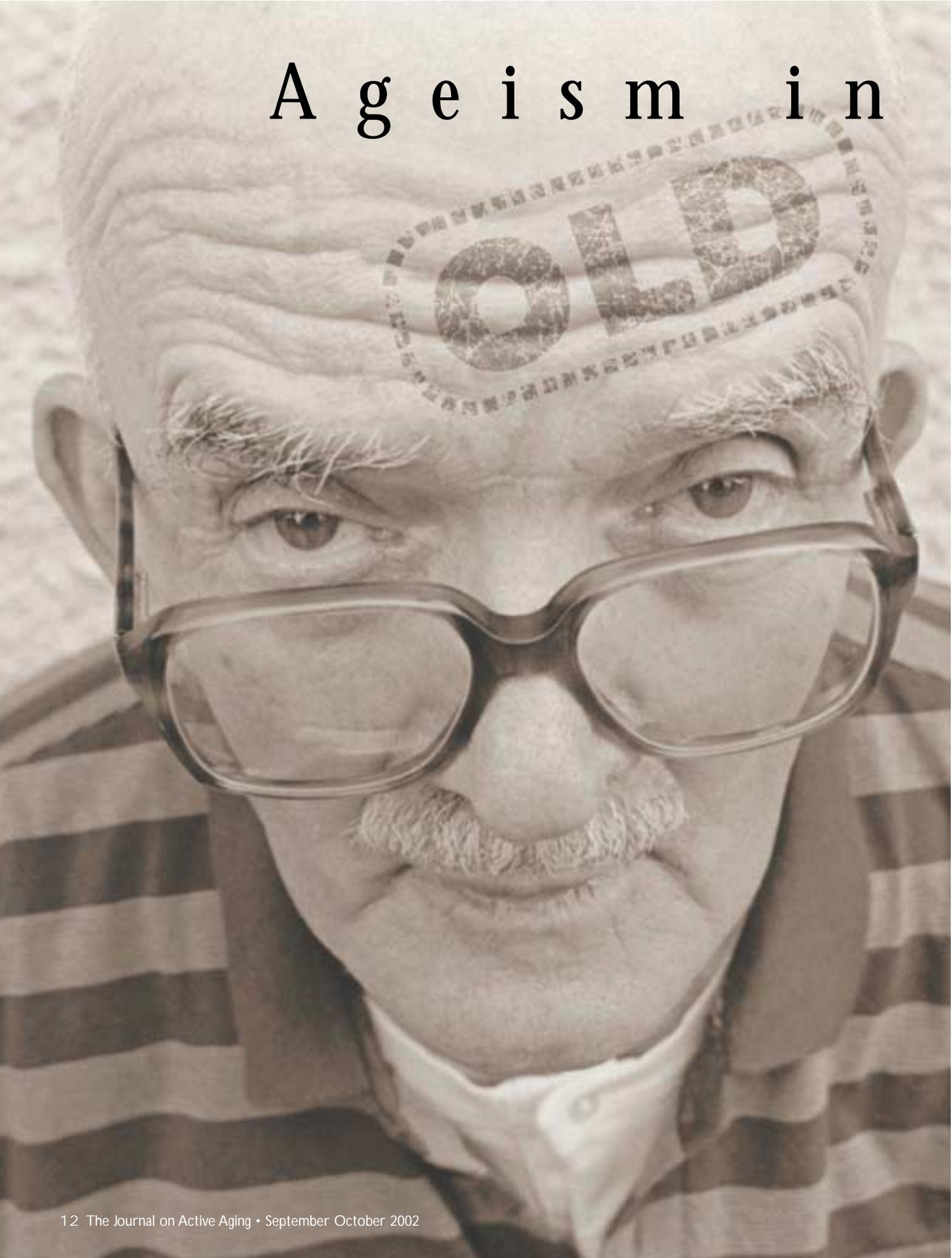


# A g e i s m i n



# a d v e r t i s i n g

The advertising world perpetuates myths and stereotypes of aging, says this marketing expert

by Robert Snyder

Many advertisers and their agencies overlook the largest, wealthiest consumer group in America in a collective worshipful attitude toward youth. Just missing the older segments would be unwise in most marketing plans. Laughing at and stereotyping older adults appears to be tolerated by many industries in ways that would never be allowed for any other group in our country.

How did we get here? Those who attempt to advertise or promote a product have looked for ways to communicate with a *target* market since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Mass marketing became highly successful following World War II. The discovery by researchers and marketers that consumers could be understood through the use of demographics (mostly related to age and income) and more accurately targeted by advertising communications would prove to be the key to all marketing communication in the final 50 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Demographically based marketing

Books have been written about the various generations. Research has been conducted with regard to the various life stages, which many people over the age of 50 have faced or will face during their remaining years. Yet these additional insights have not really changed the way we think about consumers.

Years of research and marketing based on demographics has created stereotypical images of various segments of the population. These images are so

ingrained into our thinking that it is difficult to see ageism even exists.

