

Thought leaders

share their perspectives
on progress



From marketing to trends to ageism, three prominent voices in aging offer their viewpoints, ideas and advice, plus their outlooks on the future of active aging

by Liz Seegert

The *Journal on Active Aging*® debuted in 2002 to support professionals who wanted to make a difference. As advocates of active aging, most had seen the benefits to quality of life—renewed vitality, confidence, independence, mobility—when older adults improved their physical

fitness and health. Active lifestyles also helped clients live “well,” with more verve and vigor, in all areas of life. This was a cutting-edge concept when the International Council on Active Aging® published its first journal issue.

In a recent article about ICAA’s 15th anniversary,¹ founder and CEO Colin Milner stated that what the association did was to “promote the [active-aging] concept and create an industry that didn’t exist.” The *Journal* connected and informed members, as awareness rippled

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(L to r), Drs. Walter Bortz II, Mary Furlong and Ken Dychtwald began journeys in the field of aging decades ago. They have influenced perspectives and directions in a variety of areas, including active aging. Images courtesy of Dr. Bortz, Mary Furlong & Associates, and Age Wave

outwards to other organizations, agencies and beyond.

While few businesses or marketers had heard of active aging 15 years ago, much has happened since to shape the global arena. Health, culture, business, marketing and practically anything aging related have experienced a sea change—becoming among the most talked about and profitable sectors.^{2,3,4}

Like its audience, the active-aging sector is maturing. What lies ahead?

We're asking thought leaders in the aging sphere about these issues for a new article series called "Perspectives." These articles will share leaders' viewpoints, ideas and advice, along with their outlooks on the future of active aging. We begin in this issue—the *Journal's* 15th anniversary issue—with three longtime champions:

- **Mary Furlong**, EdD, is the founder and president of Mary Furlong &

Associates,⁵ a strategy, business development, marketing, and public relations/strategic communications firm based in San Francisco, California.

Her company produces two annual summits that connect businesses, innovators and others that target the Boomer market. Furlong, who additionally founded the educational website SeniorNet⁶ (1986) and health and wellness site ThirdAGE⁷ (1996), teaches entrepreneurship at Santa Clara University's Leavey School of Business. She's also author of the 2007 book *Turning Silver into Gold: How to Profit in the New Boomer Marketplace* (see "Resources" on page 43).

- **Walter Bortz II**, MD, is one of the foremost medical experts in the United States on aging and longevity. A clinical associate professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, he has focused his research and writing on the importance of physical exercise in healthy aging. Bortz is past president of the American Geriatrics

Society and past cochair of the American Medical Association's task force on aging. He has written more than 130 medical articles and numerous books, including *We Live too Short and Die too Long*, and *Dare to be 100* (see "Resources").⁸ At age 86, Bortz is an active runner and popular speaker. He is also working on his ninth book.

- **Ken Dychtwald**, PhD, is a psychologist, gerontologist, trailblazer, and leading thinker for the past 35 years on lifestyle, healthcare, marketing and workforce implications of the "age wave." He is the best-selling author of 16 books on age-related issues, including *Age Wave: The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging Society*, and *The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life* (refer to "Resources"). His firm, Age Wave,⁹ guides companies and government groups in product/service development for Boomers and mature adults. Dychtwald has spoken to some two million people worldwide about

Boomers and aging, dedicating himself to battling ageist stereotypes while promoting new, vital roles for life's second half.

Let's explore the perspectives they have shared with the *Journal's* readers.

LS: *What are some of the key advances in your field of aging, or in active aging, over the past 15 years?*

WB: The idea that people don't retire and fade off into the sunset has changed over the past 15 or 20 years, and I think my ideas have helped to nourish that change. My mantra is 100 healthy years. It's the idea that aging is negotiable—it's a choice. I wrote my original article, "Disuse in Aging," in *JAMA* [formerly the *Journal of the American Medical Association*] in 1982.¹⁰ You can't do anything about aging, but you can do everything about disuse. So that's the drum I've beat, and exercise is my thing.

