Elderly and IT: Brand Discourses on the Go

Karine Berthelot-Guiet[✉]

CELSA-Paris-Sorbonne, Sorbonne Universités, Paris, France
karine.berthelot-guiet@celsa.paris-sorbonne.fr

Abstract. In countries where IT products have been an everyday commodity for some time and mass consumption a major social feature for a long time, very different kind of economic and social players picture elderly as the «new frontier». That is to say that elderly appear as the new generation that have to be converted to IT in order to benefit from these devices and become consumers. The challenge is, from a marketing point of view as expressed by professionals, huge since elderly are supposed to be, by nature, deeply attached to traditions and at least suspicious or at most resistant to change, especially when it comes to technological change. We intend here to question and analyze in which respect advertising discourse should, theoretically, be a huge help and drive regarding the acculturation of elderly to the use of IT products. As a matter of fact, commercials and brand content, being brand discourses, should have a major part to play in this process.

Keywords: Advertising · Elderly · IT · Stereotype

1 Elderly as a «New Frontier» for IT Products

In countries where IT products have been an everyday commodity for some time and mass consumption a major social feature for a long time, as in North America and the western part of Europe, very different kinds of economic and social players picture elderly as the «new frontier». That is to say that elderly appear, especially in Europe with the demographic weight of «baby boomers» born during the post-World-War-2 period, as the new generation that have to be converted to IT in order to benefit from these devices and become consumers. The challenge is, from a marketing point of view as expressed by professionals, huge since elderly are supposed to be, by nature, deeply attached to traditions and at least suspicious or at most resistant to change, especially when it comes to technological change.

We intend here to question and analyze in which respect advertising discourse should, theoretically, be a huge help and drive regarding the acculturation of elderly to the use of IT products. As a matter of fact, commercials and brand content, being brand discourses, should have a major part to play in this process. This results from a particular conjuncture of factors as: the traditional educational role of advertising since the nineteenth century, the targeting work made by marketing specialists about the differentiation of subcategories among the big group of people over 50 that is traditional and questionable borderline for «old-age», the assumed attachment to brands of this group of population.

2 Advertising: A User's Manual for Life[1]

2.1 Brands and Advertising: An Education to Commodity

Brands and advertising are both the result, along with packaging, of the evolution of consumption during the nineteenth century first in USA, then in Europe. They were the result of the new relations manufacturers and growers wanted to create directly between them through their products and the consumers. At that time people were buying goods from grocers. The latter were the ones making the choice between products, buying them from producers and displaying them in their shops, counseling people about their qualities. The producers had to deal with the retailers who had the upper hand in market relations and transactions. Grocers were dealing with clients[2].

When manufacturers decided to take the lead in this system, they invented three elements to transform store clients into consumers of specific goods, in a process of commodification of the market. This is precisely when and why brands were invented. Manufacturers wanted people to go to the grocery store asking for a certain brand of wheat, sugar or oat, compelling the seller to add these specific brands to his stock. Then the link and the trust began to switch from grocers to brands. In a rather quick lapse of time, buyers who believed in their grocer's skills in the process of choice and his ability to undertake responsibility began to believe that a symbolic element, the brand attached to a product, had the same kind of power. This transition could not have occurred only with brands. Because they needed to be written on something, the packaging was developed and because people were to be informed of the brand and motivated to ask for them, advertising appeared too.

At the same time, brands needed to explain a whole set of commodities to consumers and to educate them to new ways of life in order to have them buy their products. It is well known that toothpaste and soap brands were leading actors in the explanation and the installation in everyday life of new habits such as brushing teeth, soaping oneself more than once in a while, giving good care to infants and toddlers, etc. More recently brand and advertising do the same with more specific points regarding life and food hygiene: they insist on the use of deodorant, shampoo against dandruff, health food as fruit and vegetable, etc.

