

Why Do Advertisers Still Covet the 18-49s?

A TV veteran recommends revising the conventional wisdom about demographics. | **By Earl Pomerantz**

This is not a new story, but it is a continuing one.

For decades, whenever I read an article about television ratings that references the 18-49 demographic, that reference is inevitably followed by the phrase, “the group most coveted by advertisers.” Google all the articles discussing the 18-49 demographic in television and I promise you, all of them, with rare exceptions, will include the now wearisome clarification “the group most coveted by advertisers” or “the demographic advertisers drool over,” “the Holy Grail of advertising obsession,” or something of that nature. It’s always mentioned. Every time.

Message to media writers: We got it. Advertisers like the 18-49 demographic. More than “like.” More than “love” even. They “covet” it. To me, “covet” triggers images of some wild-eyed zealot targeting an age group with a single-minded fanaticism – “I want those people!!!” It sounds unhealthy. Check the Ten Commandments on “coveting.” They’re not in favor.

Commandments aside, advertisers

do want those people. And the reason I know that, besides the fact that media writers keep hammering it into my head, is that the airwaves are saturated with the consequences of that desire. Shows, commercials, programming decisions from casting to costuming to who writes the scripts, everything on the air is focused on attracting that Coveted Demographic.

Why do they want them? Lyle Schwartz, head of marketplace analysis at Media Edge, an ad-placement company, explains very simply: “The younger audience is worth more.” By “worth more” he’s referring to that group’s value to his clients, the people with something to sell. And why is the younger audience worth more? “The older population is seen as brand loyal; it’s harder to get them to change their purchasing habits.”

Garry Hart, who served 11 years as president of network television at Paramount Studios, admits that programmers develop shows for this targeted demographic because “It’s the

advertisers who are writing the check.”

A television insider specializing in research, who insisted on anonymity, described the situation more graphically: “The networks are the bitches of the advertisers.” You can understand his insistence on anonymity.

Okay. Three sources concur. Advertising’s not the tail that wags the dog, it’s pretty much the entire dog. The shows are the candy calculated to pull in the Coveted Demographic; they come for the candy, they watch the commercials – ka-ching, ka-ching – everybody’s happy.

The Television Insider tells us: “On the whole, the advertisers want to reach people who will change their minds.”

How much available cash does the coveted 18-49 demographic actually have for the products they’re being enticed to snap up?

Rules, rules, rules. The young aren’t brand loyal. The young more easily change their minds. The young will be loyal longer because they’ve got more years to live. Though nothing’s written in stone (except the Ten Commandments), the rules of advertising come very close, unchanging and unquestioned. And the rules rule the process. The advertisers cry out:

“Make shows for the young!”

And the networks reply:

“You got it!”

In a world in constant transition, hard and fast rules can be seriously counterproductive. So what’s going on? The Television Insider confides: “The business models are still based on a 20-year-old mentality, because there’s

a fear of change.”

To me, these models ignore certain questions. First, there’s the question of buying power. How much available cash does the coveted 18-49 demographic actually have for the products they’re being enticed to snap up? Second, given the upgraded technology, TiVo and the like, not to mention the good old-fashioned remote, how many young consumers actually sit through the commercials they’ve been rounded up to enjoy? And thirdly, with the proliferation of other options to attract this demo’s attention – video games, the Internet, phones with every possible function, not to mention partying – what percentage of the Highly Coveted have any interest in watching

television, particularly network television, at all? This includes, at the higher reaches of the demographic, overworked singles and exhausted parents, who

at the end of the day have barely the energy to crawl into bed. The current passion for placing products within the bodies of the shows will have little effect if the coveted viewership is otherwise engaged, or asleep.

Nor is the demo’s enthusiasm for the networks likely to be rekindled. Leaving aside the quality of the shows, never scintillating at the best of times, networks are constrained by the rules under which they operate. Legislation, passed decades before “demographics” was ever mentioned, places networks at the mercy of pressure groups of every stripe, Left, Right and wacky. Pressure groups pressure the government, who pressures the networks on matters of content and its expression, strangling

creativity and perpetuating the bland. There's a reason *The Sopranos* is on HBO and not on ABC. There's a reason *South Park* is on unregulated cable's Comedy Central and not on NBC. With these limitations, the networks have little hope of delivering shows a younger generation, raised on more risky entertainment, are likely to enjoy.

Ad agencies are not dumb. Slow to change, maybe, but not dumb. Many of them, hungry for the demo they most covet, are moving where the demos moved – away from the networks. As far back as 2004, *Business Week*, doing a cover story on “the vanishing mass market,” revealed that major advertisers such as Coca Cola, American Express and Pfizer had started introducing their latest products not on the networks, as they always had, but on the Internet, on radio, on billboards and in narrowly targeted magazines. At the same time, advertisers continue to urge the networks to make shows for the audience their research tells them has drifted away. And the networks comply. That might be dumb.

Yet understandable. Television's not completely “Gone fishin.” As ad maven Lyle Schwartz reminds us: “Television's still the largest audience out there.” But who exactly are they? Are the majority of network TV watchers members of the most highly coveted demographic? Or are they – just a thought here – their parents?

The over-50 demographic is not the one most coveted by advertisers. They're at worst despised or at best taken for granted. Why taken for granted? Ad maven Schwartz reports: “From a programming standpoint, programmers think an older person will accept a younger person, but not

vice versa.” Another rule.

