



The **50-Plus** Blind Spot

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Marketers just don't "get it" about the need to understand the 50-plus online consumer

Research from AutoPacific shows that over a lifetime, the average American household purchases 13 cars. More than half of these are bought after the head of the household turns 50.

The same research concludes that many 50-plus couples intend to add a third vehicle to their family fleet that will be "inspirational": a new car that displays their personal style. The pattern of car purchase in Europe is very similar. In the United Kingdom, more than half of all new cars are bought by the 50-plus.

You would think that automotive companies would be refining their marketing channels to appeal to the older customer. A brief review of car manufacturer's web sites reveals that nothing could be further from the truth.

Lexus was the clear winner of J.D. Power and Associates' recently released 2006 Web Site Evaluation Study. The number of people giving the site a low score was the smallest percentage ever recorded. Volkswagen's web site received the worst score.

“Vehicle shoppers come to automotive sites with a wide range of shopping patterns, Internet skills, Internet connections, computer configurations, automotive understanding and automotive vocabulary,” said Dennis Galbraith, J.D. Power and Associates senior director of digital marketing solutions. Galbraith should have mentioned that they span a wide range of ages.

Marketers have no excuse for their indifferent and ineffective response to older, online consumers

Most web sites are built by the young for the young and take little account of the special requirements of older people. This might

be acceptable for a web site exclusively used by young people, but it is naïve when sites attract visitors of all ages. It is marketing madness when the majority of customers are 50 or older.

A brief inspection of the Lexus web site (www.lexus.com) shows it to be simple, easy to use, well organized and designed around answering the questions a prospective purchaser would ask. It is unremarkably professional.

The Lexus site is low on animation and high on facts. In general, this is a good combination for Boomers. Lexus even provides a feature in which you can compare Lexus cars with other manufacturer's models. If you are want to know about the features and specs of a Lexus car, you get it on a single page that you can print. Getting the same information from the Volkswagen site (www.volkswagen.com) involves fighting your way through multiple screens, each being animation heavy and factually light.

The VW web site is packed full of animation and clever imagery, with lots of dynamic navigation. The site contains all the information car purchasers require—if they have the time, patience and inclination to look.

Web designers will love the site; clearly, car purchasers don't. (For some inexplicable reason, Volkswagen's European web sites are far simpler and customer-orientated.)

You might argue that Lexus and VW are aiming at different markets and age of customers. This may or may not be true. Surprisingly, the requirement of using web sites does not differ by age as much as most

people think. The web usability guru, Jakob Nielsen, found that the sites teenagers rated the highest for subjective satisfaction had relatively modest, clean designs. Excessively glitzy sites were marked down as being difficult to use (Teenagers on the Web: 60 Usability Guidelines for Creating Compelling Websites for Teens, Jan. 31, 2005). This is one area where teenagers and their parents agree!

Even so, marketers must understand that aging may not alter people's attitudes, but it creates physical changes influencing how

If a web site annoys and frustrates it damages the company's brand

they use the web. I've been consulting on the Boomer market for five years and found most marketers don't understand, or care about, the effects of the aging process.

Unfortunately, aging results in a decline in short-term memory, failing eyesight and problems with precision movement. In addition to these physical factors are the age-related design issues of a web site's style of language, type of content and choice of the iconography. These conditions span all races, income and social groups.

Hopefully, marketers have abandoned the notion that aging is related to technophobia. Nearly three-quarters of people aged 50 to 59 are Internet users (the proportion drops to only 56 percent for those aged 60 to 69). Making web sites "50-plus friendly" should be a no-brainer.

When the Nielsen Norman Group, a leading web usability consultancy, researched the effects of aging, it found that, on average, web sites are twice as hard for seniors to use as they are for their sons and daughters.

Making a web site "50-plus friendly" involves more than a hundred marketing and design considerations. None of these are difficult to implement or constrain the creativity of the web site's design. Most importantly, they do not add to the cost of the site.

The biggest bonus for marketers is that a web site designed to be usable for an older audience is more effective for all ages of user.

The things that will have the most influence on a web site's usability have to do with animation, navigation and design elements:

Confusing animation: Stuffing a web site with animated eye-candy might delight the site designer, but it just annoys the older user.

Poor navigation: A web site's navigation must be immediately understandable and consistent. Wherever possible, it should reflect the "goals" that people have when they visit a site.

Poor use of design elements: There is a long list of well-proven "dos and don'ts" about colours, colour combinations, fonts, font sizes and image sizes for older audiences. Often designers don't know or ignore these guidelines. AARP's Older Wiser Wired Initiative provides a library of useful resources (www.aarp.org/olderwiserwired).

Web sites are about satisfying the customer. They are not corporate ego-trips or things to amuse Web designers

With an increasing share of marketing budget moving online, the challenge of building interactive marketing

channels that work for all ages of customers increases. The days when the web was the province of the young are long gone.

So, is your web site "50-plus friendly"? Make sure you raise this question at your next marketing meeting.

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