

**Digest of SfEP breakfast briefing and roundtable discussion:  
'How to overcome barriers to effective communication with older people'  
held on 20 November 2013 at**

**Society for Editors and Proofreaders, Apsley House, 176 Upper Richmond Road, London SW15 2SH**

Lillian Avon (LA), Development Manager, SfEP – note taker

Penny Poole (PP), Member of SfEP – meeting chair

Sara Peacock (SP), SfEP Chair

Mallory Gelb (MG), Senior Media Officer, Age UK

Katherine Hill (KH), Strategy Adviser, Equalities & Human Rights, Age UK

Mark McLaren (MM), Parliamentary & Legal Affairs Manager, Which?

Rebecca McLeod (RM) Director, Stand Agency

David Sinclair (DS), Assistant Director of Policy & Communications, ILC-UK

**Regrets:** Jane Vass (JV), Head of Public Policy, Age UK

Mark Easton (ME), BBC Home Editor

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

Sara Peacock (SP) welcomed guests and highlighted the SfEP's aims, history and services. She then handed over to Lillian Avon (LA) who outlined the genesis of the meeting (see Appendix 1). Penny Poole (PP) asked guests to introduce themselves (see Appendix 2) and described the main aim of the meeting, which was to raise awareness of the SfEP as a resource for organisations who offer products and services to older people.

The SfEP offers:

- consultancy services (e.g. communications audit, mentoring)
- open courses (e.g. copy-editing, proofreading)
- bespoke training courses, delivered in-house.

Individual SfEP members offer:

- editorial expertise (e.g. writing, editing and proofreading).

## **DISCUSSIONS**

PP opened the discussions by referring to the SfEP's regular magazine *Editing Matters* magazine and an AON paper 'Differences at a glance', which highlights different generations' approaches to communication, leadership styles and motivations.

## Case studies

PP then circulated two case studies, designed to highlight issues around clarity and consistency of written communications in (a) the financial services sector – a highly regulated environment and (b) health and social care – where there are service user/carer capacity considerations. Attendees were divided into two groups and asked to:

1. Identify the most pressing communication issues in print and online.
2. Identify opportunities for organisations who interact with older people to use the SfEP as a resource for in-house training, communications audit and the expertise of its 2,000-strong membership.

PP reiterated the significance of the growing demographic and the commercial benefits of improving the quality of communication by organisations who seek to engage with older people. Ref p.4 of ILC-UK's Golden Economy paper:

'The older market is forecast to grow by 81 per cent from 2005 to 2030, but the 18–59-year-old market only by 7 per cent.'

## Ideas from the case studies

Ideas & issues	SfEP's role
Intergenerational content and context – good communication is for all generations not just older people. Clear, simple and personalised communication is better than a universal template.	The SfEP and its members can provide input to ensure clarity, consistency and impact.
Stereotypes and making assumptions about older people.	
There is a gap between policy, practice and legislation.	The SfEP can help organisations translate policy, create, apply and maintain their own house style and provide objective feedback on documents and web content.
Recognition that 'age neutral' and 'age denial' are different and separate yet often get labelled as one.	
The impact of data protection on friends and family acting on behalf of older people (especially in cases of complaints).	
Gender focus is usually on older women, especially in media (newspapers and advertising)	

where images and terminology are often clichéd.	
Vulnerability and lack of voice for older people should not determine treatment.	
Nomenclature such as 'silver surfer'.	

## ACTIONS AND FOLLOW-UPS

Item	Action
Attendees agreed to inform the SfEP which organisations in the 'older people communications arena' they are in touch with and send details to LA.	The SfEP to target those organisations and offer resources, e.g. editorial consultancy and editorial training alongside writing, editing and proofreading expertise.
Attendees to send their evidenced-based research papers to LA.	The SfEP to review relevant research which will enable it to develop its offering to organisations which target older people, e.g. financial services, retailers and energy providers.
Age Action Alliance research.	LA to investigate.
Rica (formerly Ricability) research.	LA to investigate.
Training for organisations.	Bespoke in-house training courses for organisations with products and services that are designed for older people. Also SfEP open courses.
Communications staff and expertise has been reduced in government departments due to cutbacks.	The SfEP to target the public sector.
Future bigger event.	DS to ascertain if ILC-UK can joint fund a big event and invite other organisations.
SfEP to provide digest of this breakfast briefing and continue to meet and work with Which? ILC-UK and Age UK.	LA to organise.
Which? internal communications.	MM will raise awareness of the SfEP and its members among colleagues – and, in turn, organisations they are in touch with.

NUJ Guidelines on Reporting Age – many journalists and media industry do not know about nor refer to guidelines. Lack of knowledge poses problems with imagery, identification and language.	ALL
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## CONCLUSIONS

The SfEP initiated this briefing in order to facilitate dialogue with some of the key organisations championing issues affecting older people.

The SfEP will work with these organisations to develop a commercial tool for more effective communication with older people by providing editorial support, training and consultancy (e.g. communications audit) and by offering the expertise of its members.