As a result, few if any programs offer as their stars any character over 50. In half-hour comedies, an area where I have the greatest familiarity, the older generation is virtually invisible. And if they're present, playing parents of the contemporaries of Coveted Demographic, over-50 characters are depicted in the most unflattering light you can imagine.

Monsters and maniacs. Lunatics on parade. The ego-crushing mother in *Two and a Half Men*. The *Crumbs* matriarch recently sprung from the booby hatch. Then there's the father on *Out of Practice*, a wimpy philanderer – yay, Dad. Monsters, maniacs and morons – and nothing else. If parents were a minority group, there'd be rioting in the streets.

Why are parents portrayed so horrifically? First of all, since advertisers discount them as consumers, there is no downside to presenting them in a negative light. Secondly, and more importantly, this is the way the demo they're trying to appeal to wants parents to be portrayed. Sitcoms, written by younger writers, possibly in the payback mode, offer hideous parental examples as a shorthand explanation for their current state of affairs: “No wonder I'm screwed up; look at who raised me.” In early television, when parents were the targeted demographic, it was the other way around – the fathers knew best and the kids were all flawed. Whatever the generation, advertisers, through their network proxies, provide the coveted consumer what they're always happy to receive: flattering images.

The trouble is, the kids aren't watching. The parents are watching. And all they see are reflections of their

twisted and demented selves. Why do they keep watching? Many don't anymore. Over-50's can only take so much abuse before escaping to the House and Garden Network. But a surprising number are still tuning in. Why? Because the older generation, criticized earlier for being "brand loyal,"

remains loyal to the network brand. It's what they grew up with. They're used to inoffensive programming. Over-50's also have the time to watch and, with the kids out of the way, discretionary income to spend.

Yes, but if the over-50's are "brand loyal" to networks, aren't they equally loyal to everything else? Yes and no. For example, I have a strong allegiance to Spoon-Sized Shredded Wheat (this isn't "product placement" in an article, it's my cereal of choice.) So you can't sell me breakfast food. On the other hand, which cell-phone company are the over-50's branded to? – they just invented them last Tuesday. My wife drives a hybrid – a new kind of car. Printers, fax machines, places where you can buy stocks without a broker, how can you be resistant to products and services they never had before? The persuasion bank is open. Advertisers, start your engines.

Still, Conventional Wisdom says older people aren't interested in new things, because they're old. Here I make a proposal, which I can't prove statistically, but which I sense from observation is true. When you're talking about the over-50 demographic today, you're including a recently arrived group called Baby Boomers. Not only

Over-50's have time to watch and, with the kids out of the way, discretionary income to spend.

the largest demographic of all time, but also the one that's been advertised to since birth. Baby Boomers never met a trend they didn't like. They were the first targeted teenagers. They're the first group who refuses to get old. And how do they stay young? By climbing on bandwagons and consuming new

things. What I'm saying is this is not your father's old people; it's your father, but he's a different kind of old.

With this in mind, is there any chance of a change in programming strategy? Time buyer Schwartz opines: "I don't see network television in prime time saying, 'We're going to skew old.'" Even though the younger audience is diminishing? "When network advertising ceases to work, the money moves on to other media where it's more effective." This is advertising's promise to television – "We're with you 'til we're not."

Garry Hart, the former studio boss now hoping to sell shows of his own, wonders if perhaps the demographic model for deciding what to make might itself be the problem. "The Conventional Wisdom is that young adults only want to watch shows about young adults. Conventional Wisdom sometimes is wrong."

Hart cites the example of *The Golden Girls*, where the characters were old and older, but the show was a hit with everyone, including the young. How did it get on? "I wonder if it will appeal to young adults?" That question wasn't asked back then." Hart mentions his kids' apathy toward current sitcoms, where characters are closer to their age,

but are fans of the older sitcoms on *Nick at Night* where they're not. His insight paraphrases the wisdom of the '92 Democratic campaign: "It's the quality, stupid!"

Concerning the fleeing Coveted Demographic, his proposal is a simple one: "If we make really, really, good television, maybe we can get them back."

The final word comes from the *Television Insider*: "The adult 18-49 demographic in the next 20 to 30 years is going to increase by 2 per cent. In the same time period, the 'fifty-plus' generation will increase by 40 per cent." So television will adjust to these changes, right? Don't hold your breath. "I don't think it's going to happen for a long time," the *Insider* predicts. "We

should appeal to over-50 people, but as long as the advertisers dictate the demographic they want, nobody will change," their reluctance due to the aforementioned fear and "the illogical nature of this business."

It's almost impossible to get people to revisit conventional wisdom, especially when there's still money being made by leaving things alone. But maybe it's time advertisers took a deep, relaxing breath and a careful second look. There's a chance, bordering on a likelihood, that advertisers are coveting a demographic lacking substantial buying power who have permanently "left the building" and ignoring another demographic, with money to spend, that continues to watch.

A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz was executive producer of *The Cosby Show*. He is a veteran television comedy writer whose credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy awards, a Writers' Guild award, a Humanitas Prize and a Cable Ace award. He has written commentaries on television for *The Los Angeles Times* and will be lecturing at major college campuses on the subject of this article.