



Strategic Communication Plan

Reenergizing AARP Brand and Public Perception

Com 613- Constructing Messages and Audiences

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### Executive Summary

My strategic communication plan is oriented towards offering strategies to a well-known and established organization known as AARP. This institution is not facing a crisis; however, it needs to reenergize its communication practices. This project recognizes the organization's efforts to ward off the negative images of the public's perception about the institution. This study will evaluate the messages delivered and why stereotypes and stigmas are still prevailing despite marketing and communication initiatives.

AARP stopped using the name of "American Association of Retired Persons" in 2000. The organization executed a rebranding process in February 2013 that created a new campaign and a new slogan: "Real Possibilities". The idea behind this rebranding was to reach a broader audience and fight against all the stereotypes associated with the organization. This project will analyze through Berger's lens, in the Analysis section beginning on page 8, why the rebranding has not impacted more favorably the public image. By applying Berger's social constructionist approach in the narrative analysis, I will examine which tactics are working and which are not in AARP's redesigning, and which are not compromising its legacy and identity.

Starting on page 14, this plan will lay out the market impact for implementing new communication practices for AARP's target audience, which are people 50 years and older. It will emphasize why AARP needs to attract individuals between the ages of 50-64 that still believes that AARP is only exclusively for senior citizens over the age of 65. The "suggested strategies" can be found on pages 16- 19. Through Berger's theory, we

will offer recommendations based on the four motifs: *debunking*, *unrespectability*, *relativization* and *cosmopolitan*.

### Purpose

This communication plan will provide suggestions on how to reinforce and invigorate a more convincing message that emphasis on the fact that AARP is not just for “retirees” or "senior citizens" over the age of 65. Additionally, it will suggest strategies for enhancing the slogan “Real Possibilities” and methods for voicing the message better to the target audience.

### Rationale

It is impressive to see how Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus' vision has prevailed 60 years later. Dr. Ethel Percy, the founder of AARP, embarked on the mission of creating an organization in which the concept of "aging" would be seen differently. She focused her passion and energy to prove that aging is a chapter of life full of new possibilities. She defined her vision as follows: "We do not get old, we grow old. We mature." (cited in Infonet, AARP, 2016). Nowadays, this is the principle that still guides the AARP mission. Nevertheless, this nonprofit, nonpartisan organization still struggles with the negative perception that many people have of AARP.

AARP has probably had multiple strategic communication plans in the last five decades. However, this strategic communication plan we are purposing will align our study with the current need of the organization for reinvigorating the message it had already created in different strategic campaigns. The goal is to reintroduce AARP with different approaches that targets the existing audience and captivates a new one.

Our plan will list suggestions for improving the effectiveness of the campaign already constructed and in place. Additionally, we will offer practical and tangible ideas in a narrative analysis that uses Berger's social constructionist approach. AARP needs this strategic communication plan because the organization needs a permanent renovation of its mission. AARP has to continue reinforcing through their message that they understand the needs and desires of Americans 50 years and older.

The "Real Possibilities" theme must be more than just a slogan. It is still unbelievable that many people do not associate this slogan with AARP. A majority still affirms that AARP stands for "The American Association of Retired Person". AARP is

an example of an organization with an “entrenched identity”, thus we need to solidify all the communication efforts to improve AARP’s brand and its legacy.

## Analysis

As I stated previously, AARP has sought to cultivate a more contemporary image. The organization realized that they needed to modify some dominant narrative in its public approach if they wanted to eliminate stereotypes. Following the sociological perspective of Berger (1963) as a “form of consciousness”, we will center our analysis around the four motifs: 1) *debunking motif*, 2) *unrespectability motif*, 3) *relativization motif*, 4) *cosmopolitan motif*.

As Berger points out, “things are not what they seem; reality has many layers of meaning. The hallmark of sociological consciousness is its ability to try to understand reality from several, and often competing, systems of interpretation” (Heide, 2009, p.46). In light of this, AARP started introducing some changes in 1999 regarding its acronym. They stopped using “The American Association of Retired Person”. Nevertheless, two decades later, many people still associate AARP with this name. AARP is still competing against a deep-rooted image, one that associates the institution as an establishment exclusively for senior citizens.

### Debunking

The *debunking motif* addresses an array of ways of “unmasking a situation and trying to see through the facades of social structures” (p.46). AARP has been doing meritorious efforts of changing its negative image into a more positive aspect. One example of a dominant message or narrative was the “Real Possibilities” campaign, which was launched in 2013 during the Grammys Award Ceremony. The purpose of this initiative was to change the misperception associated with the AARP brand and the concept of aging. The target audience was individuals of 50 years and over. However,



one of the most important purpose, as AARP indicated in a press release, was to change the mindset of people entering this new life stage. “This is an opportunity to reintroduce AARP to the public and show the value we provide to the 50+ audience,” said A. Barry Rand, former CEO of AARP.

