

Tapping into the grey market

Marketing guru Simon Silvester has seen an alarming trend among businesses: they're missing out by failing in their marketing aimed at older customers. Luckily, he has the solutions. By **Robert Dineen**

Simon Silvester has written a short book that everyone attempting to market their business today should read. It's called *You're Getting Old*, but you shouldn't let the confrontational title put you off. Because the problem it addresses is a crucial one. And it's one that could just see your business sink or swim.

When markets change

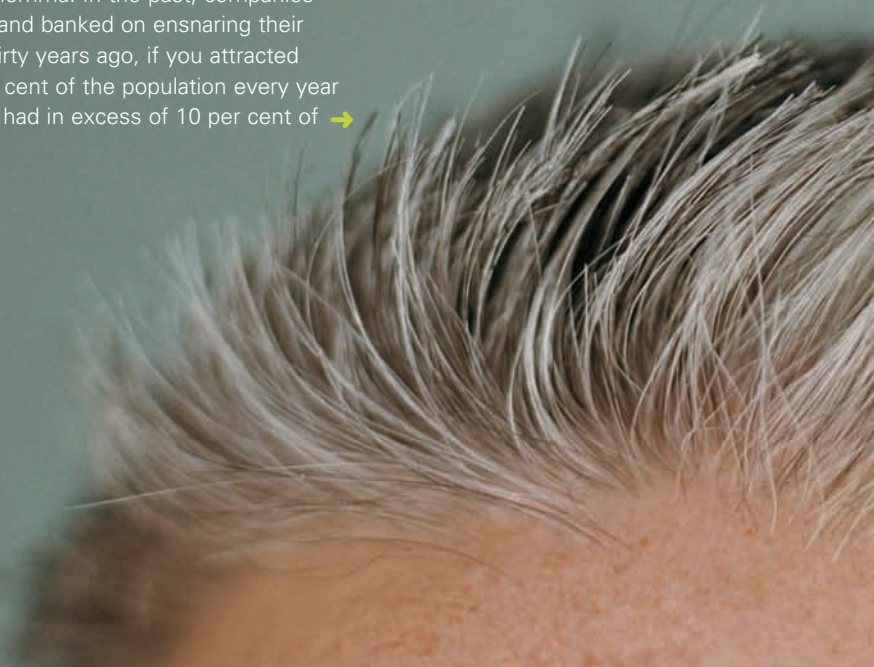
The world's population, Silvester explains, is gradually ageing. Statistics show that the baby boom generation of the 1940s and 1950s has grown up and now outnumbers the young. In 1960s Europe, 3.5 per cent of adults were aged 20. Today that figure is 2 per cent and is decreasing fast. By 2020 in Germany, for example, it will be a worrying 1.3 per cent.

This presents a dilemma. In the past, companies targeted the young and banked on ensnaring their business for life. Thirty years ago, if you attracted the youthful 3.5 per cent of the population every year for three years, you had in excess of 10 per cent of →

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The ageing of Europe is not just a crisis for governments, but for businesses too – large and small

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An older customer's investment horizon is shorter. If they waste money, they have less time to recuperate it. So they need to know they're spending it wisely



the population in your pocket. Appeal to 2 per cent of the population for three consecutive years today, however, and, well, it doesn't look quite as good.

So a company that works with new technology – such as digital print – must run a different tactic. It must, as Silvester argues, learn to market to older, as well as younger, people. And that is not easy.

A new breed of old customer

“Even if an older person's level of technological understanding is good, they fear they will be written off as technophobes because of their grey hair,” Silvester says, when we meet in his office in Euston, north London. “And because digital print will be new to many older customers, they will need a lot of reassurance and support when you deal with them.”

Better, too, to avoid discussing the technology that you will use for the job. “Rather than wowing them with how you're going to do the job, you should focus on how you're going to do the end product. Talk about the perfect print quality, for instance, rather than the 1,200dpi printing – otherwise you might scare them.”

It is also important to focus on the quality of digital print because an older customer is likely to be more demanding. While young adults are prepared to take risks – they often look to do so – the more mature want to know only that they are spending wisely. “An older person's investment horizon is a lot shorter. If they waste money, they have less time to recuperate it so want to ensure they invest it correctly.

“So, for example, rather than discussing typefaces for a golden wedding invitation, quickly compose one on a screen and, maybe, ask them to contribute in the design. That way, they will feel in control.”

Keep it simple

There is an art to selling the quality of a product. Offer too much choice and you will put off a customer, particularly if they are intimidated by a new product. “I'm always struck that Virgin only has one pension plan, which it makes it easier to buy into,” says Silvester. “Rather than reel off 500 undifferentiated options to older customers, which will throw them into a tizz, offer them six good ones.”

What about those older customers who are comfortable with new technology? Many of them will have climbed to the top of their profession and will need to embrace new ideas to stay there. How do you sell a digital process, say, to a senior manager who has the authority to invest in a company's print run?

“A lot of marketing is about keeping in touch,” he says. “You just need to do so effectively. I'm on the mailing list of a lot of printers and – this is bad – there's a tendency to write a 10-paragraph letter and just send it. So you get what looks like junk mail. It would be better to demonstrate, say, the power of personalised printing. Rather than say how great what you do is, show them what you can do. Send them personalised office mouse mats, for example.”

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