**How to Market to an Aging Boomer: Flattery, Subterfuge and Euphemism**

By Ellen Byron

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When baby boomers call ADT Security Services Inc. with questions about medical-alert alarms, they get operators specially trained to be sensitive to their needs. Top of the list: Don't remind them that they've aged.

"Boomers are used to being independent, and they get agitated if you're talking too slowly," says Barry Primm, an ADT home-health team manager who trains new operators to speak quickly and get to the point with these callers. "They just want to get it done, fast and business-like."

The generation that sent diaper sales soaring in the 1960s, bought power suits in the 1980s and indulged in luxury cars in the 2000s is getting ready to retire: The oldest boomers turn 65 this year. To accommodate their best customers' needs, American companies are overhauling product lines, changing their marketing and redesigning store layouts.

But there's a catch: Baby boomers, famously demanding and rebellious, don't want anyone suggesting they're old.

"We don't do anything to remind boomers that they are getting older," says Ken Romanzi, North America chief operating officer at Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc., which has targeted the health-conscious generation as its primary consumer base.

Surreptitiously, companies are making typefaces larger, lowering store shelves to make them more accessible and avoiding yellows and blues in packaging—two colors that don't appear as sharply distinct to older eyes.

Invesco Van Kampen Consulting, an arm of Invesco Ltd., suggests financial advisers offer coffee cups with handles instead of Styrofoam (easier to hold), use lamps instead of overhead lights (less glare), and turn off the television when clients visit (background noise hampers hearing), says Scott West, a managing director.

Euphemisms are flourishing. ADT, owned by Tyco International Ltd., is marketing its medical-alert system to aging consumers as "Companion Services."

[Kimberly-Clark](http://quotes.wsj.com/KMB) Corp.'s [KMB +0.38%](http://quotes.wsj.com/KMB) [**KMB**](http://quotes.wsj.com/KMB) **in** Your Value Your Change Short position Depend brand, widely considered adult diapers in the past, has had a makeover in a new TV ad: "Looks and fits like underwear. Protects like nothing else."

Bathroom-fixture maker Kohler Co. struggled to come up with a more palatable word for "grab bar," which boomers resist. It introduced the "Belay" shower handrail—named for the rock-climbing technique—which blends subtly into the wall of a tiled shower. "When you say, 'We've got beautiful grab bars,' [boomers] just say, 'Naw,' because they don't want to identify as needing that," says Diana Schrage, senior interior designer at Kohler's design center.

In the past, most big consumer products companies didn't specifically target senior citizens, since people over 65 traditionally spent less and resisted trying new products. But many marketers believe the baby boom generation—born between 1946 and 1964—will turn that conventional wisdom upside down.

The 76 million boomers already account for an estimated half of total U.S. consumer spending. With longer life expectancy and lower savings rates than previous seniors, they are projected to spend an additional $50 billion over the next decade, according to market-research firm SymphonyIRI. Rather than passing on their wealth to future generations, they're expected to splurge mostly on themselves as they move households and pursue active lifestyles.

"As a generation, they're large enough that they expect to be served uniquely as they age," says Sean Seitzinger, an analyst formerly with SymphonyIRI. "That's very different from the generations before them."

To be sure, companies catering to seniors face drawbacks. The recession whittled down many boomer nest eggs, requiring them to save more and rein in spending. By its very nature, an aging boomer demographic will shrink every year as the oldest members die.

Nevertheless, the generation that drove the growth of hula hoops, bell bottoms and personal computers will continue to be an influential market as it ages.

Companies are currently adjusting their approaches to new demands. Boomers are much more concerned with a product's appearance, for example, not just its utility. Kleenex recently redesigned its boxes to have fewer floral bouquets and more contemporary designs, photos and the latest hues. There is less difference in aesthetic taste between young people and boomers than there is between boomers and their elders, says Christine Mau, a design director at Kimberly-Clark, which owns Kleenex. "If boomers were acting as their predecessors did, we wouldn't be as trend-forward as we are today," says Ms. Mau.

Carol Roberts, 65 years old, is a retired elementary school teacher in Leland, N.C. But that doesn't mean she wants to behave like a "senior citizen," she says. She's using her retirement to travel and volunteer with schools and community groups. She lifts weights and does other frequent workouts to stay in shape.

She also wants to stay fashionable. "I don't want to look like I'm in my teens or 20s, but I want to look current," she says. "To me, it's really important to look your best, and not just say 'I'm over 65, therefore it doesn't matter what I look like.'"

To attract customers like Ms. Roberts, nuance is key.

Kimberly-Clark spent two years overhauling its Depend brand, anticipating boomers would demand changes to the image and design of a line long considered too diaper-like and institutional. By 2020, Kimberly-Clark expects 45 million boomers will need incontinence products, up from 38 million currently.

"Past generations were more accepting that they had a condition, and this was the product that they have to wear," says Mark Cammarota, Depend's brand director. "The boomers don't have that attitude. They demand and expect more."

In an effort to modernize its designs, Depend has introduced gender-specific versions and briefs with fashionable prints that imitate regular underwear. Some Depend packaging is labeled "underwear" and disguised to look like packs of cloth underwear, including transparent windows that show Depend undergarments folded just like regular briefs. The smaller packs hang on hooks instead of stacked on shelves like diapers.

