pricing could be investigated (Schewe, 1984). However, it is believed that the elderly are prone to deals given their diminished resources (Phillips & Sternthal, 1977; Smith & Moschis, 1985). Rentz et al. cited in Tongren (1988) isolated and analysed, cohort and time period effects on soft drink consumption in their longitudinal study. Cross sectional measures revealed that consumption declined from younger to older ages, but within cohort groups, consumption tends to increase as cohorts aged.

In summary, the elderly have difficulty in handling greater amounts of information. They perform better in recognition, than in recall. They remember better with visual aids. But, they do not benefit from televised presentations. There is no evidence of reduced deficits, with thematically organised material. However, they benefit from specific instructions for the use of memory strategies.

Marketing Correctness

Brenkert (1998) maintains that "it is the combination of their special characteristics and the means or techniques which marketers use that render them specially vulnerable". Older consumers typically report that they are not vulnerable in the marketplace but observations of their daily lives suggest a different picture (Gentry, 1997). When marketers try to exploit the characteristics of the vulnerable, they are treated unfairly. "Certain (market) segments, because of their unique characteristics or particular problems, may have to be treated with extra care" (Morgan & Riordan, 1983 as cited in Bart & Roy, 1994). The older consumer being vulnerable certainly deserves such extra care. How should marketers respond to such vulnerabilities? It is imperative that, 'good marketing' and 'good ethics' operate in tandem – the case of marketing correctness.

Insights into these issues are offered by Brenkert. Consumers visit the market not to derive profit but to satisfy needs and wants. To do so, they need competencies like knowledge and ability to shop, knowledge of relationships (between price-quality-product features), awareness of legal rights, product knowledge and the resources to enter into a marketing relationship. On the other hand, the marketer brings to the table certain advantages - greater product knowledge, marketing and targeting expertise, knowledge of attributes like motives, fears, needs, wants, interests (that even the potential consumer may not be aware of), and the resources to persuade. Marketers not only seek to create products but also consumers. The marketing concept enjoins marketers, to determine needs and wants, and to try to satisfy them. But, vulnerable consumers may get exactly what they want, that however might unwittingly and unfairly harm them.

Brenkert (1998) suggests that marketers should not target the vulnerable, by focusing their marketing campaigns on their vulnerabilities. He further questions, the use of marketing techniques like fear appeals for instance, to promote the usage of medications among the elderly. Bart and Roy (1994) enjoin marketers, to research the needs of the vulnerable in the early stages of the new product development process (by concept testing, focus group discussions, tracking of attitudes and opinions), and factor their needs in all the elements of the marketing mix. Consumer education could be a major thrust area, given their vulnerabilities under information overload. The ethical rationale and defensive strategies also, need to be formulated prior to the launch. It would also be worthwhile, to have a crisis management programme in place.

Marketers need to find ways to market to older consumers, which are compatible with their limited abilities, and characteristics. Being marketing correct, would imply that they integrate such sensitivity and commitment, systematically into their marketing mix. In the run up to the opportunity of the older consumer, marketers run great risks (legislation, attack from special interest groups), if potential reactions to their marketing actions are ignored. If indeed, marketing were to ‘benefit the organisation, and its stakeholders’, it cannot ignore the special needs of the older consumer (American Marketing Association, 2004).

Table 1. World - Population by Age, 1970-2050
Population in million and percentages in parentheses

Year	Age Group			Total Population	Median Age (Years)
	0-14 years	15-59 years	60+ years		
1970	1,381 (37)	2,113 (57)	203 (5)	3,697	22
1990	1,713 (32)	3,241 (61)	325 (6)	5,280	25
2000	1,828 (30)	3,836 (63)	421 (7)	6,086	27
2010	1,834 (27)	4,482 (65)	527 (8)	6,843	29
2020	1,903 (25)	4,960 (65)	715 (9)	7,578	32
2030	1,889 (23)	5,342 (65)	968 (12)	8,199	34
2040	1,852 (21)	5,604 (64)	1,245 (14)	8,701	36
2050	1,833 (20)	5,778 (64)	1,465 (16)	9,076	38
Growth (2000-2050)	5 (< 0.5)	1,942 (51)	1,044 (248)	2,990 (49)	

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of UN Secretariat (2004)

Table 2. India - Population by Age, 1990-2015
Population in million and percentages in parentheses

Year	Age Group			Total Population	Median age (Years)	Death rate (per '000)
	0-14 years	15-59 years	60+ years			
1990	307 (37)	474 (57)	57 (7)	838	22	10.6
1995	331 (36)	526 (57)	66 (7)	923	22	9.5
2000	346 (34)	587 (58)	76 (8)	1,009	23	8.7
2005	350 (32)	652 (60)	87 (8)	1,089	24	8.1
2010	349 (30)	718 (62)	100 (9)	1,166	26	7.7
2015	345 (28)	777 (63)	117 (9)	1,239	27	7.5
Growth (2005-2015)	-5 (- 1)	125 (21)	31 (40)	150 (15)		

Source: UN, Euromonitor GMID Consumer Lifestyles in India, Nov-2004.

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[i] Baby boomers, are those born post war between 1946 and 1964 (Moschis et al., 1997)

[ii] Older consumers, have been variously defined - oldsters, older consumers, senior citizens, elderly, old-agers, gerontic population, retirees and maturites (Lazer, 1986; Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). Consensus on the threshold definition of old age is missing within and across academic disciplines. In India, the threshold age definition varies from state to state, and across different professions.

[iii] This ratio is the number of persons in the 60+ age group per 100 in the working population (age group 15-59 years). Worldwide, the dependency ratio would increase to 25% in the year 2050 from 8% in 1950; calculated here as the ratio of 65+ to the 15-64 group (Engardio & Matlack, 2005). Increase in the dependency ratio, implies that an increasing number of the elderly, have to depend more and more, on the working age group for support.