The campaign’s conceptualization was partially effective, but not enough to change the ingrained perception of the public. The initiative did not debunk the perceived image that many people in their 40s and 50s have about AARP. They see the organization as a group of retired people who benefit from Medicare and Social Security.

Nevertheless, we should question why the campaign did not debunk the “perceived reality”? We could conclude in this case that an ingrained, entrenched history and identity of the organization might be obstructing the effectiveness of a new message. We must acknowledge some effective guidelines of the “Real Possibility” campaign. 1) They have invested one-third of their budget on media buy for social and digital media platforms 2) Ads appear in lifestyle outlets rather than news oriented press 3) They have created a landing page [www.aarp.org/possibilities](http://www.aarp.org/possibilities) to promote new content and reinforce the new image 4) “Real Possibilities” became the new slogan/tagline, and it was included in the logo. These elements prove that AARP strategized the “Real Possibility” campaign, but changing 60 years of history and a rooted mindset will require more than just one campaign.

### Unrespectability

Another component of the strategy phase of Berger’s theory is the *unrespectability motif*. This theory encompasses the respectable or dominant sector and the unrespectable sector. A distinguished feature of this motif is using language as an

identification tag of each social segment or structure. I analyzed the narrative employed in the “Real Possibility” campaign. [Chris Noth](#), who is famous for his roles in “Law & Order” and “Sex and the City”, narrated the commercial. The decision to choose Noth was not random. He is 58 years old and fits perfectly within the organization’s demographic target.

The campaign’s message has an intrinsic *unrespectability motif* that appeals to an audience that strongly believes AARP is not for them. This audience is composed primarily of the Baby Boomers’ generation. Moreover, they are the youngest generation of the Baby Boomers that turned 50 years old in 2014. The younger Baby Boomers are still working. They live longer than their predecessors, and they are looking for new challenges in their lives. Chris Noth’s message is aimed at this generation. “Now is always the time to go forward and imagine all the possibilities that lie before us.”, said Noth in the narrative. Noth invites the viewers to visit [aarp.org/possibilities](http://aarp.org/possibilities) to have more information, tools, and guidance. The message here is not just for the conventional AARP’s members, but it is also directed to those that do not share the point of view of the organization.

### Relativization

#### The Disrupt Aging

A third concept within Berger’s theory is the *relativization motif*, which stresses the “importance of seeing the value of the varied ways of understanding the world” (Heide, 2009, p.47). Thus, “different cultures with diverse values and beliefs can provide other and new ways of understanding the world” (AARP, 2015, p.1). AARP and its CEO, Jo Ann Jenkins, started the initiative “[Disrupt Aging](#)” in 2015, with the purpose of

changing the conversation and debate about what it means to grow older, and embrace new opportunities. The AARP website stated the following in the subchannel exclusively for this campaign: “We will celebrate all those who own their age. We will hold a mirror up to the ageist beliefs around us. We will feature new ways of living and aging.” (p.1)

This initiative relates with the relativization motif because it appreciates and incorporates the values of another audience that promotes innovative ways of living and aging. “Disrupting aging AARP is a place to have a new conversation – often funny, sometimes raw, always honest” (AARP, 2015, p.1). The initiative asks questions that stresses the value of the varied ways of understanding, as Berger stated. Jo Ann Jenkins has done a remarkable role promoting the project. Nevertheless, the initiative could reach a broader audience if a celebrity or well-known public figure is the face of this rebranding effort.

The multicultural factor

AARP is an example of a multicultural structure. This organization with a membership of nearly 38 million embraces diversity among senior adults. Its diversity is comprised of 17.5 Hispanic/Latinos, 13.3 percent Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 4.7 percent are Black/African Americans. According to Berger’s relativization motif, we can state that this diversity is a great asset which brings different values and beliefs to the organization. It is a valuable component that AARP should promote more in terms of attracting other cultures. The organization used to publish a bilingual magazine in Spanish and English, but they stopped publishing it years ago. Currently, they have a Spanish digital operation focused on the Hispanic/Latino market in the U.S. and Puerto

Rico. However, appealing to other demographics should be a priority in terms of editorial content on the organization's website.

### Cosmopolitan

The fourth and last motif in Berger's theory is the *cosmopolitan motif* that implies "openness to the world to other ways of thinking and acting" (Heidi, 2009, p.47). Berger addresses the sociological approach in having an "open mind and be interested in other cultures and eager to understand new horizons of human being" (p.47). This particular component is intertwined with the *relativization motif*. AARP should work towards attracting millions of Americans who have reached the age of 50, and who do not want to be affiliated with an organization that targets senior citizens. AARP should be more realistic in its approach towards this population segment. They should try untested ideas that advocate and understand the attitudes of this demographic. They ought to speak their language and appeal to their interests and goals.

