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COLUMN ONE

Over 50 and Out of Favor

Advertisers and thus TV networks are fixated on 18- to 49-year-olds, but aging baby boomers say they shouldn't be taken for granted.

By Meg James
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Brad Adgate turned 50 today and, just like that, he became irrelevant to the TV industry.

You might think marketers would want to court Adgate. The New York advertising executive makes a six-figure salary, and he and his wife enjoy spending it. Last year, they spent \$35,000 remodeling their kitchen with all new appliances. They splurge at the supermarket — he likes microbrew beers — and at the sporting goods store. Recent purchases include new bikes for the family (\$1,300) and a pair of running shoes for Adgate (\$115).

"I don't run as fast as I used to, but I don't feel old," Adgate said. "And I don't act old."

Such subtleties, however, are lost on most advertisers. Madison Avenue has focused for decades on reaching the demographic group that Adgate just grew out of: the 18-to-49-year-old consumer. The result: TV networks are fixated on the under-50 "demo" as well.

Next week in New York, that obsession with youth will be on garish display as the TV industry gathers for its annual "upfront" presentations. There, at what has become a springtime ritual, the networks will unveil next season's shows, hoping to persuade advertisers to commit \$9 billion for prime-time commercials.

This year, like every year, the broadcast networks, including ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox, will be using the same bait: shows aimed at people in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

Catering almost exclusively to the young might seem counterproductive. More than half the nation's wealth is in the hands of people over 50, who spend an estimated \$2 trillion a year on products and services.

But advertising experts say that when they aim commercials at young people, they also get older folks — while the opposite

is rarely the case. People over 50 watch more TV and thus are easier for the networks to reach. The younger demo, busy with work and family and tempted by myriad entertainment choices, is more difficult to corral.

"If you target young, you're going to get younger viewers and keep your older ones," said Jon Nesvig, Fox Broadcasting's advertising president. "But if you target old, that's what you're going to get — older viewers."

It's a classic case of supply and demand, which means networks can charge a premium for capturing 18-to-49-year-old eyeballs.

This season, for example, a 30-second spot on NBC's younger-skewing "Las Vegas" averaged \$185,000. A comparable spot on CBS' "JAG," whose viewers' median age was 58, went for \$130,000. The CBS show recently went off the air.

With that kind of money hanging in the balance, "there's been no incentive to change the equation," said David Poltrack, CBS' head of research.

How does that make people over 50 feel? To paraphrase the famous line from the movie "Network," they're mad as hell and they wish they didn't have to take it anymore.

Last year, AARP tried to draw attention to the issue in an ad campaign built around a photo of a morgue, complete with toe-tagged cadavers. The slogan: "When you turn 50, doctors don't pronounce you dead — marketers do."

Jim Fishman, group publisher of AARP's magazines, said advertisers were terrified of seeming too friendly to the gray-haired set.

"They don't want to do anything to alienate their younger audience," Fishman said. "They're making products for people over 50, they're selling them to people over 50, but they're just not marketing them to people over 50."

But some warn that unless advertisers change their tune, they eventually will face the wrath of a group that knows how to make its voice heard. After all, it was these same baby boomers who came of age protesting the Vietnam War.

"That activism will come alive again," predicted Brent Green, who wrote the book "Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers." "Advertisers that ignore or make fun of aging people will do so at their own peril."

No such revolution seems imminent, though. Consider the case of Jon Currie, a 58-year-old Santa Monica media consultant who was in the market for a new car. Last fall, irked by the news that Lexus was altering its designs to lure younger buyers, he fired off an angry letter.

"You are making a huge mistake," he wrote to a ranking Lexus executive. "You are biting the hand that feeds you ... throwing away a very loyal market. Why must all brand marketers pursue younger demos?"

Currie got no response.

Ironically, the very 18-to-49 formula that is now excluding much of the baby boom generation was initially developed to embrace them.

By 1950, research firm A.C. Nielsen was tabulating TV ratings by estimating the number of households that tuned into a program. Most families had only one TV set and shows with broad-based appeal were the most popular. CBS had "I Love Lucy" and later "The Beverly Hillbillies," and NBC had "Bonanza."

"Advertisers were finding their way," TV historian Tim Brooks said. "They really didn't know what segments of the audience they reached."

Nielsen began providing more detailed information about viewers, including age and gender, by the early 1960s. The firm even created a category called "Lady of the House," Brooks said, to identify which shows housewives were watching. That group was of particular interest to packaged-good companies seeking to influence the person who did the shopping.

Executives at the third-place ABC network saw demographic details as a way to get into the game. For the 1969 season,

ABC had just two shows in the Top 20: "Marcus Welby, M.D." and "The Johnny Cash Show." With the post-World War II babies coming of age, ABC executives aggressively lobbied advertisers to adopt 18- to 49-year-olds as the new ratings yardstick. They developed shows with this audience in mind.

