Baby Boomers represent a large percentage of the population. Are your products appealing to them?

How can you use the trend of broader, softer marketing to make your product more appealing to a wider range of consumers, including the Boomers?

Trends to capture the Boomer segment’s attention include highlighting nutritional benefits and health-promoting ingredients, as well as a return to retro packaging.

Therefore, it’s essential to find a way to appeal to this group. They are feeling their age, they are worried about the future, and they are saving their money. They have health issues, but they don’t like to talk about them. And, above all, they still want to have fun. To put this push-pull of ageing and feeling ever young, consider this: The five members of The Rolling Stones (a defining Boomer rock group) have a combined age of about 300.

The types of products we see on the market for Boomers tend to fall into two distinct groups—those with explicit benefits for ageing consumers and those with more implicit benefits. Those that have more explicit benefits tend to not appear as much in the U.S. market, but rather are much stronger in Asia. It is a cultural phenomenon—in Asia, it is not a negative to be older, and seniors are usually revered and thought of as wise. Therefore, it is much more common to see products that are positioned as being for “seniors 40+” or the like.

For example, in China, Shangdong Qinlaotai Foods introduced Qin-Laotai Red Jujube and White Fungus Paste, which is a grain-based hot cereal that has added calcium. It is specifically formulated for “middle aged and seniors.”

But perhaps of more interest is activity in Western markets, where the messages are usually softer, and often suitable for a wider range of consumers. For example, we see a number of products positioned to enhance heart health, bone health, digestive health, and joint health. All of these focus on the claims and benefits, rather than on the specific age group to which they may apply.
made with olive oil. The company says the side dish can “help naturally lower cholesterol to promote heart health.”

In fact, on the front of the package, the product specifically calls out the FDA-approved claim: “Three grams of soluble fiber daily from barley-containing foods, such as Healthy Heart, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease.” Healthy Heart blend provides 1.6 g per serving. Total fiber per serving is 4 g.

While the message on the product is quite clear—it is for heart health—it does not say specifically that it is for a specific age group or those with any specific ailment. This broader, softer positioning makes it more appealing to a wider range of consumers.

Sometimes, we see an old-line brand transforming itself to make it more appealing to consumers. That’s what Kellogg’s has done with its All-Bran brand. Now, the company offers its All-Bran Buds in a single-serve pack. The pack comes in a multipack box of 12 units. The product has not been changed in any way—it is the same All-Bran enjoyed by parents and grandparents. It is, however, positioned in a new way. The single-serve packets make it seem more modern, while the graphics on the box reinforce the greater relevance of the brand. The box shows one of the individual pouches being sprinkled into a cup of yogurt.

The front of package tells consumers what they need to know—that it contains one-third of the daily requirement for fiber. The front also shows the key nutritional information (calories, fat, sodium, sugar, etc.) in a clear, easy-to-read format. And to further reinforce that this is not a product for old people, pack copy takes an extremely soft approach. It says that All-Bran Buds in a single format make it easier than ever to realize the benefits of a fiber-filled life. There is no reference to heart health or digestive health, allowing the consumer to make the inference on their own.

Kellogg’s does not only focus on these extremely soft benefits on all of its brands. For its Kashi Heart to Heart Whole Grain Crackers, as an example, it uses plant sterols in the formulation to help bolster the cholesterol reduction claim. The crackers also include six natural antioxidants, such as green tea, white tea, and grape seed, which support healthy arteries. They also are low in sodium to promote healthy blood pressure.

Overall, any new products that make heart, digestive, bone, or joint health claims have declined so far in 2010. In addition, only a very small number of all new product introductions—less than 1.5%—make any of these claims (2). What’s clear, then, is that while these benefits are important to consumers, and especially to Baby Boomers, products that specifically make the claim are relatively few and far between. That may be due in part to difficulties in the ability to make the claim from a regulatory standpoint and also can relate to the notion of inclusivity. Why make a product that is less appealing to some consumers because it is positioned to help a specific ailment?

Instead, we are seeing more products that offer strong nutritional benefits, without specifically calling out any particular health issue. These products can be quite appealing to Baby Boomers, as they often also tie in with more premium positioning and ingredients, and offer a unique taste experience to this group that many say has seen it all and done it all.

For example, Frito-Lay’s Smartfood line of snacks is positioned as offering “powerful nutrition” in addition to offering a unique, gourmet taste. One recent introduction was its Popcorn Clusters, which come in a Peanut Butter & Apple variety. The product makes the claim of offering “powerful nutrition,” such as calcium for strong bones, and also claims to be a good source of fiber (5 g per serving). This type of positioning can resonate well with Baby Boomers, as it allows them to have an indulgent treat that also has some healthful benefits.

But for Baby Boomers, it isn’t always just about good nutrition. They want to have fun as well. As a result, we have seen some major U.S. brands offer some of their existing products in retro packaging. General Mills, again, knows how to appeal to Baby Boomers. It recently offered on a limited basis for a short period of time its Cheerios cereal in a retro package. That package would have been the same package with the same graphics Boomers would have enjoyed as kids.

Although this market can be a difficult one to capture, it can be an important one as well. Although Boomers are hard-hit by the recession, so too is everyone else. And boomers appear to have a bit more spending money than do other consumer groups, making them an important group to target. But it can be quite difficult. Boomers are more willing than ever to talk about anything and everything, but they are easy to offend and do not want to be considered as “old.” So, although they are willing to talk about digestive issues (e.g., constipation), female health issues (e.g., menopause), male health issues (e.g., ED), and all health concerns related to ageing (including bone health and heart health), they perhaps prefer the discussion to be a bit light-hearted and to not focus on their age.

To help identify which types of claims may be the next important ones, look in the healthcare aisle of your local grocery store. You are likely to find dietary supplements that address many of the specific concerns of Boomers today. The question then becomes, how can you incorporate into your portfolio the benefits sought after by Boomers while not turning them off by too strong a message? One answer may be to look to categories outside of food and beverage for ideas, such as appliances and automobiles. And if all else fails, simply ask your Boomers coworkers what they are looking for. They have opinions, and they are eager to share.

References
1. U.S. Census Bureau data. Published online at www.census.gov.

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