

Challenging the Stereotypes – A positive images campaign

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Incorporated

I am very pleased to be here with you to share that excellent example of ABC's Peter Cundall, as a productive, knowledgeable and happy 81 year old, excited by life.¹

For my presentation today, I will share with you Resthaven's experiences. Resthaven is a South Australian Uniting Church agency that provides a range of community and residential care services across state.

In understanding and managing perceptions of community care, Resthaven aims to influence how older people are perceived and treated, how they engage life, and are offered opportunity.

We are bombarded with images that influence our perceptions. Depending on our life experiences, these perceptions may become stereotypes that remain unchallenged throughout our lives.

We feel strongly that when aged care is portrayed negatively in the media, it influences perceptions of older people and undermines the valuable work done by employees in this sector.

Today I will encourage you to:

- consider the prevailing stereotypes and images of older people and of working with older people.
- ask you to think about the contributions we make as service providers and to join a national campaign to promote positive images

The power of language

As children, we learnt the power of language. You may recall the chant, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me"²?

This rhyme was taught as a response to emotive and negative language.

Unfortunately for many, the effect of the spoken words was to have the impact of "saying makes it so", much in the same way as other forms of communication, such as gestures, pictures, body language, and so on have significant power to influence perceptions.

Language used in community services can also impact negatively on people. It can create barriers and can disempower individuals through unnecessary use of confusing jargon. Whether such jargon is related to how we create unique or "natty" names for services, or the way we describe clients by their deficits or conditions, as a sector, we need to improve and simplify our use of language.

It is up to us to influence the imagery and stereotypes that are depicted to the general public and through the media. Doing nothing only perpetuates the preconceived negativity that we complain about.

What are some of the stereotypes and images that are portrayed about older people?

There are both positive and negative examples: ^{3; 4}
Older people are sometimes portrayed as:

- kind and wise
- passionate and aspiring
(in her 101st year Eileen was trying to share her passion with some crows players that time was running out for them to win another premiership flag!)
- happy and active
- dependable and experienced
- having talent for community development and citizenship ⁵
- fulfilling vital social roles, being the 'glue' of families ⁶
- caretakers and transmitters of cultural traditions. ⁷

Pictured here at 90 is Jack Cullen, who continues to actively contribute by making pasties and coat hangers to raise funds for the children's cancer charity, Camp Quality. To his credit, he has raised more than \$10,000 so far.

Another example is our three centenarians flipping pancakes for UnitingCare's Pancake Day - actively raising money for charity and having fun.

There are so many examples of positive images. Sadly, however, "in western societies, there is a great deal of negative stereotyping, even ageism, surrounding older people"⁸ and it tends to be the negative headlines that 'sell' papers and make the news.

Such stereotypes imply negative images and generalisations that older people:⁹

- are a burden on society
- create a major drain upon health systems
- are passive and inactive
- take more out than they contribute
- are unable to learn (grumpy and resistant to change)
- are unproductive
- are senile or confused
- are all the same.

Older people are NOT a burden, nor are they passive and unproductive.

The danger is that unchallenged, negative attitudes become part of everyday thinking, accepted as true even in policymaking arenas. The myths reinforce age discrimination and the widespread assumption that to age and retire is to opt out of life.

We need to challenge these myths and negative stereotypes.

Older people add value

Recent key Federal Government studies, such as the Productivity Commission's Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia¹⁰, reflect the dangers inherent in the assessment of potential issues of an ageing community. On one hand it is prudent and important to plan ahead; we expect Government to develop and implement public policy for the long term.

Yet on the other hand, the manner in which "contribution" and "value" are measured with reference to *paid* work, effectively excludes the value of the important contributions that older people make every day in unpaid work activities, such as their roles as family carers, providing informal help to families and community groups, volunteering activities, and so on.¹¹

A study in 2003 by de Vaus and colleagues demonstrated that older people make valuable economic contributions to Australia. They estimated that Australians aged over 65 years contribute almost 39 billion dollars per year in unpaid caring and voluntary work.¹²

The roles of "Being" and "Doing"¹³

Even when the value of "activities" undertaken by older people are recognised and measured, the value of an older person's "being" as an individual is not easily measured. If this is not acknowledged, it further risks undervaluing and understating their on-going role and self worth.

