

Marketers in Full Bloom

As the Biggest Generation Passes 50, Retailers Refit Their Appeal

By KATHY LALLY
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All we had to do was get born, and we turned Gerber into a Fortune 500 company. Faster than a speeding bullet, we created the kids' cereal industry. We wanted a Hula-Hoop, and 25 million were sold in four months. And, in 1981, when we began to turn 35 and were buying houses, Apartment Life magazine became Metropolitan Home.

"What came first," asks Matt Thornhill, a marketing consultant and president of the Boomer Project, based in Richmond, "baby boomers having babies or the minivan?"

Think about it. We baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, have gone through life deciding what sells. There are 78 million of us, Thornhill says, and we control half of all household discretionary income and spend \$2 trillion every year on consumer goods and services. Our money, and our numbers, talk.

Now boomers are aging, and by the end of this year, half of us will be 50 or older, Thornhill says, with 10,000 more Americans facing the blaze of 50 candles every day. Surely you've noticed all those parties.

Once, 50 was old, especially for a culture that idolizes youth and for marketers who believed 18- to 49-year-olds ruled. Trust the boomers to change that, just as we have so many other aspects of American life. And if retailers don't start paying attention, marketing consultants say, they're going to be in big trouble.

That's because 50 is about to become very, very cool.

"This is too large of an audience to ignore anymore," says Candace Corlett, manager of 50-plus marketing for WSL Strategic Retail in New York. "If you're going to succeed, you're going to have to make yourself relevant to people over 50."

Thornhill thinks he has already witnessed the

actual moment when it became socially acceptable to grow older in America. He was watching Billy Crystal on "The Late Show With David Letterman" a few months ago. Both Crystal and Letterman, heading toward 57, were joking about how they had to check all their body parts when they got up in the morning to make sure everything was still working.

"What struck me was that they were now making fun of themselves, instead of 'old people,'" Thornhill says. They had shifted from disparaging stereotypical "seniors" to self-deprecating humor.

"I predict that event will ultimately mark the spot in time when it became okay for boomers to grow older in America," he says.

James J. Gilmartin, president of Coming of Age Inc., points out that while the over-50 group is expanding rapidly, the younger generation that marketers think is so desirable is not doing the same, growing at only 1 or 2 percent a year.

His company, in Lombard, Ill., is a marketing, advertising and public relations firm dedicated to helping clients improve their market share with older consumers. "The rules of aging are changing," he says, "and so are the rules of marketing."

Corlett says the baby boomers are getting older without being old, remaining energetic

and full of vitality, though only a few businesses recognize it. Chico's understands, selling older women clothes that are trendy but appropriate, she says. Other manufacturers will have no choice but to make clothes and products that appeal to broader age groups, especially those over 50, she says.

"Eileen Fisher is brilliantly ageless," Corlett says, speaking of the clothing line that advertises women of all ages wearing its clothes, including vibrant, beautiful women with gray hair.

Thornhill and his partners in the Boomer Project -- the Southeastern Institute of Research in Richmond and Survey Sampling International in Connecticut -- say that although most boomers accept their age, they refuse to be treated as if they are old.

The generation that rebelled against sexism is not about to brook ageism, he says.

We're going to want more Viagra and vitamins, Botox and body scans, exercise mats and fitness classes, he says. Remodelers will hear from us as the kids move out and spare bedrooms are transformed into offices or home theaters. Wanting to "age in place" rather than move into a retirement community, boomers will be buying rails for the bathtub and renovating the kitchen so everything is in easy reach.

And, as both Thornhill and Gilmartin agree, baby boomers have bought plenty of stuff. Now we want experiences.

When we travel, Thornhill says, we want to take a class. When we have grandchildren, we'll want to find ways to indulge them. (These are the people who plastered their minivans with "Baby on Board" signs.) When we go out to dinner, we want to savor the moment -- so restaurants will have to print menus with type large enough to read and provide enough light that we can see what we're eating, Thornhill says.

Sur La Table, which has three stores in the Washington area, is one retailer that understands that desire for experience, Thornhill says, offering cooking classes alongside the cookware in its stores. Gilmartin says New Balance gets it, with ads showing women enjoying the experience of running rather than touting the mechanics of the shoe.

"You have to see products as the gateway to experiences," Gilmartin says.

Most retailers, and especially department stores, Corlett says, have a long way to go, ignoring that their core customers are over 50. All the creativity and energy goes into the junior department, she says, while older customers in misses get a sleepy, boring store.

"That contrast says, 'We really care about the young. You, in misses, the clothes are on the rack, go fetch,' " is how she describes it. That's not good enough, she says, arguing that retailers have to make their older customers feel desirable.

"Merchandise to my spirit," Corlett says, "not to my tired feet."

She suspects Gap understands. The chain is developing a new format aimed at shoppers over 35, perhaps mindful of those millions of over-50 boomers who don't feel a day over 35.

"You're only as old as you shop," Corlett says.