### Campaigns to the "Movable Middle"

While the campaigns "You do not Know 'AARP'", and "We Hear you" have been great initiatives, they should refocus the message and revitalize the strategies in order to appeal to the "Movable Middle", a population segment that covers individuals who are between the ages of 50-64, according to AARP studies. This is a crucial target audience for AARP. The organization should ask the following questions if they want to attract this population: Why are we not reshaping their perceptions about AARP? Why are they refusing to be related to the AARP brand?

According to the AARP communication team, the campaigns "You don't Know 'AARP'" and "We Hear You" were effective in improving AARP's importance for the

“Movable Middle” and reshaping their perceptions. Nonetheless, it is important for the organization to reintroduce the message to people who have a limited view about AARP.

The new message should convey answers to questions such as:

Who retires at fifty? Why can't a large population of people over 50 afford to be retired?

How can one balance the positive image that AARP is trying to convey of aging when one has to present a membership card for a 10% discount while getting strange looks?

AARP should have answers for members who have been enrolled in the organization but cancelled their subscription because they felt AARP did not represent their interests. The following excerpt from a Huffington Post blogger articulates some reflections of a former AARP member: “I am deluged by your constant emails and postal reminders proclaiming all the wonderful AARP discounts I can get. Here I am, doing my best to try to look younger and you expect me to go to a car rental company and blow the whole impression by flashing my AARP card (...) Is that really worth the 10 percent off,” wrote John Blumenthal (2014) in his blog post. This is the market that AARP still needs to capture in its rebranding and repositioning strategy.

### Market Impact

One in three Americans today is 50 years old or older, and by 2030, one in five will be 65+. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people aged 50 and older in the United States is expected to increase to 55 million in just 3 years [2020]. This suggests that AARP could have a strong voice in the future. Besides, we have all been taught to respect our elders.

AARP's priority of engaging with the "Middle Movable" should define the way in which the organization is interacting with this segment of the population. The "Middle Movable" is still active within the workforce, so they should not be identified with labels and terms such as "retirees" and "retirement". The Baby Boomers generation is seeking a purpose in their lives. Experts conclude that they will live longer and work longer due to financial necessity, or their strong desire to be productive. In contrast with previous senior generations, many Baby Boomers still have credit debts and home mortgages. Inflation has played a major role as well. Many things cost a lot more than they did in 1946.

AARP needs to emphasize on the generational marketing in order to appropriately target and reach the younger Baby Boomers generation. Therefore, they need to extend the same approach to all the communication strategies. The rebranding campaign of "Real Possibilities" should target more specifically these Baby Boomers. The generational division of people who were born between 1946 and 1964 (ages 53 to 71) is too broad. AARP needs to divide this age group into at least three categories in order to reach out more effectively these Boomers. One target should be people that just turned 50. The second should be individuals from 55 to 65, and the third should be 65 and older.

The value of this audience is that they know what they want in this new phase of their life. It is an audience that has changed the concept of aging. According to marketing studies, the Boomers are the "me" generation. "They are self-centered, self-fulfillment, individualist attitudes. They were the first TV generation, as well the first generation where divorce was socially tolerated" per the MayeCreate design website. Experts determined other elements that define the Boomers:

- They do not like to be referred to as "old" because it is a generation that is not necessarily looking forward to retirement.
  - They grew up with discipline from childhood whippings to military experience.
  - They experienced attracting a mate in person by physically meeting and talking.
  - Their standards of customer services are high, so any group or organization targeting them should offer exceptional quality in terms of products and services.
  - This generation is tech savvy. They use the social platforms and buy online.
- According to Immersion Active reports the Internet is the most important source of information for Boomers.

Taking into consideration all these characteristics, the organization needs to refocus the promotion of its brand. It should be an organization that offers much more than just discounts for seniors, health insurance options, and sending email reminders. The organization's mission should be a true mirror of the members' reality. AARP has already created the rebranding message. However, they need to strengthen and reshape the narrative. They should find a narrative leader or leaders that provides a new facade for the organization.

### Suggested Strategies

Which motif according to Berger's theory could be suited for refuting AARP's narrative? What does it need to do to reinforce the message for AARP's members and the public?

#### Strategies for improving *Debunking*

- AARP needs another campaign to reinforce the "Real Possibility" tagline. They need to reinforce aggressively that the organization acronym has changed. Social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are effective tools to promote this message.
- This new campaign that reinforces the slogan should stand-alone. No other AARP campaign should be running at the same time.
- Create more editorial content and videos about the stereotypes and myths about AARP. This is an effective tactic to debunk a negative image. It is a mirror effect. The audience will see and listen to what is in their minds.
- To debunk the entrenched perception that AARP is only for old people, the organization needs to identify a simple but memorable concept, and develop a powerful idea that tells a relevant story. For instance, people in their late 40s, 50s, and 60s could answer in one short sentence the question: How do I contribute?
- If AARP unifies its lens through one strong concept, this initiative could play itself out through all different platforms such as bulletins, emails, social media, tv, radio, digital, print, etc.,

**Timeline:** Starting January 2018.



**Resources:** Communication team working with in house production team or a third party production crew.

**Goal/Metrics:** Digital campaign in social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Reach at least 1 million of followers. Commercial TV in national TV networks, at least in three different TV stations.