We need to continue to affirm and recognise the essential worth of an older person as an individual. This is evident not only in their relationships as grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, veterans, friends, clients, colleagues, volunteers and so on, but also in their mere "being" – recognition of which is a fundamental right of each individual.

{Daisy may be frail, but you cannot put a dollar value on this relationship.

Nor should we undervalue Bill's enjoyment of his surrounds in his daily stroll in his 103rd year}

The intrinsic worth of an individual and their relationships cannot be underestimated- they are vital – equally for both the very fit and the most frail of individuals.

In what ways can we as service providers work towards encouraging positive images of older people?

We can begin by making it a priority to encourage positive images.

Resthaven does this in a variety of ways. It is a deliberate strategy, embedded in our Strategic Plan. The Resthaven Board committed itself to the objectives of

- **promoting positive images of older people** and
- **promoting positive images of working with older people.**

One related activity we have undertaken was to find out some of the public perceptions regarding working in community services.¹⁴

Our recent research infers that 95% of the general population places a great deal of value on aged care work. It identified that there is a strong sense of good will,

appreciation and support for the services provided to older people - it is important work.

Our research also reinforces the link between how we provide services and the public image of community care, noting that of those with an experience of services provided to older people, **83%** indicated theirs was a **positive** experience.

The majority, 63%, had first hand knowledge of an experience of a service provided to an older person .

So despite the negative perceptions in the media, the actual experiences people have had are predominantly positive. We need to remember the extent to which our services both directly and indirectly touch many people.

The power of word of mouth

How we provide services influences perceptions and image through the power of “word of mouth” sharing of experiences.

We need to be mindful of the diversity of **our clients** and their diverse needs. The majority of older people are not our clients, they are living actively and independently. Sometimes we lose sight of this.

However encouraging positive images is not just about images of older people undertaking extreme exercise.

Our challenge is more subtle regarding how we project the positive images of our clients, notwithstanding their support needs. Our focus also acknowledges the critical importance of the resources Governments do – and need to – provide to assist individuals in their daily activities and participation in their communities.

The needs of our clients may involve episodic short term interventions, and for others, we respond to more complex issues and provide on-going support, helping them maximize their capacity to continue to live in the community.

The reality is for most of the week, our clients manage independently of us, living their own lives, with or without the help of family carers.

At Resthaven, we emphasise to staff that the manner in which they provide services and relate to clients does have a lasting impact on perceptions and image. We believe the adoption of client centred and self management principles in our services does have us focus on the needs of individuals and their outcomes.

Aged care and the media

Public perceptions are not only influenced by how we provide services. The media plays a significant role in projecting particular views. Many service providers avoid engaging with the media, keeping their heads low and out of sight.

Rather than be ‘defensive’ and passive with regards to negative images and stories in the media, aged care providers must go on the ‘offensive’ and become ‘pro-active’. We must give a higher priority to engaging with the media to present an alternative perspective.

This has been recognised internationally. For example, in Ireland, ‘Age & Opportunity’, their peak national body, currently has a campaign called “**Older and Bolder**” and state, ‘The media are crucially important both in reflecting society’s attitudes and, almost certainly, in shaping those attitudes.’¹⁵

Over a decade ago, Resthaven asked what we could do to promote positive stories and images in the media. This became a deliberate focus during 1999, the United Nations Year of Older People, and gained momentum throughout the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. These campaigns provided an impetus to encouraging positive images.

Make the difference

Over recent years, we have embarked on a social marketing campaign to **challenge the stereotypes through positive images**.

