**Rethinking Old**

Aging just isn’t what it used to be — and there are numbers to prove it. Consider this: In the 1950s, the average age of a person entering a nursing home was 65. Today, it is 81. Due to a combination of factors, including lengthening life spans, older ages at marriage and childbirth, the challenges of an uncertain economy, and a desire to remain socially connected and financially secure, large numbers of older people are leading active and productive lives well beyond the traditional retirement age. Many are delaying retirement by remaining in their jobs while others are launching new careers in their 50s and 60s — as well as taking classes, hiking, running marathons, and seeking out novel experiences. It may well be that 60 *is* the new 40.

Other numbers tell more of the story. According to U.S. census figures, between 2000 and 2010, the 65-and-older population increased by 15.1 percent while the total population grew only 9.7 percent. And the fastest-growing segment of the over-65 population? People between the ages of 85 and 94, whose numbers shot up 30 percent to more than five million. So not only are there more older people, there are more very old people — many of whom remain in their communities.

What do these statistics suggest for publications and advertisers? The most obvious lesson: If publications are not marketing to older people, they are losing out on important opportunities. But there are other lessons embedded in these numbers, particularly when it comes to special sections and ad design.

Traditional “senior sections” often focus on challenges, such as living with chronic medical conditions, caregiving options, and residential choices, and have “backward-looking themes,” such as recounting memories or sharing life stories. While these topics will be of interest to a segment of the older population, a balanced section will also explore recreational, cultural, and occupational opportunities for active seniors.

Featuring more dynamic content is essential to engaging the full spectrum of older readers, but it is equally important to showcase advertisers whose businesses reflect their diversity in terms of both interests and needs. Recently, I thumbed through a senior section whose “active lifestyle” focus was diminished by page after page of ads for retirement communities, funeral homes, hospitals, pharmacies, and medical suppliers — and not much else!

Ads need to be dynamic as well. Upbeat colors and design flourishes, lively graphics and energetic copy are essential.

Today’s older readers are far more than the sum of their years. They want information about hospitals *and* hot tubs, pharmacies *and* foreign language classes, retirement communities *and* community recreation facilities, funeral homes *and* home furnishings, early-bird specials *and* late-night entertainment venues. The big lesson? Think 60 *and* 40.

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