2.2 Brands and Advertising: Education Through Stereotype[3]

Education can be seen as a paradoxical effect of brands and advertising. They achieve this in a very specific way that is linked to the advertising discourse system. Advertising is a highly particular type of discourse since it is submitted to a very complex set of constraints. Regardless of the country where it occurs, it happens to deal with external restrictions such as the ones coming from different sets of laws and self-regulation, the sociological and organizational operation of the inter-profession dedicated to the buying

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[1] This tille refers to the title of Georges Perec novel: Life, A User's Manual.

[2] All the elements about the birth of brands in USA and France are coming from [1].

[3] On these aspects see [2, 3].

and selling of advertising, and the fact that only a few words, a few seconds or a little space is needed to achieve persuasion.

All of these aspects, and others, put under pressure this plurisemiotic system. It ends in the production of highly condensed and oversized semiotic forms. The advertising discourse has to find a balance between all these strains and its first function to show off the brand. It needs a particular work on signs, a semiotic densification that explain some characteristics of advertising discourse: firstly, advertising is dedicated to selling, all is done in order to sell; secondly, advertising is a discourse that needs to exist, because people are not so willing to look at it; thirdly, advertising has to serve the brand and it always conveys the same message: my brand is the best [4].

At the same time a huge semiotic work is done to turn this ever the same message into something apparently different and naturalized. To achieve this, advertising discourse deals with collective imagination and uses very well known symbols and ready-made sentences. Both Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have the hypothesis, and we'll go in the same way, that people receive the complex system of advertising as a whole, something someone already knows because of intertextuality and/or stereotypy. As Eco puts it, it is a discourse that uses. Whatever will be the brand, the tone, spectacular, educational or informative, advertising is obliged to use stereotypes and sometimes to help to establish some of them.

3   Elderly: Apparition of a Class of Consumers

3.1   Where there Is as a Market, there Comes a Target: Teenagers and Senior Persons

The brand managers have, since the second half of the twentieth century, started to work on new markets to sell their products. First of all they have looked inside their own country towards new segment of population and sometimes they helped trough their «targeting» work to enhance the place of a type of people. For example, when teenagers began to appear as a specific age of life, soon enough, marketing people realized what it meant in terms of money reserve. Almost as they were recognized in society, first in USA, then in Europe, teenagers became a marketing target through a process of selection, construction and reduction that can change an executive young woman into an «under-50 housewife».

The whole society of consumption has evolved in the past sixty years scouting new segments of population with enough money to spend in all kinds of branded products. Advertising people have adapted their activity, collecting different stereotypes to speak to new people.

Regarding teenagers, a swelling literature from management psycho-sociological sciences is dedicated to the role of first children, then teenagers and young adults regarding consumption. For example, in France, teenagers appear as a marketing target worth the work at the beginning of the 90's. Since then marketing people are going towards an ever better refinement and creating new «fictions» as «adulescents», «X generation», «Y generation», «Millenials». All these targets are supposed to be a potential source of money because they are able to buy or to have influence [5]. But this is

not enough, these young people are supposed to build a specific link with brands during this highly complex time of life that is supposed to last for the rest of their life as consumers.

This is why brands take so much time, energy and care to try to understand how teenagers choose what they buy and what they want, even if the buyer is a parent or a grand-parent. This ever-changing generation is also thought as particularly at ease with IT products. They are even frequently surnamed «digital natives» as if they knew from the start how to «speak» the IT language. We can make fun of this, but this categorization is interesting because it induces that the rest of population, especially elderly, are in a second language situation. Taking for granted that young people can master any new IT products, the brands that advertise towards them tend to choose a specific way of doing it, going towards spectacular and aestheticized forms of advertising.

Advertising as an aesthetic mediation is due to E.Morin [6]. According to his analysis, the incentive aspects of advertising are based on a work about aesthetic, ludic and erotic springs that entice the public because it gives them a kind of pleasure. In this respect we can say that Nike brand, highly appreciated by teenagers works on an aesthetical mediation of sport. Everybody is able to reach as personal achievement. The Nike Fuel Band, a connected wristband, is also giving a view to even small but aesthetic personal performances.