As researchers have become more sophisticated in their approaches to and understanding of human behavior, one would think that new methods of marketing and creating advertising communications would have evolved in the past 50 years. Strides have been made. But, when all the bells and whistles are stripped away, the strategies of today's advertisers are similar to those used in the 1950s.

For the past few years, companies that advertise consistently report that marketing costs are rising and the return on investment is down. Yet the industry continues to "do the same things and expect better results." Once considered the panacea for increasing sales and capturing lifelong relationships with the customer, customer relationship marketing efforts have yielded less than satisfactory results.

With this as the backdrop for entrance into the new millennium, it would seem logical that the marketing world would open its collective mind to new and far-reaching ideas that would turn the marketing world upside down, as the Internet has done on the technology side of our world.

The Internet has literally forced a fundamental change in strategies in technology and companies are scrambling to be connected at lightning speed. It has happened quickly and without regard to the size or depth of brand equity held by any company.

The Internet is brand blind. The Internet is age blind. Yet the shift in thought with regard to human-behavior-motivating underlying values and brain science has not really even started. This shift in thought needs to be as dramatic as the technological shift. However, it will take

## Definitions

Ageism (n.) didn't enter the English language until 1969. This word is defined as prejudice or discrimination against a particular age group, especially the elderly.

Elderly (adj., n.) entered the English language in 1611. Webster's Dictionary defines this word as meaning "rather old, especially beyond middle age."

a concerted and sustained effort to create lasting change in the way in which we view the chronologically older portion of our population, because changes in social thought occur slowly.

## Ad industry numbers and trends

The resulting status of marketing and advertising in the United States can be summarized as follows:

- We have all been placed into buckets according to age, income and generation;
- It is generally assumed that because we are a certain age, read a certain magazine or are a part of a generational label (GIs, Boomers, GenXers) that we are very much like others within that same generation;
- The advertising world is dominated by youth. Companies with products to sell are, in general, mesmerized by the need to capture the youth market. The reasoning goes this way: to preserve our market share for the future, we must capture them while they are young. Research supports the notion that this is nonsense, yet companies and advertisers continue to do as they have always done; and
- Those aged 50 and older are, for the most part, labeled as *spill over*, according to those who place media buys for major advertisers.

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# Ageism in advertising

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## Myths about aging

The topic of aging is durably encapsulated in a layer of myths in our society. Like most myths, those about aging include a confusing blend of truth and fancy. Here are a few of the most familiar of the aging myths compressed into single sentence assertions:

**Myth 1:** You get old; you get sick;

**Myth 2:** You get old; you lose interest in intimacy;

**Myth 3:** You get old; you are unwilling to try anything new;

**Myth 4:** You get old; you lose control of bodily functions;

**Myth 5:** You get old; you can't function in the workplace;

**Myth 6:** You get old; you can't understand technology;

**Myth 7:** You get old; you have no social life;

**Myth 8:** You get old; you cannot fully participate or pull your own weight; and

**Myth 9:** You get old; you need help to make decisions.

These myths are frequently heard, usually with some link to reality, but always in significant conflict with recent scientific data.

The public, in general, and advertising people, in particular, are programmed to think that aging is a *bad* thing. That once you're past 40, you're over the hill and out of the game. But if you talk with most healthy, older people, you'll learn there are many positive things about aging. In fact, Drs. J.W. Rowe and R.L. Khan, authors of *Successful Aging*, speak to "successful aging (as) dependent upon individual choices and behaviors... attained through individual choice and effort."

Many advertising people—copywriters, art directors, account executives and media buyers—subscribe to these myths and perpetuate ageism within our

industry by being unaware of the realities of marketing to mature adults. It may be easier for young staffers to go with what they know and understand—what appeals to them personally. Often advertising people think, We'll pick up the older consumer anyway.

The hard fact is the sheer number of Baby Boomers will change everything during the next 15 years. The advertising agency that understands this fact and acts to stamp out ageism in advertising will survive.

A new customer majority  
More than 12 years ago, David B. Wolfe, author of the book *Serving the Ageless Market*, documented and wrote about the next step in the evolution of understanding human behavior as it relates to marketing. As is true with many explorers, inventors and scientists, Wolfe's understanding that a person's chronological age is nearly a *non sequitur* has for the most part fallen on deaf ears.

The study of the brain has led to some rather astonishing conclusions, which fly in the face of traditional marketing strategy. According to Wolfe, people become more *introspective, individuated* and *autonomous* at midlife:

*The introspective midlife mind is a more subjective mind, which offers greater resistance to objective analysis than the more objectively biased minds of the young. Older consumers think in a more nuanced manner, and see more shades of gray where young consumers perceive the world in black and white. This is a big reason why consumer research has become less dependable as the consumer population has aged.*

*The more individuated midlife mind is less tolerant of marketing when its individuality is denied in marketing communications and when transaction processes depersonalize the customer*

*experience. This is why customer loyalty has fallen as the customer population has aged.*

*The autonomous midlife mind is more resistant to attempts by others to bend it to their wills. This is why argument-styled advertising that hard sells product features, functional benefits and economic value has lost much of its effectiveness as the customer population has aged.*

Marketers everywhere know something is wrong, but they don't know how to use the traditional age-related demographic information they possess to improve results.

