

Talkin' 'bout my generation?

BY LIZ TORLÉE

It's time marketers realize life doesn't end at 55

To paraphrase The Who, why don't the over-55s all f-f-fade away? Well, why not? They're such a nuisance. They are beginning to take just a little too much time checking things out with the pharmacist while younger people are waiting impatiently in line. And they're hogging all the friendly advisors at the bank, fussing about their mutual funds not doing so well. Their music keeps on coming back over and over and over again. They laugh with each other about something Timothy Leary said in 1969. And they wet themselves when they laugh.

Now, if you think that's all a little harsh, I challenge you to go double-click the first creative or media strategy you can dig up and check the target group definition: 18-34? 25-49? Perhaps there's a really daring one that says 35-54. OK, maybe you'll find one for 55-plus but it doesn't count if it's for liver spots, cruises, reverse mortgages or erectile dysfunction.

How many of you found a target group definition for, say, a perfume, a beer, a fashion brand, a car, a dating service that reads 55-plus or maybe 45-64? If you did, a thousand kudos and a long and happy life to you. Because it's rare.

Nearly seven million people in Canada are already over 55 and, within the next 10 years, another 4.5 million will cruise by. So much is written about the so-called aging population—especially those "pig-in-the-python" baby boomers and yet in the marketing world, the only thing that has noticeably changed is an embarrassing sea of clichés and euphemisms.

The fact is, despite the dutiful efforts of Statistics Canada and the weighty tomes of educated opinion, the whole concept of aging is littered with assumptions. It is still assumed, in marketing circles, that men experiment furiously with brands of beer while in their twenties and that if you don't catch them before they're 28, they've made their choice and will refuse to budge.

It is assumed that women over 55 suddenly stop spending money on cosmetics (after all, who's going to look at them now?) and think about winding down their careers, or that men turning 60 realize their sports car fantasies were childish and content themselves with a nice, comfy four-door sedan. Ideally, of course, it should be a no-name sedan because the marketing people at the car company would get a cold, sick feeling if they knew a 60-year-old was driving their all-new sedan, and would quickly call an agency review.

Here are excerpts from the profiles of two women (names changed). One is 34, the other 56:

Emma has booked an eco-adventure tour of Nicaragua, contemplates leaving her well-paying but boring job to start her own business from home, takes ginseng because she thinks it will help with her training for the half-marathon and sports a kabbalah-inspired, Madonna-approved red string bracelet.

Heather wonders if it's too late to get life insurance, really enjoys babysitting for the family next door, has joined a quilting club and finds the music these days "a bit too hyper."

You've probably guessed this, but it's Emma who is 56. This is not to suggest that all 34-year-olds are like Heather. We know they're not. It's really to make the point that there are a lot of Emmas out there who are slipping under the radar. In four years, she'll qualify for the seniors discount on Via Rail, but she'll think three times before claiming it. It's that "seniors" word. Somehow, it means she is suddenly supposed to work part time so she can play more golf, take a special brand of multi-vitamins to maintain an active lifestyle and begin to investigate retirement communities on 50plus.com.

But she's nowhere near ready to do this. First of all, the whole concept of retirement is being overhauled, not only by government pension-dispensers, but by the working world in general. Fewer people can afford to retire and, more important, fewer people want to. Many, it seems, want to overhaul their lives and, based on ethnographic work in several different categories-to live more intensely. They now want spicier food, even more obscure wines and *Indiana Jones*-type vacations; some of them sell everything, reinvent their home identity and buy motorcycles (BMW and Harley-Davidson have been reporting record sales; over 20% of *Canadian Motorcycle Guide's* readers are 50+). And many of them are on sites like Lavalife or Match.com, scouting for their second or third partners. To quote one of these 55-plus people, "Retirement? You've gotta be kidding. Sounds like you've given up on life, nothing more to plan for."

While there are some valiant efforts in the marketing world to address this fickle bunch, there is still too much old-speak, too many clichés. Here are a few:

- Retirement-just plain old.
- Lifestyle-"Used to death," said one man-"what happened to the word life?"
- More time for family-"Frankly, that's about the last thing I want after 28 years of them all over my kitchen."
- Empty-nester-too negative. Empty is sometimes good (see above).
- Snowbirds-suggests much older people and only in Florida, whereas many 55-plus are going to Tuscany, Provence, Mexico, Spain and, watch this one, Uruguay.
- Silver, Gold-"That only works in the Olympics."
- Vintage, Mature-"Yuck."

Our culture is simply not ready to accept that getting old is a fine thing. There is a lot of rationalizing, lots of talk about always being beautiful inside, but the minute anybody has the gall to announce the age of their target-"All you 55-plus folk, pay attention"-well, they must be talking about someone else.

The fact is, there is no need to do any of this. Just keep promoting wonderful things and great experiences and they will come. And we just have to get rid of that "seniors" word, whatever age it is supposed to apply to. I know it's been tried, but surely there's some creative liberator out there who could come up with a better handle. Personally, I think a big chunk of that 55-plus gang should be called The Stillers. They are still working; still experimenting; still dancing; still making love; still going to rock concerts; still spending a lot of money on fashion, home décor, holidays; still working on their bodies; still planning a long, intense future; and, to paraphrase the "My Generation" mantra from The Who, still hoping they die before they get old.

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