Advertising is also a spectacular mediation and works on the show side. This is not dedicated to young targets but we can say that some brands have chosen to work the show on IT devices that give access to social media. Brands are ubiquitous in social media for the few last years. This presence is linked to different aims and accompanied by a string of commentaries. Mainly, the professional point of view has been focused on the idea that social medias enable a conversation supposedly based on transparency, equality of places and proximity. They depict a new Eldorado of pacified and non-hierarchical communication.

A content and discourse analysis of this exchanges show instead a one-way messaging system, comparable to stimulus/response. The brand initiates something and people are reacting, individually, without any brand feed back. It is a one-way system. At the same time this does not mean that nothing happens, communication happens even if it is not conversation. People tend to react to the brand proposal considering that this is an advertising show. We can say that, first, because most of the posts are in fact the written equivalents of cheers, claps, and laughs in other words, what people usually do when they enjoy a show in order to express their positive appreciation. Secondly, we can state that this show is acknowledged as advertising because they consider that (they write it openly) the discourse produced by these brands on their Facebook pages is fathered by advertisers and marketers.

Here lie several interesting points:

– The followers of these specific Facebook brand pages register in order to receive on an almost daily basis an advertising product they enjoy. This point is quite remarkable when we know that people are supposed to be repelled by marketing and advertising. This is one of the main arguments of conversation. Here some participants are freely asking and enjoying the show of advertising.

– Whenever they register, they freely accept to enter a state of "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge) that prove they fully consider advertising as fiction putting an end to the idea of the manipulation of consciousness. Advertising cannot lure people whenever they qualify it as fiction.
– These very same people commonly give their opinion about the value of this show, on its aesthetic aspects, its cohesion with the brand discourse and what they are waiting/wanting from these brands in terms of advertising quality.

But who knows how old they are?

3.2   Brands and Advertising, Converting Elderly to IT Products: Using Stereotype to Change Stereotype

What happened when the young ones, becoming a marketing target multiplied in a constellation of sub-targets, finally touched to the other end of the generational scale around the beginning of the twenty first century? Once Elderly were no target at all. Older people where supposed, even when mass consumption started fully first in North America during the Interwar period and in Western Europe in the 60's, not to enter consumption, especially for new products related new technology. They were thought too stuck to old ways and habits and difficult to convince because of a great suspicion towards advertising. Consumption was not the only field to think about older people in this way; many pieces of popular culture such as songs used to stress the fact[4] that old people had no curiosity, no dreams left.

But people born around World War 2 started to change this stereotype. They appear to stay «younger later» and most of all they still had money to spend after retirement. This opened a new field of expectation for marketing people who developed first a single new target named "senior". A bunch of specific products were launched: magazines, radios, TV broadcasts and programs, specific food etc. They appeared in more and more commercials for cars, insurance, banking, and rather expensive goods[5]. On this matter, advertising began the work of stereotypy, choosing carefully nice looking not so old people, very dynamic, beautifully tanned, hair brand white, doing with great joy and smile physically demanding activities. The senior target was a very acceptable socio-marketing construct artifact using a stereotype to replace the previous one. The new representation spread by commercials depicting people looking forward future with confidence and buying power. As Alyette Defrance put it, instead of becoming old these "seniors" appeared as "still young" (Fig. 1).

Along with this new era representing elderly in advertising, the commercial discourse chose a very old way to ensure an optimal communication with this huger and huger part of occidental countries population: communication tending towards education. Dedicated and general media are now commonly containing advertorials on topics linked to various health issues such as cholesterol, osteoporosis, and digestive wellness.