Until enough noise is made about the need to embrace a fundamental shift towards viewing this new customer majority as an *ageless market*, no change in marketing efforts will take place. Advertisers and marketers continue doing what they have always done, because it is easier than taking a new path—even if this new path will lead to better communication with potential customers and ultimately grow revenues.

Finally, the world has changed to a global economy. This fact cannot be changed or reversed. Marketing strategies that proved successful in North America in the past will simply not work in a multicultural world. Just think for one moment about all those young MBAs who are being educated today. How do we expect them to understand Chinese markets? Through age? Through generational experiences?

The current system is destined for communications failure. The foundation upon which future marketing communication is to take place must be timeless and ageless. ▼

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# 50 - plus numbers and facts

Fifty-plus adults now comprise 38% of the U.S. population and this number jumps to 47% by 2020. (Census Bureau)

Fifty-plus adults account for approximately 80% of personal wealth in U.S. banks and financial institutions, and have 50% of all discretionary income. (Age Wave Report, 2001)

Approximately 6,000 Americans each day celebrate their 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. (Selling to Seniors, 2001)

A person who turned 65 in 1998 can expect to live an additional 17.8 years. (Research Alert, 2001)

Median household net worth in 1999, according to age of household head: 55-64, \$145,000; 65-74, \$190,000; 75-plus, \$132,900. (Administration on Aging, 2001)

Percentage who owned their own homes in 1999: 50-54, 77.8%; 55-59, 80.7%; 60-64, 81.3%.

## Spending

Consumers over 50 spend an average of \$75.24 per week on groceries. (International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association, 2001)

According to a survey by the Cotton Incorporated Lifestyle Monitor, the amount of money spent on clothes in the past month (June 2002) by women 50-55: none, 20%; \$1-\$50, 30%; \$51-\$100, 14%; \$101-\$200, 20%; over \$200, 17%.

Fifty-plus adults buy 41% of all new cars and 48% of all luxury automobiles. Consumers in the 60-69 age bracket have more than doubled their new vehicle purchases since the early 1970s. (Age Wave Report, 2001)

Today's 50-plus adults represent 80% of all luxury travel, and spend 74% more on a typical vacation than 18-49 year-

olds. According to an Age Wave report in 2001, they spend 40% more time vacationing in their 50s than they did in their 40s.

## Drugs and healthcare

Of the 50 drugs used most frequently by seniors, the average annual cost per prescription as of early 2001 was \$956. (AARP)

Consumers 50-plus purchase 77% of all prescription drugs and 61% of over-the-counter drugs. (Advertising Age, 2000)

Seniors spend anywhere from 12-19% of their income on out-of-pocket health expenses. (AARP, 2001)

## Technology

Half of 50-plus consumers have personal computers at home, and 70% of this group has Internet access. (Advertising Age, 2000)

Most popular online activities for senior Internet users according to a Pew Research Center study in 2000: email, 93%; search for health info, 53%; get financial information, 44%; read political news, 36%; play a game, 32%; buy/sell stocks, 12%.

## Quotes

"Media buyers estimate 55 percent of the \$8 billion in advertising in TV's upfront and scatter market last year was directed to the 18-49 age group. Remainder went to kids under 18 and adults 25 to 54." (Ad Age, 5/13/02)

Less than 10% of today's advertising focuses on people over 50—up from 1-2% a decade ago. (Age Wave, 2002)

With the exception of pharmaceutical advertising, most of the images seen in advertising featuring seniors mocks them with bad humor or stereotypes.

"For a lot of brands we work with, it's sexier to advertise to the younger consumers who are trendier, much more

fashion-forward, very social and very much in the public eye. With marketing dollars so limited and precious, you want to bet...on the future." (Melissa Pordy, SVP of print, Zenith Media)

"There's a certain illogical standard today when Baby Boomers...are moving into their 50s and taking a predominate amount of spending with them. Nielsen Media Research now tracks 35-64 year-olds, proof that some advertisers look at this demographic as more representative of where the core consumer is." (David Poltrack, EVP, research and planning at CBS)

"Advertisers will need to understand the change in sophistication of today's over 50 population. Boomers want to see people their own age represented in ads for products they buy rather than the 70-plus stereotypes or the advertising that uses 20 and 30 year-olds." (Les Harris in Quirk's Marketing Research Review 2000)

The 50-plus market holds more than \$1.6 trillion in buying power...even with this kind of cash, 'corporate America is leery,' an ad exec says... Marketers should directly target (this) group, which by 2020, will include one in three Americans. (Ad Age, 2000)

Marketers who worry about their product being labeled as an *old folks' brand* need to educate their 30 year-old brand managers to walk in the shoes of someone twice their age. Help them to know that those who may be of *retirement age* don't necessarily retire—they often redirect, refocus and reinvent themselves.

"Sixty year-olds don't think like they did in the last generation. Sixty year-olds in the last generation wore plaid pants." (Richard Kinsler, president of SLG Advertising and former publisher of Playboy and Mademoiselle)