

Aging, Lifestyle and Consumerism

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Introduction

Industrialized nations have populations that are quickly aging and percentages of the older populations increasing. This is expected to continue. Older adults are a vital part of society and have played key roles politically, economically, artistically. Ruth Bader Ginsberg got a seat on the Supreme Court at age 60, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, Jr. is 69 years old, Mother Teresa was 61 when she traveled to New York City to open her first American-based house of charity and 75 when she opened Gift of Love, a home to care for those infected with HIV/AIDS, Grandma Moses became famous when she was 79 as a result of her one woman show in New York City. In her paintings showed power, not despair, aging or unhappiness. Leslie Stahl of the 40 year running television show “60 Minutes” is 74 years old and Morley Safer, her fellow longest serving correspondent retired at age 84. Older adults continue to blaze trails in all aspects of life. At the same time, there are a number of challenges and opportunities that are becoming apparent throughout society (Siren 2013).

As the United States of America continues to evolve, many baby boomers find themselves facing a sometimes awkward, confusing and challenging stage in life where they are far beyond the “over 30” folks that they chanted never to trust and in a position to be called a “senior citizen” in some venues. If “age before beauty” really was the valued attribute, today, it could be an enriching and fulfilling time in their lives. Some of the major stepping stones to an egalitarian society (belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political, and economic affairs) are: Women’s right to vote in 1919 and Black American’s right to vote in 1964. However, some seniors find themselves experiencing treatments of be devalued dismissed and overlooked which oddly enough, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) refers to the unfair or unequal treatment of individuals 40+ when ageism is present. Ageism is discrimination and prejudice based on age. Holding negative stereotypes about people of different ages affects culture and getting the true potential from all members of society as a result. Older Americans today are seeking a renewed way of thinking about aging.

Aging

As the age continuum goes from an infant being born to the death of this individual, there is what is called a process of change that is physiological aging. Chronologically the 1998 World Health Report states aging as 65 and over while the United Nations’ reports it as 60 years of age and older. (Yilmaz 2012). As health services improve and increase, development of better nutrition, knowledge and containment of contagious diseases, the people reaching agedness is gradually on the upswing. (Yilmaz 2012). Discriminatory practices have often been associated with race and sex with less emphasis and understanding of how it relates to age prejudice. With the expanding of the aging population, this is concerning. Ageism, usually associated with treating older people inferiorly, is increasing as the Baby Boomers retire (Azulai 2014). It is found that it is part of a social perception of human beings (Azulai 2014).

A social theorist, Maggie Kuhn, Co-founder and Convener of the Gray Panthers (1972-1975), spoke in the 1970’s about “identity politics” referring to discriminating by age and alienating, disempowering and disrespecting the older generation (Estes 2009). One opportunity today is to look at this cohort in a different way in terms of their contributions to the marketplace, work environment and society.

Society

Messages that are ageist are passed on through the media via newspapers and magazines, billboards, television, greeting cards, early bird specials, senior discounts indicate a culture that is biased. (Nelson 2011). This influences the attitudes and behavior of policy makers, business leaders, and government officials. Certain attitudes and beliefs that surround aging become ageism. Some examples of these are that older people are not well, are in

bad moods and that being young is preferable. These can evolve into actions of discrimination. Younger people comprise a large group that are discriminating towards elders (Yilmaz 2012).

To help dissipate this belief, intergenerational service-learning programs linking college students and older adults are becoming more commonly used. Indicators are that students knew these elders better after the experience and developed deep relationships gaining admiration and feeling inspiration from them. Many students viewed them as role models after the project (Zuccherro 2011). Ageism often translates to treating aging adults inferiorly. These service learning collaborations contribute to breaking that mold, and this could counter what Maggie Kuhn described as the learned myths about older people being mindless, helpless, and baby-like. Ms. Kuhn helped dispel myths with her motto “do something outrageous each day”.

The written and spoken media convey negative messages in regards to older people. These beliefs and attitudes manifest certain behaviors toward this population resulting in excluding and discriminating against them. (Azulai 2014). The collaborations discussed earlier attempt to address the stigmatization.

Self Concept

Cognitive age, a form of self-concept, tends to be lower than the person’s chronological age. Indications in earlier research are that one’s self-concept is in the vicinity of 8-12 years less than actual age chronologically (e.g. VanAuken and Barry, 1995). Personal values can also be helpful indicators to look at and comprehend the role of people as customers, workers and helpful to organization and marketers (Kohlbacher 2012). Research connects customer behavior and cognitive age (Kohlacher 2012). Perceptions of wealth influences individuals to deduce that they are in better health and reverse is also true. A possibility for this perception might be related to improved medical care and lifestyles that are healthier.

The healthier and wealthier respondents in a study saw themselves as younger and those less wealthy and healthy did not view themselves as young (Kohlbacher 2012). As the baby boomers continue to age they are considered to be informed and educated consuming at high levels. “Non-old” individuals feel that they will not age the same as “the others” aged previously (Jonson and Jonson 2015).

Marketing and Workplace

Life expectancy is on the rise as is increasing productivity and healthier lifestyles. The way aging is thought about and discussed is being challenged by older Americans as more and more of this population strives to stay physically and socially active as they age. Wells Fargo released a study in 2011 where 1 in 5 affluent Americans and 1 in 4 middle class Americans said that they would need to work until they were 80 (Touryalai 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that currently the United States has the most older people working since prior to Medicare in 1965. This is due to the baby boomers. When asked, 40% said they will work as long as possible or that they do not plan to retire at all (Steverman 2016). Marketing and Management can learn more about the aging populations and what opportunities can be pursued addressing this group. The baby boomers, who were born between 1946-1964 are a large and growing part of the United States older market.