#### Strategies for improving *Unrespectability*

- Produce new commercials with celebrities. The celebrity should be on camera, thus the message will be more powerful. They should be well-known figures turning 50 years old. Here is a list of celebrities [turning 50 or 50 plus] that AARP should pitch for in future ads: Julia Roberts / Jamie Foxx/ Nicole Kidman/ Will Ferrell/ Pamela Anderson/ Mark Ruffalo/ Toni Braxton / Benicio del Toro / Vanilla Ice / Jimmy Kimmel / Keith Urban/ Faith Hill / Anderson Cooper.

**Timeline:** Begin preproduction phase 4 quarter 2017 or upon celebrity's availability. Broadcasting phase should not be later than Spring 2018.

**Resources:** AARP should hire a production team who could work closely with the AARP communication team.

**Goal/Metrics:** Commercial spots running in at least five national TV networks and Netflix. Potential TV networks to pitch for are CBS, Bravo, ESPN, CNN, and Fox.

#### Strategies for improving *Relativization*

- The “Disrupt Aging” is a great initiative in terms of rebranding the organization. Jo Ann Jenkins, the CEO, should invite another well-known figure and start a new promotion cycle. We do not doubt at all on how well Jenkins connects with

people at events or in person, but translating this initiative to TV requires a well-known figure or celebrity. This campaign should attract the “Movable Middle”.

**Timeline:** Start broadcasting January 2018. Pre-production phase 4 quarter 2017.

**Resources:** Jo Ann Jenkins and a celebrity working together in the new commercial spot.

**Goal/Metric:** The spot should run in national TV and also in local markets where the AARP community of local chapters are present.

- AARP should consider starting the publication of the bilingual magazine. The Hispanic/Latino market is growing. AARP should have more editorial content in its website targeting other voices such as African-American, Asian, Black and black, non-Hispanic.

**Timeline:** Start bilingual publication Spring 2018. AARP in Spanish is relaunching the digital operation, thus all efforts are currently focused on this task. As soon as the new website in Spanish is live, the second phase should be the bilingual magazine.

**Resources:** AARP en Espanol team.

**Goal/Metrics:** Produce content for three editorial versions targeted to different life stages (50-59, 60-69, and 70+). Reach the 17.5 percent of Hispanic/Latino adults aged 50 and over.

#### Strategies for improving *Cosmopolitan*

- Reintroduce new messages and approaches to the campaigns “You don’t Know ‘AARP’” and “We Hear You” in digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

- Create a series of videos that run across online platform about people who have changed their misperceptions about AARP.
- Incorporate a celebrity in the campaigns to have more impact on the already produced TV commercial of both campaigns.

**Timeline:** By September 2017.

**Resources:** AARP's communication team.

**Goal/Metrics:** Increase at least 20 percent in the number of followers on Twitter. Increase at least 30 percent in the number of shares and likes on Facebook. If a celebrity is involved in the campaign, they should be more aggressive with promoting this campaign on Instagram, which in turn will increase the number of followers by 30 percent.

## Conclusions

AARP has all the potential for reinforcing their brand. The organization needs to refocus its communication strategies, and accomplishes its mission in a more efficient way. An organization that changed its name in 1999 should no longer be associated with the old tagline. AARP should continue to work on its brand positioning, and meet the expectations of their 38 million members. Additionally, they need to attract new members that just turned 50 and still have a limited vision of the organization.

This communication strategic plan will provide AARP with tools that will facilitate in creating a better positioning statement. Furthermore, the suggested strategies provide concrete actions for executing in the next 12 months. Ideally, by the fourth quarter of 2018, AARP should see some changes in the public's perception of its brand. The strategies recommended under the *relativization* and *cosmopolitan* motifs are indicating that AARP needs a clear strategy in its multicultural approach, especially within the Hispanic/Latino community. AARP could be an authoritative site on topics related to the demographic of 50 years and older.

I recommend re-evaluating and re-assessing the execution of this communication plan in order to evaluate if the suggested strategies are working or not. The communication team and other parties involved should identify which new elements are triggering or hindering the execution of the short and long-term goals.

AARP's message should acknowledge the years of experience and acquired maturity of this audience. Therefore being rewarded should be an accomplishment and not an embarrassment. Growing older is an attribute of becoming wiser.

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