The SfEP's role is not to dictate or influence policy, shape opinion, conduct polls or 'police' organisations but rather to familiarise itself with evidence-based research and provide editorial consultancy services alongside the range of editorial expertise offered by its members.

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**Information and instructions**

A number of participants in both groups noted that they found information written on products or in instruction booklets difficult to read. This was down to both print size – it is simply too small – and a problem with language. Some people commented on how the language in instructions is often unclear and written in technical jargon. This was a particularly prominent problem with electrical products. Similar problems were highlighted about information on food packaging – it can be too small or poorly explained. There was some discussion of the new ‘traffic lights’ food labelling system, designed to make information clearer, but there was disagreement among the participants about whether this had improved clarity or not. One participant observed that he found the pictures on food packaging misleading and dishonest. This highlights how the information we receive about a product is not just written but comes in other forms, and this problem is not easily divisible from other concerns about packaging design.

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In the meantime, the media as a whole has a vital role to play in halting the perpetuation of ageist attitudes and beliefs. Some of the worst examples of ageism unearthed during this report seem to come from journalists rather than the advertising sector. In an article about marketing to older people one author describes older people as ‘oldies’, and ‘silver haired’ before going on to note that ‘It might not be entirely flattering for a young at heart 55-year-old to be pigeon holed alongside other oldies!’<sup>174</sup> Another journalist talks of ‘grey gappers’<sup>175</sup> who increasingly want to take time out to travel, while a third talks of ‘a huge and growing audience of wrinklies out there’.<sup>176</sup> If individuals writing about good practice in marketing to older people are using such language, we should perhaps not be surprised if poor and counter-productive practice appears in print and other mediums.

The NUJ Guidelines on Reporting Age recognise that ‘language can be a powerful tool in shaping our views and reflecting public attitudes and perceptions – both of which can form barriers that prevent people of every age from integration and participation in society’. Although this guidance exists, it is clearly not followed in all sections of the media.

174 ‘Do We Not Matter to You?’ (2007) *Harpers*, 21 September.

175 A. Goss (2009) ‘Gap Years Are Not Only for the Young’, *The Times*, 8 September.

Available at: [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/money/consumer\\_affairs/article6825940.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/money/consumer_affairs/article6825940.ece) (accessed 30 September 2010).

176 ‘Youth Culture Is Dying a Death, but Industry Won’t Help the Aged’ (1999) *Marketing Week*, 21 January.

Available at: [www.marketingweek.co.uk/home/youth-culture-is-dying-a-death-but-industry-wont-help-the-aged/2019575.article](http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/home/youth-culture-is-dying-a-death-but-industry-wont-help-the-aged/2019575.article) (accessed 30 September 2010).

## **APPENDIX 2 – non-SfEP guests' biographies and subject interests**

### **Mallary Gelb, Senior Media Officer, Age UK**

Mallary is a former reporter and Senior Producer for the BBC, CNN and ABC News in New York. At Age UK, age discrimination is one of her areas of focus. She works closely with the media to ensure the organisation's messages are heard and influence public debate and decision makers.

### **Katherine Hill, Strategy Adviser, Equalities & Human Rights, Age UK**

Katherine has worked at Age UK for 4 years and before that she was Parliamentary Adviser at The Children's Society, where she worked on matters relating to age equality at the other end of the age spectrum. She is interested in intergenerational issues and works on equality and human rights issues for Age UK. She believes that although anti-discrimination legislation is an essential part of the solution for addressing ageism, stereotypical attitudes and the way we talk about older people also have to be challenged. She is interested in how ageism infringes older people's rights as citizens as well as consumers and recipients of health and social care.

### **Mark McLaren, Parliamentary & Legal Affairs Manager, Which?**

Mark previously worked for Age Concern before it merged with Age UK. Which? is really focused on all issues concerning consumers, but some of its campaign work does affect older people – for example that on big button phones, nuisance phone calls and scams. Rica (formerly Ricability), a charity that provides research into disabled and older consumers and age-friendly products, was originally part of Which?.

### **Rebecca McLeod, Director, Stand Agency**

Rebecca co-founded Stand Agency in the spring of 2012 and has worked for Dementia UK and Contact the Elderly. She has a government and public sector campaigning background, which included organising the inaugural Get Online Day aimed at 'silver surfers'. Stand Agency was shortlisted for the PRCA's 2013 New Consultancy of the Year Award. Rebecca is particularly interested in the integration of health and social care, and is currently working for 'Integrating Care' a group of health and social care professionals chaired by Sir John Oldham.

### **David Sinclair, Assistant Director of Policy & Communications, ILC-UK**

David has worked in the 'ageing' sphere for over 10 years and before that in disability. He left Help the Aged just before the merger and was its Head of Policy. He is interested in the private sector's influence on older people's lives. He questions how identity can be built without using the word 'age', the usability of language, and language as a purpose for information.