When casting for recent Depend ads, the brand looked for actors who appeared to be in their early 50s, a far cry from the brand's former white-haired spokeswoman, June Allyson, who sometimes portrayed a grandmother.

The new ads—which launched last month—feature a fit and flirtatious man in a coffee shop and a fashionable woman strutting down a sidewalk while tossing her hair, not a gray strand in sight.

"We're very subtle in that we don't have to explain the problem and solution in the ads," says Mr. Cammarota. "Boomers like seeing the confidence part of it."

Despite concerns inside the company that the actors were too young to be believable, focus groups of boomers didn't mind a bit, says Mr. Cammarota.

A big driver of boomers' increased spending is the fact that over one-third plan to move to a new home within five years of becoming empty nesters, according to SymphonyIRI. Many more are expected to adapt their homes to better accommodate diminishing mobility, all in hopes of maintaining the independent lifestyles they have embraced since their rebellious teenage years.

"A lot of boomers have been downsizing into new homes, and when you move into a new home, you need to redecorate, which is a very good thing for us," says Ellen Moreau, vice president of marketing for [Sherwin-Williams](http://quotes.wsj.com/SHW) Co.

Sherwin-Williams, mindful of boomers' sensitivity about aging and not wanting to limit its customer base to one demographic, has subtly redesigned its 3,400 stores to make them more comfortable to older browsers. They now have more lighting and seating and serve coffee in most locations. Product displays feature less fine print, hence fewer squinting shoppers. The company believes the subtle changes will be appreciated by all age groups, including younger shoppers.

That's how 63-year-old Lynn Donadio prefers it. "Companies don't have to go to the highest mountain to shout out that something is made for a baby boomer," says Ms. Donadio, a retired real-estate agent in Long Valley, N.J. "They can go to the top of a hill and maybe whisper it."

After noticing older shoppers struggling to read its cat-litter packaging, Arm & Hammer began sharpening the color contrast for the text and gradually increasing the font size, which is now about 20% bigger than it was five years ago.

"Our research shows that 60% of boomers who are near 65 claim to feel much younger than their actual age," says David Cohen, vice president of the home-care division of Church & Dwight Co., which owns the Arm & Hammer brand. "So you provide a solution to issues that they may have, but it's not an explicit message," Mr. Cohen says.

[Diamond Foods](http://quotes.wsj.com/DMND) Inc. [DMND -0.52%](http://quotes.wsj.com/DMND) [**DMND**](http://quotes.wsj.com/DMND) **in** Your Value Your Change Short position carefully engineered the packaging of its Emerald snack nut line to accommodate the declining agility of baby boomers' hands. But no such boast appears anywhere on the green plastic canisters.

"We're very careful not to come across as preachy," says Andrew Burke, Diamond Foods' chief marketing officer. "Boomers have a filter that says, 'If you're trying to sell me too hard, then I'm not sure about your intentions.'"

Diamond, which long sold nuts for baking, finalized plans to enter the snack nut category after research found doctors were advising boomers to incorporate nuts into healthy eating plans. To differentiate their product from entrenched competitors, Emerald executives focused on making their packages easy to use.

Indented sides make the canisters comfortable to hold, and grooves make the lids easier to grip. After noticing that arthritic users struggled to twist the cap into place, Emerald shortened the required rotation.

Emerald, introduced in 2004, now has about 6% of the $3 billion U.S. snack nut category, or about $193 million in sales, according to 2009 estimates by market-research firm Euromonitor International Inc.

Like Sherwin-Williams, other retailers have been quietly adapting to aging customers. CVS Caremark Corp. has retrofitted stores with carpeting to reduce slipping. Shelves have been lowered to 60 inches, from 72 inches, and signs no longer have plaster windows, allowing more natural light in stores to improve visibility. Wherever possible, curbs are eliminated from store entrances, and existing curbs are painted yellow to heighten awareness.

In the basement of a nondescript office building in Appleton, Wis., Kimberly-Clark has built a mockup of what it thinks a senior-friendly store aisle might look like in the future. The company believes it's crucial to overhaul these aisles or boomers will resist going into what had been considered an "old person's" section of the store.

The mock store aisles pair incontinence products and other personal-care items not associated solely with senior citizens, such as body washes and razors so boomers don't feel like they are in an age-specific section of the store. "This way it appears that it's all about your hygiene routine," says Deborah Hannah, Kimberly-Clark's integrated marketing planning director.

Over the past two years, [Walgreen](http://quotes.wsj.com/WAG) Co. [WAG +0.11%](http://quotes.wsj.com/WAG) [**WAG**](http://quotes.wsj.com/WAG) **in** Your Value Your Change Short position has been gradually adapting its 7,655 stores to be more friendly to aging boomers.

Subtle changes make it easier to navigate stores. Many stores have positioned magnifying glasses in aisles that carry products like household cleaners, hair color and cold medicine that use lots of fine print. Reading glasses are getting snazzier, too, now that the chain updates styles more frequently. "This customer is focused not just on function but on fashion," says Robert Tompkins, Walgreen's divisional vice president and general merchandise manager.

Walgreen has introduced easier-to-open packages on its private-label painkillers and incontinence products, and expanded its vitamin aisles.

"The boomers are much more focused on enhancing their well-being versus just trying to address being sick, as the prior generation might have been," Mr. Tompkins says.

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