



By Janice Kennedy

PAUL MCCARTNEY WROTE *When I'm Sixty-Four* when he was 16, conjuring up visions of “wasting away” in all its gross and unthinkable absurdity. When he was 24, he included the song on Sgt. Pepper, and callow baby boomers everywhere sang along to the cheeky lyrics.

“Will you still need me? Will you still feed me?”

These days, they're more likely to be singing, “Will you still see me?”

Male or female, there isn't a soul over the age of 50 who hasn't been smacked down at one time or another — walking down a street, sitting in a restaurant, trying to get served at a crowded store counter — by the invisibility factor.

One day, it seems, you're there, a full-fledged embodiment of living, breathing humanity.

The next? Vanished. Invisible. An empty space for younger people to look through.

But the invisibility of the post-50 crowd, which now includes the burgeoning boomer demographic, is not limited to stores and streets and crowded places where oldsters fade into spectral insignificance. It's also in the culture, entrenched and intractable.

The veneration of youth that boomers introduced into the zeitgeist nearly 50 years ago is now biting us on our collective butt.

Take advertising, that unique cultural barometer of who we are and what we want to become. If you're a boomer, try to

remember the last time you saw yourself positively reflected.

Surf the web, watch TV, check out the newspaper inserts advertising everything from clothing to home services, furniture to sporting equipment. If a glossy LCBO booklet is promoting a line of wines for the good life, you can bet your next bottle of Barolo Riserva you won't see a single representative of the good life over the age of 30. (The LCBO's spring *Trend Report*? Seven models, all young.)

Yet boomers, in vast numbers, wear clothes, fix up our homes, have more time than ever before to indulge in our favourite sports. And we love trying out new wines, microbrews and single-malt scotches. But you wouldn't know it from the ads.

According to a recent Ad Age White Paper, sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons, some non-age-related marketing is starting to target boomers — a few high-end appliance manufacturers have taken note, for instance — but it's still an extremely small segment.

Chuck Nyren, 60, is more aware of this than most. The Washington state-based ad expert, international consultant and author of *Advertising to Baby Boomers* says boomers are indeed an infinitesimal segment of the market, but that's not the worst of it. When they do appear, he says, it's almost always for stereotypically age-related pitches, like pharmaceuticals and vacations.

"Every time you see yourself, you're sick. Or else you're a smiling, vapid idiot on the beach."

Or perhaps the target of Kimberly-Clark's ad campaign for its Depend line of "discreet personal care solutions." Nyren concedes that the Depend ads were indeed funny and clever. (Directed

by Academy Award-winner Errol Morris as mock-documentary discussions, they focused on the differences between men and women. For example, who's the better driver? Who rules the world?) But their effect, despite their cleverness, was still to reinforce the stereotype. "It's still age-related."

The ageism implicit in our culture shows its face everywhere, but nowhere more dramatically than in the hypervisual world of fashion modelling. There, says Ben Barry, the Ottawa-born founder of Toronto's Ben Barry Agency, it is overwhelming. He estimates the senior presence at two per cent or less in a world where "the beauty ideal dictates not only thin, but young. In fashion magazines, it's very rare to see anyone over 40, or anyone with white hair."

And while some of the mass fashion brands, like Sears and Wal-Mart, are embracing the demographic, the luxury brands are not. Barry says senior models are usually reserved for stereotypical ad roles like "grandmother" or "the older woman."

Barry, who is only 28, established his reputation by embracing diversity, including in matters of age. He is passionate about inclusivity, and his agency's gallery includes a number of mature models.

One of them is Helen Mara, 62. A successful real estate agent in Oakville, she started modelling just two years ago. And Barry says she's been like a breath of fresh air. During Toronto's LG Fashion Week in March, when Mara walked the runway for designer Sunny Fong of VAWK — the only senior model in the shows — she was the only model to be applauded.

"People were so excited to see someone who wasn't a cookie cutter of everyone else," says Barry. »

» For Mara, it was exhilarating.

“At 62, I was the combination of any three models’ ages. So when I heard the applause, I did a little muscle pump. And that created more applause,” she laughs.

