

GIBBS & SOELL

# Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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## Identity Crisis: Breaking the *Mad Men* Mindset

Some C-suite executives believe little has changed since the *Mad Men* days of advertising, when the industry began to leverage the “science” of consumer research to drive the “sizzle” of creative art and copywriting for better marketing results.

Although some of those pioneering demographic research efforts – such as focus groups and broadcast audience measurement – survive in some form today, marketers, communicators and the media are now wrestling with the challenge of re-engineering the process to achieve greater relevancy and accuracy.

The preference for marketing to audience segments defined by decades-old research is a misguided illusion that soon will be shattered by sweeping changes in the population.

### Counting Heads

In a few months the U.S. Census Bureau will again set out to fulfill its constitutional mandate to count everyone living in the United States. Considered by many to be the mother lode of U.S. demographic research, census data forms the basis for critical government decisions on federal funding, resources and legislative representation that affect the inner workings of communities and businesses.

The survey and its findings will no doubt be a source of heated public debate. The far-reaching impact of the 2010 census on business decisions like financial planning and risk assessment, future transportation and housing needs, and development of rural and urban areas is a major reason that many C-suite executives will be closely watching the outcome.

However, when the Census Bureau begins releasing the data in spring 2011, one fact will be indisputable. The face of the consumer has changed.

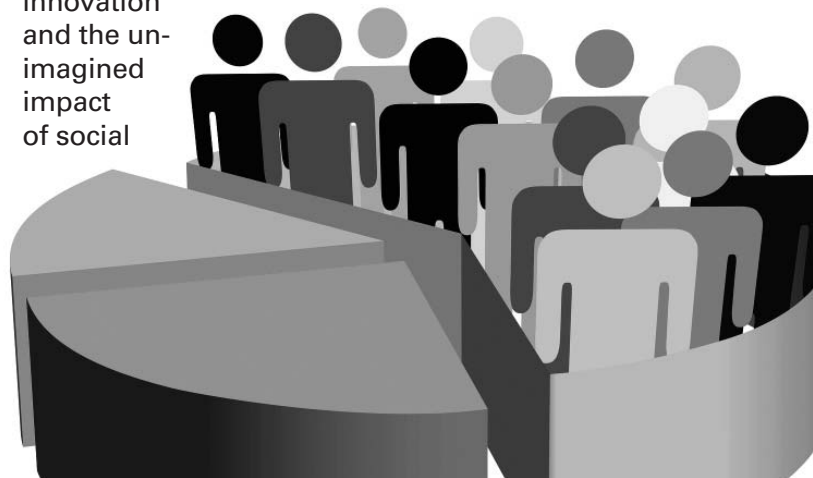
### “Ah Ha” Moment

The country’s population has undergone a seismic shift in the last 10 years. We are much more diverse, complex, and fragmented than ever before. In exploring the potential marketing implications of the 2010 census, Bradley Johnson wrote in a recent issue of *Advertising Age*, “The message to marketers in clear: No single demographic, or even handful of demographics, neatly defines the nation. There is no such thing as ‘the American consumer’”.

Johnson’s article pointed out some of the anticipated shifts, including the rise of childless married couples, followed closely by single-person households, as the most common types of U.S. households. It is predicted that married couples with kids will account for only 22% of households.

And therein may lie the “ah ha” moment for many executives. They will be confronted with the magnitude of the demographic shift and its potential impact on business. The 1960s macro-categories glorified by the series *Mad Men* and its time-encapsulated views of household units and consumers (male/female, young/old, urban/rural, rich/poor, black/white/Hispanic) will be of little to no value. They will have been replaced by a dramatically different set of household characteristics, values and influences.

Add to the mix the effect of an exploding online population, the whiplash-inducing pace of technology innovation and the unimagined impact of social



media, and the whole marketing communications paradigm has just been upended.

This is not to say that traditional marketing vehicles with broader reach such as newspapers, television, radio, and magazines will no longer be effective and will disappear. They will continue to play distinct roles in the overall marketing mix for the foreseeable future. But the dominance of mass media has changed because digital and social media are often more effective ways to reach today's diverse and fragmented customer base.

## Unleash the Niche

One of the fundamental changes in this new world order is that power has shifted to the individual. It is harder to hit broad demographic categories en masse with a single media placement, piece of collateral, or advertisement, which presents both the opportunity and the challenge.

Companies must deliver content that is truly tailored to the individual's needs, wants and preferred channels. Communicators must also help their target audience put smaller snippets of information into context quickly and efficiently, else run the risk of being tuned out. After all, the promise of more compelling information is always a click away.

So what do executives think about all of this? According to a recent survey of executive attitudes by Russell Herder and Ethos Business Law, they are unsure how it all fits together.

The research found that 81 percent of U.S. executives see value in social media to enhance relationships with customers and clients. The same percentage sees social media as an important tool for building a company's brand. *But, fully half of all respondents said they do not use social media because they*

*don't know enough about it or how it applies to their specific situation.*

What many executives miss is that the true potential of the online universe rests not in its ability to reach everyone, but in the ability to micro-target a defined audience. Savvy marketers can now effectively target prospects, tailor messages and deliver dynamic content at precise points in the buying cycle – all without leaving the office. This ability to niche market is what makes digital and social media so promising and effective in both the consumer and business spaces.

## Defining Your Target Audience

A critical first step in any successful communications campaign is gaining a clear understanding of the target audience. Where can you find them? What do they want? Where are they looking for it? Who influences their buying decisions? How do they use information once they find it? How can you best engage them?


There are a lot of easy ways to figure this out. Talk to your customers. Ask members of your sales force. Conduct market research. Look at the user profiles and segmentation available on select social media sites. Examine relevant Web sites to see what the focus is and who the target appears to be.

Just be careful not to fall into the trap of simply targeting generic audience classifications such as the general consumer, soccer moms, farmers, home builders, contractors, or engineers. That really won't help you focus your efforts. Instead, hone in on the specific characteristics of your target population and how you can best reach them – which will likely be through a mix of traditional, digital and social channels.

*Groundswell* authors Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff aptly summed

up the importance of defining your audience when they wrote, "...you need to dissect and quantify the dynamics that separate different participants. Why? Because a strategy that treats everyone alike will spell failure – people aren't alike and won't respond in the same way."

The art of storytelling has changed. People expect to be treated as individuals with information that is easy, convenient, relevant and in context for them. The companies that recognize and adapt to this shift in the landscape will be the ones who prosper.

And that is something even Mad Men's Don Draper would understand. 

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