

# Markets Focus: The Proud ...The Forgotten

By Larry Dobrow, October 2007 issue

## ***Marketers have oddly overlooked the military community***

Online advertisers are so eager to find the Next Big Thing niche that they've been creating ones of their own — witness the way the health and travel industries have argued that a majority of people over 80 are highly active online. And yet these same marketers continue to ignore military families, a large, hugely loyal group of consumers practically begging for attention.

Right now, the United States boasts approximately 2.5 million active military members and reservists. Add in immediate family members and that figure surges to six or seven million, plus none of these figures take into account the close bond between active servicemen and women and veterans. A recommendation from one member of the military to another tends to carry more weight than, say, a recommendation passed from dentist to dentist.

"Companies don't know much about this market and the ones that do tend to find it elusive," says Loree Hirschman, vice president of marketing for Military Advantage Inc., the publisher of Military.com. Adds Tom Harpointner, co-founder and CEO of AIS Media, "Just look at Amazon. They have special categories for almost everybody, but you never see military families there."

The reason for this, not surprisingly, is that marketers hew to outdated assumptions about the military. Those companies targeting servicemen and their families assume that they're speaking to a homogeneous audience of white males. They believe that this audience is interested in little beyond military-related topics and that the best way to lure them is by prominently featuring Old Glory in every marketing missive.

"The military family of 2007 is very, very different from the one of 20 years ago. They know right away when somebody who's trying to reach them hasn't done his homework," says Michael Jacobs, executive vice president and executive creative director of MRM Worldwide, which has coordinated online programs for the U.S. Army.

Just as surprisingly, it seems that marketers haven't paid much attention to statistics showing that active service members and reservists are regular and enthusiastic Web users. According to a Pew Internet & American Life Project tracking survey, 95 percent of the U.S. military population is online, compared with 72 percent of the general population. Similarly, 88 percent of military members are online "at least once a day," versus 45 percent of the general population.

There are numerous other reasons to believe that online programs targeting military members and their families could generate big returns. The first is the aforementioned connection between members of the military, both current and former. People in and around the military have a distinctly different lifestyle from just about everybody else. They move frequently, enduring lengthy separations from their loved ones. They have different job stresses, especially in an era like this one. As a result, their networks tend

to be tight, whether offline (at military bases) or on (in the community areas of sites like Military.com, MilitarySpot.com, MilitaryNow.com and others).

“If you reach a family at a military base and they become a big fan of a brand or company, they have the opportunity to spread the word more efficiently than any group except college students,” Harpointner notes. “Throw in the online [community] component and you have an incredible fertile breeding ground for word-of-mouth. Earning the loyalty of one family might mean earning the loyalty of a dozen.”

Hirschman, who spent 10 years in the Navy, should know. “Even before the Internet, this was such a tight-knit community. Everything we did or bought depended on what we used to call ‘the gouge’ — other people in the military. The concept of ‘the gouge’ translates well to the Internet, where you can connect with people across the world who might be in similar situations to the one you’re in.”

Additionally, while military members don’t earn huge salaries — Military.com puts the average income at \$60,000 per year — they receive extensive allowances, like gratis on-site housing. What this means is that military households often have more disposable income than households with greater incomes. “Worrying about the money they make or the overall size [of the audience] is why companies tend to miss out,” Jacobs says.

Military members are, due to their peripatetic job descriptions, a moving target for marketers. So tip No. 1 for reaching them is to secure an e-mail address, whether by offering coupons or a comparable incentive to those who provide information. You can’t market to somebody if you can’t find him or her, and an APO/FPO address is only of so much use to a company hoping to forge a lasting relationship.

Online marketers believe that discounts and special offers, in fact, are more important for the military audience than any other — simply as recognition that they are a distinct and worthy group of individuals. “A specific program or a discount for [members of the armed forces] works well, especially when it’s put together with something, whether a note or whatever, that shows appreciation for what they’re going through. They respond to companies who show a real understanding of their situation,” Hirschman notes.

Not that customer service isn’t essential under most circumstances, but the military audience demands a level of responsiveness that many online marketers and sellers simply don’t provide. Take Kazoo Toys, a seller of educational toys and one of the few companies with a spot on the military’s official online shopping mall. “These customers, more than most others, need to know that there’s support. The notes that you get with the orders break your heart. If you make a promise that you don’t fulfill, they’ll hold it against you,” says Kazoo owner, president and CEO Diana Nelson.

The common mistake companies make when targeting military families online is pitch tonality. Pitches that fail to reflect the diversity of the military will lose credibility. “Active service people and veterans come in all shapes and sizes. We’ve gotten a big response featuring single mothers with children in some of the banners we’ve done,” says Janice Thompson, managing director of site EDGE Agency, which has handled online campaigns for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

Messages that patronize, even slightly, will similarly fall on deaf ears. "You certainly don't want to talk at them or to make it seem like you pity them," Thompson continues. "These people weren't drafted. To serve was a choice that they made and they're proud of that choice. The messaging and imaging needs to reflect that." Nelson agrees: "You can't just dress up a model in uniform and slap an American flag behind him. That's a cliché."

Then there are the companies who make no distinction between the branches of the armed forces. Adds Hirschman, warning marketers to mind the details: "We got a banner advertisement from a client, which had an image of what I assume was a model in uniform. But his hair was touching his ear. It was short, but not short enough. That's a credibility killer."

Up next: programs that attempt to take further advantage of social networking, such as a "virtual post" in Second Life. Adds Thompson: "If a company or organization can ally themselves with one of the virtual communities we're seeing more of, they could build loyalty in a hurry."