

# The New Power Generation

By Patti Minglin  
M2W™ ESSENTIALS FEATURE STORY

It's a commonly held belief that marketers need to concentrate their effort on the 18-49 set. In her article "Where the Bucks Are" for Fast Company, Linda Tischler\*, who is also a regular on the M2W™ stage, points out, "It has been a dearly held article of faith in the industry that if you hook a consumer when he or she is young, you'll have a customer for life. Axiomatically, then, mature consumers must be locked into brands they first met decades ago, even though recent research by RoperASW says that older consumers are as likely to switch brands as their children."

Unfortunately, as with many efforts at marketing to women, corporations have been slow to take advantage of this opportunity. A February 2007 Barrons' cover story "Geezer Power" stated, "It's something the advertising and marketing industries will have to come to grips with, something they're not too enthusiastic about. For decades, the hucksters of Madison Avenue, Hollywood, Television City, Radioland and even Detroit have mainly focused on 18-to-49-year-olds, while generally treating older people like crazy aunts and uncles who show up uninvited for Christmas dinner."

## Boomers By The Numbers

The numbers are staggering. Between 2006 and 2016, the entire population of the United States will grow by 23 million. The over-50 population will grow by just over 22 million. The 40-plus age group is now 45 percent bigger than the 18-to-39 group and will be 60 percent bigger by 2010. In 1989, adults 40 and older became the biggest adult segment for the first time in U.S. history, making them the new customer majority. According to Mature Marketing & Research, a Boston-based firm, they control more than half of the nation's discretionary income and three-quarters of the country's financial wealth. "As the population ages, women become even more influential, given their longer life-spans and

increasing decision-making power in household purchases," says Nan McCann, president of PME Enterprises, LLC producers of M2W™-The Marketing-To-Women Conference (<http://www.m2w.biz>).

During the 2006 M2W™, Marti Barletta\*, founder and CEO of The TrendSight Group and author of PrimeTime Women: How to Win the Hearts, Minds, and Business of Boomer Big Spenders and Marketing to Women: How to Understand, Reach and Increase Your Share of the World's Largest Market Segment, told attendees that boomer women represent a marketing trifecta. "They are the largest segment, with the most money, and with ever-increasing influence." They hold this clout by sheer size plus the fact that most have been wage earners and decision makers within their own households. Barletta contends that women of the baby boom generation are "poised to rule the world for the next twenty years."

## Defining The Status Quo

Tischler's article highlights industries failing to capture this vibrant market – car manufacturers, consumer electronics, even retail fashion. "Every year, when we announce our year-end sales, analysts ask us, 'So, who's your new competition this year?'" says Charlie Kleman, CFO of Chico's, the hugely successful women's clothing store that sells to boomer women. "We always answer, 'Nobody.' I don't know why there aren't more stores like us out there. This woman is crying out for someone to sell her clothes that keep her in style and will fit her body the way she wants, and nobody's doing it."

Even in the face of Chico's success, fashion retailers have tried and failed to understand their most potentially lucrative market. Most recently, Forth & Towne, Gap's attempt at a chain dedicated to boomer women failed after only 18 months in business. Given Gap's resources and brand power, plus their stated understanding of women's needs and bodies, Forth & Towne seemed like a natural fit.

But, says Dori Molitor\*, founder and CEO of WomanWise LLC, a hybrid consultancy-agency specializing in marketing brands to women, “What Gap didn’t understand is that a boomer woman perceives herself being about 17 years younger than she actually is. No way is a woman who sees herself as being in her thirties going to shop at a store for old ladies.”

### Bright Spots On The Horizon

Despite notable failures, a few brands have managed to tap into this market brilliantly. Even as recent industry publication articles begin to critique Dove’s decision to take their Campaign for Real Beauty to the boomer level—”embracing aging in all its naked, wrinkled and sagging glory” (Ad Age, Sept. 24, 2007), experts continue to stand behind the product’s innovative marketing strategy. In a recent article that appeared in Time magazine, Cheryl Swanson, managing partner of Tonic, a brand-strategy firm in New York City, states, “The concept is linguistically brilliant. Skin care has typically been about fighting back—age defying. It’s been almost warrior-like. Take a stance against this natural thing that’s happening to you. This is different.”

Tischler admires companies that have not only seen the boomer potential but, more importantly, have found ways to reach them. New Balance sneakers actually got in ahead of the curve. Notes Tischler, “After watching sales to young consumers decline in the late 1980s, [New Balance] CEO Jim Davis turned his attention to the older customer. Having five shoe widths rather than three was a boon to older, flatter feet, but his true breakthrough was in product positioning. One ad several years ago featured a woman of uncertain age jogging down a lane. The text read, “One more woman chasing a sunset. One more woman going a little farther. One more woman simply feeling alive. One less woman relying on someone else.”

“What all these companies seem to understand is how boomer women see themselves,” states McCann. “Through our work with presenters and sponsors of M2W™, we have noticed that the most successful brands offer products and services in ways that acknowledge the wisdom and self-assurance of this power generation.” Crawford Hollingworth, a director at London’s trendtracking firm Headlightvision, a leader in global research on the over-50 market notes, “I’ve seen a reawakening of a consciousness of what it means to be a woman, not in a sexual way, but in enjoying being a

woman, and thinking about what they want to get out of their lives,” he says. “There are a lot of things these women have put on hold, and now they suddenly have the freedom to do them without feeling guilty that they’re not looking after their family or their husband.”

Even media companies are slowly, if not surely, trying to tap this market. In a September, 2007 article in Advertising Age, Abbey Klassen cites the launch of several boomer-dedicated websites, including Grandparents.com, Eons.com and BoomerGirl.com as evidence of how deep this market reaches. “The trend isn’t limited to web-based startups: Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia is exploring the launch of its own boomer-targeted title and Viacom’s TV Land has for the past couple upfront selling seasons made its boomer audience the center of its upfront pitch.”

### Pathways To Success

Brands which understand the subtlety between “old” and “older” are the ones who will win out in the end. Most importantly, don’t be condescending. Again, from Klassen’s article, “They’re not interested in media that panders, or trips down memory lane. They’re over that,” said Laurel Kennedy, who is a founding member of a new trade association for boomer marketers -- the International Mature Marketing Network. “They want things that resonate with the future.”

Barletta agrees, noting that the success of brands such as Dove, Ponds and Nike with women is due to their playing to women’s power. Ads tell the real stories of real women. That’s empowering and attractive to female consumers.

In a 2005 article “The Grown Up Woman” in Marketing magazine, Jennifer Ganshirt\*, cofounder of Frank About Women, a communications company based in Winston-Salem, N.C. states, “It starts with getting into the mind of women as they age. It’s about knowing that it’s a time of growth, experimentation, change and exploration, understanding their needs around it and simply showing a sense of reality and celebrating it. They don’t lose their brain when they age; if anything they become savvier.”

“The success stories we hear during M2W™ point toward profit,” says McCann. “The statistics don’t lie. The money is waiting. All that remains is for everyone else to catch up while avoiding the pitfalls of those who have already failed.”

\* All past M2W speakers