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[4] This is underlined by Alyette Defrance with the analysis of the differences between a Jacques Brel song and songs from 2000 [7].
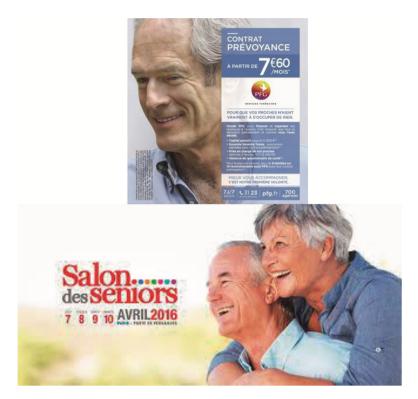[5] These elements of analysis [7].

Fig. 1. Advertisings including «young» elderly and advertising for Funeral Planning Insurance

As once sugar was presented as a healthy food for kids and hard-working people and chocolate as well, nowadays specific brands of margarine enriched with omega-3 or 6 fatty acid, yogurt with vitamin D or bifidus lactobacillus take time and space to present the dietary problems due to aging, their source in body metabolism and how the manufactured products launched on market food can help balancing the problems if not cure them. Whenever one takes time to read these advertorials, they appear to be truly informative, achieving a work of popularization about these topics along with TV and radio programs or magazine articles. They give elements related to scientific knowledge and appear or look like pages torn apart from a popular encyclopedia.

Then came the time, at the end of the twentieth century for sub-targeting in the elderly kingdom. Thus appeared, in the first instance the "very old people" or "fourth age" or "oldest old", their markets and advertising messages, less euphoric than the one dedicated to senior, dealing with retirement homes, life insurances, enuresis, funerals, etc. Even in this case, stereotypes are present. If we analyze the very common TV commercials about what French call «convention obsèques», that is to say funeral planning insurances, we can see that they deal with the announced death of the subscriber through the use of other themes that make it work: death is dodged or understated. These advertising messages show not so old people, still in shape, training in sport, gardening, participating in cultural activities who are caring to avoid imposing further worry to

their loved ones. But, at the same time, they stay consumers, even after death, choosing for themselves the proper standard. They can master the whole process regarding rituals, materials, and the location of the grave. Consumption and customization stay distinctive signs even for a deceased.

But stereotype is still there. Taken as a whole, these TV commercials are based on a few variations: the subscriber is still a "young senior", sometimes with no white hair; whenever their children are speaking instead of them, they don't seem, physically, so different from the previous ones. Discourses are using some linguistic cliché like "with the loss of a loved one", and so on. On this very theme IT products and productions appear with the online condolences. Something must have changed about IT and elderly.

IT products, being the most quickly changing part of technological latest innovation, were supposed to be prohibitive for elderly. They were meant not to be able to cope with

Fig. 2. Advertorial about cholesterol in French magazine Pleine Vie, mars 2016

these new devices such as cellular phones, laptop and tablet computers. But, in this respect, marketing people have lagged behind the new kind of elderly they contributed to put into the light. Apart from the intergenerational link between grandparents and their grandchildren, TV commercials tend to deal, even now, with elderly people still in the old stereotype of technophobia. They don't want to use these devices, they are suspicious about the service offer that comes with them and are supposed, even young as they look, to need the help of a young one or a teenager to use IT products, with reluctance and as a little time as possible.

Brand managers and advertisers have partly missed the point about how people become old and most of all how they dealt, all their lifelong, with IT change, from radio to TV to tape-recorder, CD's, streaming, from video-recorder, to DVD and blue-ray players and then router boxes. At work, they swung to everyday use of computers and web services and kept on using it after retirement coping with new devices as was necessary (Fig. 2).

4   Elderly, the New Frontier for Advertisers

It seems that the future challenge for marketing and advertising professionals is to understand fully the elderly they still too much categorize as a whole, especially when it comes to IT products. The newcomers in the class of age are totally users of IT devices and will go on like this for a while, inventing new uses, and new sociabilities. It is a challenge to be able to keep these very well trained, experienced consumers that do not stick to international brands as oldest old people do.

The question is to know how to deal between educational, spectacular and aesthetical advertising discourses.

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