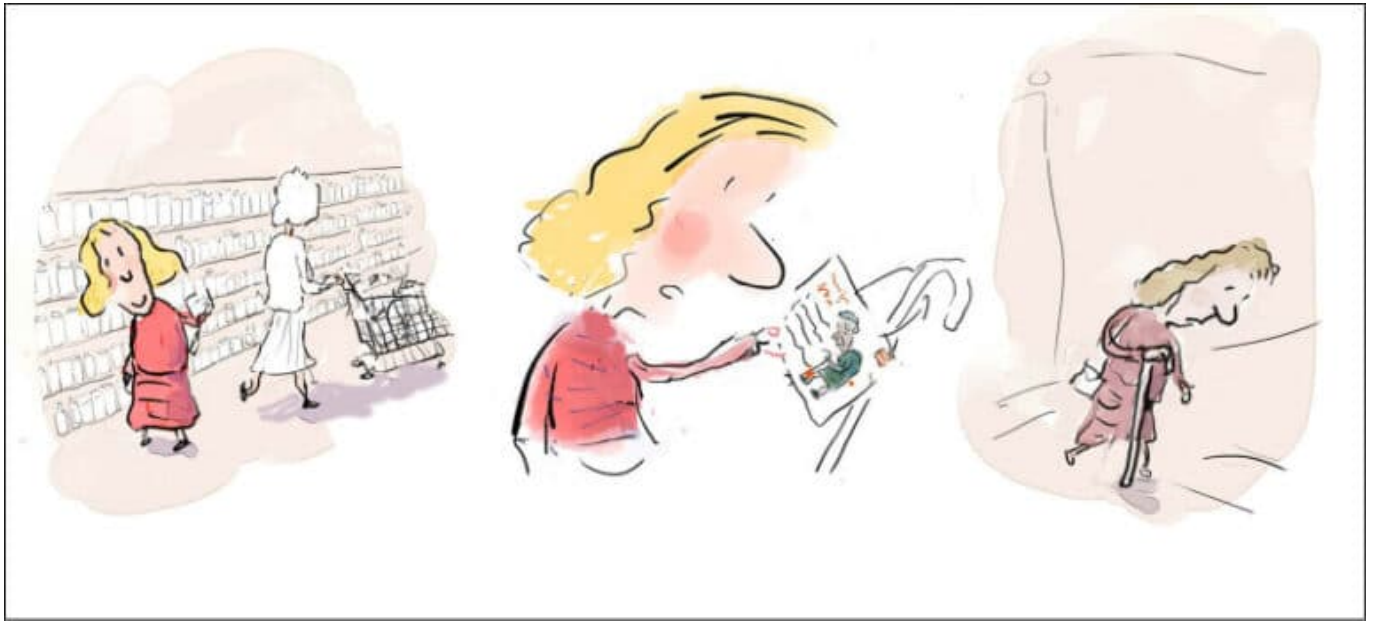


Think outside the product box



Buying products aimed at a different demographic can be a lesson in what really matters.

by Shari Short

I don't know about you, but I spend a lot of time at my local pharmacy. In fact, I am reasonably sure they should name an aisle after me. Perhaps you've seen me there. I am the 43-year-old standing in the senior-care aisle, yelling at the products on the shelves. You see, for a long time, I had one strong, particular need: to find a product where the person on the box looked like me. And that was not happening.

"But you're not a senior," you may be saying. "Why should the products feature someone who looks like you?" For me, it comes down to one simple truth: Because of my multiple sclerosis, I use these products too.

Like a lot of people with MS, I struggle with balance issues. I have found that an extra source of support, such as a rail along a wall, can go a long way. In the senior-care aisle, I found several rail options that could be installed in the bathroom or bedroom to help with transfers, and I knew they would be perfect for me, but going by the pictures on the box, I am not the target audience.

Instead, the box for the bed support rail featured a man who looked like Morgan Freeman. I also looked at a walker, but I could have sworn the woman on the box was Bea Arthur. Where's the product that features the woman who looks more like Tina Fey than Tina Louise?

When I see these images, somehow I feel like I am intruding on someone else's aisle and

taking their stuff. I am stealing Morgan Freeman's bed rail. I am trying out Bea Arthur's walker. Remember when Maude would get mad? It wasn't pretty.

I've had countless encounters where people think I am making the purchases for someone else, even when I have my cane. They figure the product is for my parent or grandparent. (Or maybe they think I am stealing other people's stuff.) I know people mean well, but I always wonder: Should I correct them, tell them it's for me and make them feel awkward? A lot of times with MS, I feel awkward enough. Most recently I received the HurryCane as a gift. Have you seen the TV commercial for this? It's a foldable cane that is marketed for its supposedly superior balance and stability. It's a great cane, but you'd think I was holding an Oscar in my hand instead, going by the number of people who stop me just to tell me how much their great aunts love their HurryCanes. I don't tell them, but I saw their great aunts on the TV commercial. I didn't see anyone my age.

It took a while, but I realized that my sensitivity to the target audience photos had more to do with my feelings about my MS than toward the marketing professionals who selected the photos. My "a-ha" moment came about when my cane first saved me from a fall. So what if my device came in a box with a silver-haired couple walking on a beach? Does the device help me? Yes. And that's all that matters. That same couple, by the way, can also be spotted riding a tandem bicycle on the box for a shower bench, just two items over on the same shelf. They get around. And now, with all these devices, so can I.

At the suggestion of my physical therapist, I recently joined a gym. I checked out the catalog to look at the classes I may be able to take, given my limitations, and sure enough, there was a water aerobics class with a photo of many beautiful older women in bathing caps. All those awkward feelings began to creep back, but this time, I knew how to counter them.

All that matters is that the water aerobics class keeps me active, mobile and independent. Besides, I can learn a lot from people who share common experiences with mobility limitations. Just because they don't have MS doesn't mean they will glide through the water like a synchronized swimmer. The MS community has offered me a whole new community of friends, so maybe I can befriend my fellow swimmers, as well, and learn about other exercises that help them keep active.

Who knows? Maybe we could have lunch or go shopping—I, for one, certainly know where we could go. And exactly which aisle.

Shari Short lives in Wilmington, Delaware, with her husband and 11-year-old son. She was diagnosed with MS in 2008.

Ever felt others don't understand what it's like to live with MS? Share your story at [MSconnection.org](https://www.msconnection.org).

Read "[Man of steel: an MS hero](#)," from the Spring issue of **Momentum**.