Today I will share with you one particular aspect of this campaign - our experience of exploring the power of **television**. We had never used this medium before, but research identified it as being the most effective in influencing perceptions.

Having created our concept, we used a freelance producer to develop a commercial. The cost of air time on television is significant. So our commercial was pitched as a Community Service Announcement to all three commercial stations, and supplemented with limited paid coverage, shown over three campaigns.

The simple message is to challenge negative stereotypes by affirming the importance of interactions, and the simple things in relationships. Our intent is particularly focused on the aspects of engagement with older people, of their “being”, and their relationships.

We will now show you our Community Service Announcement .¹⁶

As I trust you were able to see, the intention of this commercial was to show positive images of the

- Importance of interactions
- Simple things
- Relationships
- Working with older people

In support of the television commercial, all press and radio advertising was reviewed and adapted to incorporate the commercial’s tag line, ‘**make the difference**’. This campaign strategy and commercial can be viewed on our website. Our statistics and feedback indicate that the campaign has generated significant interest.

Our primary purpose has not been specific to Resthaven or to build brand awareness.

We have had some key learning from our campaign experience. One is, we believe that we did achieve the desired outcome, at least in a modest way.

However, for a social marketing campaign to have an ongoing influence on public perceptions, it requires a long term (for example – a 5 year) campaign, preferably funded by Government, to ensure the greatest impact.

We have shown one theme in our commercial of a number that could be appropriately reflected in a national campaign. Such themes relate to older people and their activities and contributions, they also should relate to the dynamic nature of the work we do with older people, its importance, professionalism and quality.

Where to from here?

The recent appointment of the first Ambassador for Ageing, Noeline Brown¹⁷, is a great opportunity for aged care to have a strong, national voice. In wishing her well and supporting her appointment, I encourage her to use this unique opportunity to challenge the stereotypes and myths.

Could the Ambassador extend the 2020 summit “idea” of “Golden Gurus” to have a lasting impact on improving the recognition, perception and respect of older people in the community?¹⁸

Such a focus would affirm the lives of older people in their diversity of activities and their needs.

The Government is a key stakeholder and we encourage them to take more active leadership in developing and sustaining positive images of older people through proactive social marketing, as they have in other campaigns such as Life - Be in It, Quit and Healthy Eating programs.

In Conclusion

- We all need to ensure that building and sustaining positive images remains an area of priority.

ACSA has given this prominence and focus at this conference.

For each of us here, the focus needs to be on what commitment we make, - today - to be pro-active.

- A successful campaign involves both the reality and perception of how we provide our services, the quality of those services, and the language we use in communicating with and about our clients. These all influence the powerful “word of mouth” sharing of experiences that clients and family carers have with our services
- We must also continue to challenge negative stereotypes and generalisations, countering with positive examples and objective data. A challenge for our sector is to research and gather information about the interests and ‘being and doing’ roles and contributions of older people.
- The Government has a key responsibility in encouraging positive images of older people and their intrinsic worth. They also have a responsibility, which we share, to encourage positive images of working with older people in order to attract and sustain the workforce capacity required in aged and community care services.

To effectively achieve these outcomes, we need to embrace the media and harness its power to influence public perceptions.

Magic is required to achieve this and that is the “magic” of a commitment and focus from us all.

In summary...

I leave you now with a memory to take with you. Tim Samuels is a BBC producer who noted the media bias for negative stereotypes and set about challenging them.

With the help of Dave Palmer from X-Phonics Productions and others, he gathered 40 older people to form the Zimmer Band - named after the UK Zimmer brand of walking frames.

Band members are aged between 70 and 100 years, all with varying levels of independence, and with a 90 year old lead singer.¹⁹

I ask you to reflect on the words of the song itself, “My Generation”, and its message. In true band tradition, Buster Martin, - thought to be Britain’s oldest employee - sends you a message to let you know that it is a myth that older people do not know how to poke fun (Buster recently celebrated his one hundred and first birthday at his local pub)

ENJOY

Richard Hearn

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