Females are found to be at a large disadvantage and more vulnerable than their male counterparts when it comes to aging in the workplace. The structure and attitude of the workplace lends itself to practices that carry stereotypes that are negative and often punitive to caretaking responsibilities (Barnett 2005).

Businesses need to utilize the expertise and insight of the older adults in the workplace whether it is through skills or interpersonal connections. Advisory roles utilizing the mind or heart more than physical activities might be an option. (Spiro 2009). This could also add to the insight of what this large market wants and needs in terms of products and services. The employees with more experience, education, and skill are of great value to those who employ them, and may not be replaceable (Steverman 2016).

Consumerism

The capability and needs of older consumers can differ from younger adults. Devices for supporting healthcare may require some adaptations for older people. Technological advances are being made to assist older adults to remain functional and independent as long as possible (Matthews 2006). The beauty industry is developing and introducing a multitude of anti-aging hair products. (Serviss 2013). This particular market values convenience and is willing to pay for it (Serviss 2013)

In 2012 the Boomers bought almost half of the bedding and furniture and almost half of the dollars spent in that industry. Many are in their peak years of earning and were less touched by unemployment and the housing roller coaster than others. (French 2013)

The Baby Boomers, also known as adult majority, due to their numbers have had an oversized effect on Society as they have gone through their lives. The baby boomers who make up 29% of the population in America, occupy what is called PCG or Psychological Center of Gravity who have a great influence on society. When millions of boomers hit mid-life in the 1990's and began thinking more in depth about life's meaning, the United States experienced a spiritual awakening (Wolfe 2004). Boomers are more affluent financially and more educated than their parents resulting in many more ways to meet their needs and view the world as more realistic and ironic. The experience they have as a consumer has become more significant to them as customers than the product itself. (Wolfe 2004)

Lifestyles

Scientists theorize that aging likely results from a combination of many factors. Genes, lifestyle, and disease can all affect the rate of ageing. Studies have indicated that people age at different rates and in different ways. In general, the lessons are clear. Regular physical activity, a balanced diet, social involvement, moderate or no drinking, and no smoking, can significantly decelerate the aging process.

Dr. Clinton Wright of the University of Miami reports on a study connecting exercise with maintaining memory and thinking skills in aging adults. The people used are a part of a larger study, Northern Manhattan Study. The outcome was in line with a study finding that a couple of years of eating healthy food, brain training and exercising can increase one's memory ability (nbcnews.com 2016). Gerontologist Bernice Neugarten said the different segments could be divided into the young olds, middle olds, and old olds according to their employment, transition into retirement or well into retirement stages. This can be helpful when advising these consumers financially which is more a matter of life status than actual age. Financial and health situations attitude and level of education can be great predictors for rates of aging in the 50+ age group (Timmermann 2014)

Mobility

Driving allows older adults to stay independent and active. Many seniors maintain good driving skills into later years. The baby boomers are the automobile generation that was born as cities spread into suburbs and it became very common to get around in automobiles. "Just as boomers have changed everything before them, from schools to work and housing, boomers have changed the way Americans travel, taking to the road in their teens and living behind the wheel as adults," say Debra Whitman of the American Association of Retired People (AARP). As baby boomers become older adults, driving mobility and safety are becoming larger and more important issues.

Over the recent years, there is evidence of an increase in older people travelling. In the future, the post-World War II cohorts may be demanding mobility in regards to transport systems and maintaining optimism regarding being mobile as they age (Siren 2013).

Managerial Implications

As the internet revolution continues to grow speedily, also there is a large increase in older populations (Lee and Chung 2014) experiencing added ways to connect with family, friends, medical industry, education etc. Although often ideas of products or services that are considered brilliant for the aging market actually, lack understanding of the needs of these consumers, the size of the market segment, and what the desires and obstacles for this

market are. Little attention given to the impact on a day to day life lowers the odds of success to the marketer. (Reed 1995)

As the 60 and over population who are physically active increases and is asking for services that are high quality, it is a prime opportunity for fitness centers to focus on perception, intention and customer satisfaction of this cohort. (Yu 2014) . People that have more education and financial security have gotten the largest boost to their longevity. However, those with less education are living longer than their parents did as well (Steverman 2016). As the marketplace changes and matures and the demands vary, it is imperative for businesses to be cognizant of how these consumers are living these milestones of aging. (Dychtwald 2016).

Conclusion

The Baby Boomers are categorized as born in the postwar “baby boom” from 1946-1964. Boomers influenced many social movements such as civil rights legislation, conclusion of the war in Viet Nam, the women’s movement, and environmental protection. There is leverage in numbers by this cohort and they are a significant market defined by age. It makes sense for businesses to provide products and services extending independent living to this marketing and support successful aging. The positive outcome of this is that the transparent ageism throughout could fade as the median age has risen (Longino 2005). This relates to the employment, consumerism, the marketplace and society.

Cultural ageism has permeated throughout society which emphasizes the younger consumer and structural ageism which limits options for the aging population. With such an enormous mature market, many opportunities and obstacles prevail. The aging population that is invisible to younger members of society, can be influential by their sheer numbers, are an active and healthy cohort and call for attentiveness, respect and understanding. With the health and buying power of this cohort at impressive levels, it would be missed opportunities not to admire, research, work with and trade with this market.

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