Within a few years, ABC had become a force with "Happy Days," "Laverne & Shirley" and "The Six Million Dollar Man." Advertisers moved money into shows for younger audiences.

At the time, 18 to 49 made sense. It represented a broad swath of the adult population, and the first members of the bulging baby boom population (those born from 1946 to 1964) were in their 20s. This was the first generation to grow up with television, and they were free-spending, not having lived through the Depression or World War II. Advertisers saw a seemingly endless supply of boomers to buy their products.

"At that time, 18-year-olds were marrying and starting families," Brooks said. "The 18-to-49 category roughly matched the age span of consumers of family-oriented products."

Over the years, the 18-to-49-year-old group, or "the demo" as it's known in the industry, took on increasing importance. Shows with seniors in leading roles gradually disappeared. These days, such once-popular fare as "The Golden Girls" or "Murder, She Wrote" wouldn't make it onto the air.

"That's why 'JAG' got canceled — it had older viewers," said executive producer Don Bellisario, who is 69. "Now that I'm of that generation, people come up to me and say: 'Why are they always chasing after 18- to 34-year-olds?' As nicely as I can, I say: 'Well, you're going to be dead a lot sooner than they are. And you are not going to change the cereal that you eat in the morning or the car that you buy.'"

But is it true that older people are rigidly set in their ways? Advertisers have long clung to the notion that brand loyalty can be instilled in the very young. Just get them into the habit of buying Cheerios, Crest and Chevrolets, the theory goes, and you'll have them for the rest of their lives.

A recent RoperASW study, however, found that people over 50 were just as likely as younger consumers to switch brands for such things as banks, airlines, computers, even bath soap. The 2002 report, commissioned by AARP, found that when it came to some products — including athletic shoes, home electronics and cellphones — older buyers were even more open than younger ones to change.

Just ask Steve Mosko. At 49, the television executive knows firsthand how dramatically buying patterns have changed.

"When my dad was 50, he drove a Chevy, he bought Gulf gas and wore the same kind of wingtips year after year. He was a creature of habit," Mosko said. "Our generation is completely different. I buy the same clothes that my son buys, and he's a sophomore at USC. We get new cellphones every six months, and buy different cars. People in my age group are desperate to try something new."

To Matt Thornhill, president of the Boomer Project, a marketing research and consulting firm, Mosko proves one thing: "The whole notion of brand preference is a myth. If baby boomers were brand loyal they would still be buying Thom McAn shoes and shopping in Woolworth stores."

Slowly, some advertisers are recognizing the power of this under-appreciated group. This fall, retailer Gap Inc. plans to open a chain of clothing stores for women over 35. Cadillac and Audi have incorporated the music of such 1970s rock icons as Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix and David Bowie into their TV commercials to touch a chord with aging boomers. The Bowie song that runs in Audi's recent ads? "Never Get Old."

Anheuser-Busch Cos. has courted consumers over 50. After research showed that many boomers had stopped drinking beer in order to stay trim, the company aimed Michelob Ultra — a low-calorie, lower carbohydrate beer — squarely at them.

"There wasn't a product out there that reflected their lifestyle," said Mike Sundet, brand manager for Michelob Ultra. The beer caught on quickly.

Similarly, Home Depot sought to grow its market share by welcoming those over 50. Teaming up with AARP, the company

added seniors to its in-store workforce and has been targeting the 50-plus crowd in media buys.

When it comes to home improvement, said John Costello, Home Depot's executive vice president for merchandise and marketing, codgers have the ability to spend more than ingenues. Besides, he added, today more than ever before it makes sense to target niche audiences.

"Consumers for years have had a mass-market mentality, where everybody wanted to use the leading product," Costello said. "We have become a more diverse and multicultural society, driven more by individualism than mass preferences."

One of the most successful products recently to tap into that individualism has been Apple Computer Inc.'s digital music player iPod. Apple set out to market the portable device, which can hold thousands of songs, to people of all ages.

Last fall, its TV commercials featured a silhouette of a dancing Bono of the Irish rock band U2 singing "Vertigo." Apple was confident that younger consumers would see Bono — who turned 45 today — as the ultimate in cool: a hardened rocker who crusades for social and environmental causes. Apple was also betting that older consumers, whose fear of technology might have made them anxious, would feel reassured. If Bono, whom they'd listened to for more than two decades, could handle an iPod, so could they.

"We have huge youth appeal," said Greg Joswiak, Apple's vice president of iPod marketing. "With this campaign, we tried to reach across several generations."

Adgate, the ad executive who turns 50 today, recently got an iPod from his wife. He loves the way it makes his two-hour commute fly by. And recently, it prompted him to alter his exercise routine: the five-mile jog.

"I've been running for 37 years and I've never used a Walkman or anything to run with," he said with an enthusiasm that sounded, well, youthful. "But now I use my iPod all the time. Jackson Browne, the Eagles, Steely Dan. It makes the workouts so much smoother."

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