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Singular behaviour



By Emma Jacobs

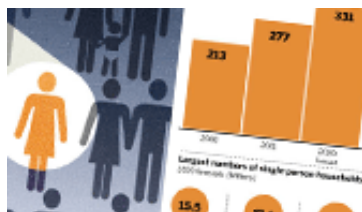
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While working as a marketing executive at [Weight Watchers](#), Sherri Langburt, single at the time, became increasingly frustrated that brands wanting to work with the diet company were forging family-focused campaigns.

“They were talking to mums who have to divide their income with the family,” she says. “They would

have got more bang for their buck from single people. They have more money to spend. And there are lots of single people.”

Single-minded



Numbers of single-person households worldwide

So in 2007 she set up Single Edition Media, a website aimed initially at single people that focused on lifestyle rather than dating. She now helps companies engage with singles online.

“Big brands are conservative and want to identify with traditional families. If a brand sponsors a big event it might say ‘Thanks to all the Moms’, but this polarises the audience by assuming household spending decisions are made by mothers. Marketers haven’t caught up with changes in society.”

Mothers have customarily been one of the most important target groups for advertisers, because they dominated in the purchase of groceries and children’s items. According to research from Euromonitor, the market research group, the number of people living alone globally is rising dramatically, from about 153m in 1996 to 277m in 2011, and predicted to rise to 331m by 2020 or 15.7 per cent of total households.

Such figures conceal big variations. While the trend is evident in emerging markets, it is more pronounced in the developed economies of western Europe and North America where the proportion of single-person households stood at 31 per cent and 27.6 per cent respectively in 2011. Sweden has the highest proportion of single dwellers in the world, with 47 per cent of households having one resident; next is Norway at 40 per cent. By 2020, the

US will have the highest number of single-person households in the world at 36.3m followed by China (31.6m), Japan (18.2m) and India (17.4m).

The phenomenon is driven by factors including greater female employment, higher divorce rates, longevity and mass urbanisation. A recent report, *Who Will Love Me, When I'm 64?* by Relate, the UK relationships organisation, and New Philanthropy Capital, a think-tank, found that divorce rates among the over-50s in Britain have risen significantly.

Eric Klinenberg, a New York University sociologist, whose book *Going Solo* looked at the transformation of attitudes to the single life, finds that whereas once it was stigmatised, now it is an aspiration. It is "a mark of distinction, not a social failure".

Last year, Honda, the carmaker, ran a campaign focused on 20- and 30-somethings, which centred on "leap lists": ambitious life goals to be completed before marriage and family. Chevrolet, the carmaker known for family cars, ran an advertisement called Dependable Friends, showing a stylish young woman rescuing a friend from a bad date. Even De Beers, which has long touted its diamonds as an emblem of romance, sold a "right-hand ring" for unmarried women who want to treat themselves.

Yet most businesses and advertisers have been slow to capitalise on the demographic. Ms Langburt says "it's a missed market".

Karl Gregory, managing director of the UK's Match.com, the dating website, describes "this segment is a marketing challenge – you can't view them as a homogenous group. We think it's dangerous to target people on age."

Paul Kelly, corporate affairs director of UK supermarket chain Asda, agrees: "There is a danger in trying to give an overall definition to what a single-person household is. The needs of an elderly widower are very different to a young single person."

The variations have led Experian, the credit scoring agency, to try to categorise single households according to their behaviour (see box).

"Companies shouldn't talk to singles like they are 'Bridget Jones', in a manner that treats them as [looking for love]. Many single people like being single and don't necessarily want a partner or kids now," says Mr Gregory.

It is also a mistake, says Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist, to see single people as atomised loners. "In fact they are much more connected than families in many ways, helped by technology. They are very social. They are not alone, they form temporary or makeshift family groups."

This is something Marc Vlessing, chief executive of Pocket, a private developer of affordable urban housing, has observed. "Our single buyers would rather live in something compact [in central London] than a bigger property further away. They need to be close to transport and

shopping,” he says.

It has been important too, that their developments have communal areas. So typically they will have a courtyard or terrace to be shared by 30 flats. “We haven’t tried to force a community but we’ve found [that residents] form book groups and go on skiing holidays together.”

Ms Yarrow makes the point that in seeing family life as the norm, many retailers and consumer goods groups are missing out on creating products to fit with single people’s lifestyles. “They don’t necessarily sit at a table eating an evening meal for one. They might graze throughout the day and just have a slice of pizza on the couch for dinner.”

Mr Kelly points out that shopping patterns are usually different for single people than families. “The single household doesn’t do the weekly shop. They tend to shop day to day, buying an evening meal on the way home. Whereas older people see it as a social activity.”

Ordering online before collecting orders in-store has been one way that Asda has responded to the time-strapped solo shopper, while opening up supermarket rooms for community groups has helped meet the social needs of older shoppers. “In the past [retailers] dictated the terms but in the internet era, we have had to be more responsive to customers’ needs.”

Mr Kelly also believes social media, rather than television, might be a more effective way of advertising to single people.

This is an area that Ms Langburt consults on, helping brands to work with single-lifestyle bloggers, just as retailers targeted so-called “mommy bloggers”. “People engage with lifestyle blogs rather than, say, fashion blogs,” she says. “Fashion companies make the mistake of sending their products to fashion bloggers but the majority of internet users are not interested in pure fashion so they might be better off sending it to someone who writes about their lives.” Women, she says, tend to blog about being single or identify themselves as single more than men do. “They share their ideas and give support to others.”

Also, as Mr Gregory points out, being single is not a fixed identity: people move in and out of relationships. Match.com has run advertising campaigns targeted at couples. “It’s important not to alienate people. Married friends [and] grandparents will spread the message” about the dating site to single friends and relatives.

But it also has an eye on future customers. After all, Mr Gregory says, “they may become single themselves”.

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