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100 Is The New 80

Why age will defy nature and the ageing will stay active

People in Britain are living longer. Fact. Fewer of these people can afford to retire. Another fact. This has been a subject of white papers for over five years. So is ageing an emerging trend? The trend is not about ageing for its own sake – this is one of the developed world's biggest collective problems. The trend is really about Baby Boomers ageing. In previous years we talked about the Boomers reaching retirement age. Now they actually are. And funnily enough, they don't resemble our much-loved Grandmas. This is the first generation of middle-aged folks not to reach their use-by date in their fifties, not even in their sixties. They may have become a little more conservative and a lot more worried about medical care, but they're cool, relevant, setting trends and most definitely planning to remain economically active.



According to the Office of National Statistics, employment rates for older people are on the rise, with the majority of women and men aged 50-64 still working. In fact employment rates for men and women over 65 increased almost a percentage point in 2010. Economic factors have surely precipitated this change. This is the 'squeeze generation'. People over 50, over 60, even over 70 just don't feel old, or they don't have time to. They're too busy supporting their own parents - who are living longer - and their children, who are staying home longer too, eking out the deposit to pay for a first home of their own, whilst wrestling with student debt. And the over-extension and debt accumulation of the 90s and beyond means the Bank of Mum and Dad simply has to stay cashed up.

So what do you do when there's no quiet retirement in the offing? You re-invent. That's what this generation of middle aged and older people is all about. They've seen it all, they can't be shocked. These experienced consumers want more honest conversations; they demand authenticity and expect brands to push the boundaries, especially when it comes to engagement and service levels. These are not followers, they're trend drivers. They're a demanding bunch, so expect to have to mirror their mindset.

Another sub-trend we should expect to grow for this maturing audience is higher expectations of corporate transparency. These consumers are online and active, they're opening up to each other, old flames and distant relatives in online environments and they expect corporations to do the same. This demand for transparency and for brands to show a human face is fundamentally redefining trust. Trust is not something a brand can command by confidence alone any more. Trust is borne out of performing as promised, it's earned through authenticity. This is one of the most critical cultural shifts of our generation and one that many producer-consumer relationships still fail to acknowledge. The mature consumer expects unedited, non-sanitised brand experiences and interactions. In other words, they want everything to be as no-nonsense and candid as they are. Speak to this audience in their language, because they'll surely ignore you if you don't.

The mantra for the (healthy) older audience is a combination of reinvention and experience, all embraced with gusto. Reinvention requires doing new things. Learning is a trend that will likely take off – but this is not a matter of sewing classes on Saturday morning. It can mean taking a gruelling eight week university course on top of a ten hour working day, studying Greek philosophers, or taking up piano. Experiences must be authentic. If they can't afford as many holidays (and the ash-cloud disaster is still in the memory bank), then at least they can get some adventure close to home. The leisurely Sunday drive into the country may well be for the purposes of a hot air balloon flight.

The reinvented, mature audience is forgiving too. They've sinned, repented and are ready to roll again. This bodes well for the Labour Party, Tiger Woods and possibly even BP. With the right message, appropriately contrite behaviour, plus enough money for a good reputation campaign, almost any corporate or celebrity offender can find forgiveness. Staying angry is not in their nature.