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## Size Does Matter

By Tania Casselle

We've all seen the news stories about the "obesity epidemic" in the United States (the National Center for Health Statistics reports that more than 64 percent of adults are overweight). With a healthy body weight no longer the norm among Americans, it is increasingly important for marketers to tailor their communications on the basis of a customer's body shape and size.

"We always try to sharpen our understanding of our audiences by trying to slice them and dice them as finely as we can, and the body mass index (BMI) is one indicator," says Ira Matathia, managing director of strategy for the New York-based advertising and marketing agency Euro RSCG Worldwide. "This is a mainstream issue and something that marketers for a long time have had a great deal of difficulty wrapping their arms around, because it's obviously a sensitive area to single out."

Last year, New York-based Simmons, an Experian company, introduced Waistband Segments in its National Consumer Study, using BMI to categorize consumers according to their body type: underweight, normal, overweight or obese. The study, which also provided insight into consumers' lifestyles, behaviors and attitudes, could have implications for many types of industries, including travel, food and restaurant, automotive and pharmaceutical.

"The data allows marketers to target their prospects better," explains Ellen Romer, a senior vice president of Simmons Integrated Marketing Solutions division. "For example, apparel manufacturers, particularly the direct marketers and cataloguers, can identify appropriate prospects by height and weight, and profile these individuals by what type of media they use, the department stores they shop and the credit cards they use."

Some of the findings from Waistband Segments are not surprising (for example, slim women eat lots of fiber), but others are curious:

\* Overweight men between the ages of 30 and 39 apparently favor Toyotas, while men of normal weight prefer Hondas.

\* Obese women between the ages of 25 and 34 are 20 percent more likely than others to shop for clothes at Wal-Mart, while overweight women are 26 percent more likely to shop at TJ Maxx. Customers at Target, by contrast, are fairly evenly distributed across all body types. Another interesting finding is that normal or underweight women are 30 percent more likely than others to read *InStyle*, whereas overweight women are 10 percent more likely to reach for *Glamour*.

Identifying — and targeting — a niche segment is one thing, but positioning your message just right is another. "Brand image being as important as it is, one doesn't want to get pigeon-holed into being the brand for overweight guys," Matathia points out, "unless it's a food product specifically aimed at diet."

### Changing Shape of Consumers

Thanks to recent research by the Society of Automotive Engineers and SizeUSA, using electronic 3-D body scanning to "map" the measurements of thousands of

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Americans, marketers have a more accurate idea of people's shapes and sizes. Previous standard measurements, based on a 1941 study of young white women and a post-World War II military survey of service personnel (mainly white men), were hopelessly outdated.

The SizeUSA study, conducted by North Carolina technology and supply chain specialists, analyzed 200 different body measurements in six age groups (both sexes) and four ethnic groups, and correlated the information to other demographics and behaviors. Russell Corporation, for example, searched the data to identify consumers who are very active, a little overweight or about normal, and who buy running shoes.

"Now we can see what those people look like for different ethnic or age groups," points out Jim Lovejoy, director of SizeUSA. He confirms that the population is getting heavier and taller: "The surprise is that we're also changing shape and becoming more pear-shaped."

"Reality is," adds Matathia, "if someone is overweight, they need to think differently about, say, automobile purchases. It's probably why trucks and SUVs are outselling sedans, and it probably has more to do with that demographic than anyone is talking about."

Matathia reminds marketers not to assume that overweight people have a problem that needs to be "fixed." Many are comfortable with their body type. "In effect, it's two markets," he notes. "One says how do I cope with this and get it under control? The other, which is the hidden market, says deal with me for who I am, and provide products and services to accommodate me."

Gus Valen did just that in 1994 when, as a group product manager for Michigan-based Haworth Corp., he helped launch the first affordable big and tall chairs. "The chair market wasn't segmented then," says Valen, who now serves as the CEO of the Valen Group, a strategy consultancy in Cincinnati. "It was a one-size-fits-all market, and we were surprised by the returns we could get."

Valen believes marketers can fall into the trap of talking down to overweight consumers. "They have the same lifestyle needs as other individuals," he says. "If you communicate too differently to them, you're going to run into problems. Understand the implicit drivers of what makes people feel good, and then communicate that message as it relates to your product."

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