Mara is busy, sometimes modelling three or four times a week, even though it’s not always for her favourite clothing lines. “Last night I was in haute couture,” she says. “Today I was in granny pants that would accommodate double Depends.” She sighs. “I’d love to do Joe Fresh. I even sent them a nice letter on pink paper. I haven’t heard back, though.”

Barry salutes Mara’s gutsy tenacity. “She’s changing entrenched cultural beliefs in both the consumer and the industry. It sends out a strong message.”

For Mara — who admits she’s having an awful lot of fun — the issue is simple. “We boomers are definitely overlooked. We’ve got money. We’ve got time. We want to look smart. Why not show some really nice clothes on older women?”



And that, in a nutshell, is the issue. Boomers represent a huge consumer base, buyers with both time and money, and we're being ignored by advertisers. Furthermore, says Nyren, "Women boomers are the largest single demographic of consumers. They control the purse. They're the ones who buy everything — for themselves, their grandkids, even their parents."

Ignoring boomers, in other words, makes no commercial sense.

"This is a demographic cohort that spends over \$2 trillion annually on consumer goods and services," wrote Matt Thornhill last fall in a MediaPost commentary. Thornhill is the founder/president of Boomer Project, a U.S. marketing research firm. "Yet, 8 out of 10 Boomers tell us they think the advertising they see ... is intended for younger consumers."

For Thornhill, the solution is not to make boomer-specific ads but rather to target all age groups.

Nyren agrees. And the only way that's going to happen, he says, is if agencies start hiring creative people from across the age spectrum. "The energy of youth is great, but you need diversity."

It's the lack of age diversity in ad agencies that has rendered boomers invisible, he says. That began in the 1960s, of course, when Madison Avenue was tasked



with reaching the great golden demographic goose of youth. Doing what it always did, hiring the kind of people who could advertise to themselves, it filled agencies with young people.

That hasn't changed, says Nyren. They still hire young people almost exclusively. "Until the '60s, there was never any ageism in advertising. But we created the monster. We were too influential. And the zeitgeist hasn't changed. So you've got 22- and 23-year-olds who are the creative thrust in advertising."

And since age is distinctly unhip—"Nobody ever wanted the Geritol account"—that is reflected in what they produce. "They look at boomers—which, for them, usually means anyone from 35 to 101—and they don't like what they see."

That, he says, has created the disconnect between advertising and a huge chunk of the consumer dollar. The surprising thing is agencies' apparent ignorance of the phenomenon. "If I had a product to sell to teens, and everyone in the agency was in their 50s and 60s and 70s, I think I'd walk out. And yet they still keep hiring young."

But the backlash may have begun.

Challenging the bland stereotypes of age, top American fashion designer Tom Ford got tongues wagging in December when he guest-edited the French edition of *Vogue* magazine. In a fashion jewelry feature called Forever Love, he posed a man and a woman, both in their 70s, in a series of sexually suggestive poses. In the commentary that followed, Ford, who turns 50 later this year, wrote that he was "tired of the cult of youth" and "the stigmatization of wrinkles, grey hair, of bodies furrowed by the years." There is beauty in aged bodies "incandescent with desire," he wrote, and it should be honoured.

A new book of essays by Canadian women not only doesn't bemoan aging, it celebrates its "unexpected joys." *I Feel Great about My Hands* makes it clear that boomer women not only chafe against being rendered invisible, they're also very aware of who they are and what they have to offer.

Green Party leader Elizabeth May writes, "I used to be seen as a disruptive influence. Rebellious. Feisty. Now I'm respectable. It's a welcome change." Activist Judy Rebick sees "the later stages of life as a time to explore new possibilities."

And Lillian Zimmerman, a gerontology researcher, writes, "Yes, I am familiar with unhappy physical and mental declines, but we're not all dancing down the road to dementia. Very far from it: many of us now occupying this new social stage of life are doing so with verve and passion."

In other words, boomers — never very good at self-effacement — are now embracing defiance. Any day now, expect them in their increasing numbers to start popping up in unaccustomed places.

Wrinkled. Slightly shopworn. But clearly visible.

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