MF: In the mature marketing area, the traditional principles of marketing were very common 15 years ago. Direct marketing and print were critical channels in terms of the mix. Now you need to have robust integrated marketing and be very strong in the social channels. Affiliate marketing is also a critical piece.

KD: We're in that popcorn-in-the-micro-wave stage: It's "there's something going on," and then all of a sudden it starts to take off. The subject of active aging has landed on the radar screen over the last 15 years, and it's created a market phenomenon and language. There are leaders. There are dos and don'ts. If you Google "active aging," you'll find all sorts of interesting things are happening—it's international; it's also connected to enormous demographic shifts, to political changes, to lifestyle, to urban planning, and to livable communities. Several decades ago, active aging was far more at the periphery. However, I would say it's still not front and center.

LS: *What are some of the key challenges or barriers to overcome to encourage interest?*

MF: [If you're a business owner targeting this market,] you're always having to think about the right business model and whether there's a need to adapt or change that model in light of the conditions. Another challenge is how do you scale your business. And what is the blocking and tackling you need to do to really seize the opportunity?

Defining the ecosystem is another challenge. The way in which a company goes to market in this space is different, because you need to know the nonprofit channels, the incentives of the nonprofits, and the players—which range from food companies to insurance companies to healthcare companies. And what do they all share in common? You also have to keep up with the USD\$20-billion aging-in-place market,¹¹ with the housing market and with the healthcare market. So there are a lot of niches to follow.

KD: I don't think our leaders over the past few decades—all of whom are familiar with these issues—have stepped up to the plate to both optimize the opportunities and avoid the catastrophes. Aging could very well be the most substantial issue of this century. But it has yet to seize the kind of attention and influence that matches the importance of this phenomenon.

LS: *What have been some of the key trends that have driven change?*

KD: First, there are some forces at play that are getting people's attention. We're hearing more talk about longevity. How do we live a long life? Whether it's stem cell research or Google's Calico,¹² which uses technologies to learn about the biological life span and create aging interventions, there's more and more fascination with longevity and it's multiplying.

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Resources

Internet

Age Wave

<http://agewave.com>

Mary Furlong & Associates

www.maryfurlong.com

SeniorNet

www.seniornet.org

ThirdAge

www.thirdage.com

Walter M. Bortz, II, MD

www.walterbortz.com

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Second, we've got an unprecedented shift in the demographic center of gravity. We have more than twice as many people over 85 today in America (6+ million)¹³ as there were total Americans at the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence (2.5 million).¹⁴ The demographic center of gravity is migrating from youth to midlife and maturity. And that has never happened before, anywhere, ever.

Third, maturity is where the money is. People over 50 control about 70% of consumption and about 70% of wealth,¹⁵ and that group is growing in the next 20 years. Most every segment of the population is going to have modest growth, but the older segment of our country is going to almost double, and they've got the money.

The last thing, which took me a decade to figure out, is today's older adults are not brand loyal. In the 1960s and '70s, when modern marketing emerged, there was a belief that when people were between ages 15 and 25, they made their identity decisions and reached their conclusions as to what brands they would affiliate with for life. So the entire world of marketing and media, and our culture, organized around influencing or capturing people between these ages. The idea was, why bother with 50- or 60-year-olds as they've already made their decisions about everything? What we now know is that people make new choices about their brands at every stage in life. People used to be brand loyal for life. It's not that way anymore. And not only that, many of the products we think of buying didn't even exist when we were 18 years old.

So we have this combination of longevity, aging demographics, concentration of wealth in the 50-plus segment, and older adults' openness and willingness to reinvent themselves and try new things—to take an adventure vacation, rebuild muscle tissue, try new restaurants, go back to school, fall in love

again. We're unleashing this active-aging market phenomenon for the first time, worldwide.

MF: In my book *Turning Silver into Gold*, there are five major trends:¹⁶

First, the mature market is global, so some of the innovations we hear about are happening in Korea or Japan, or China, or the Netherlands.

Two, technology plays a bigger and bigger role. Also, more technology companies are discovering the market because it is so large.

Three, layered on top of added longevity is the Boomers' sensibility. They're going to do things in a different way; they're working longer, starting new careers, learning as much as they can. The immutable issue here is chronic diseases, which still have to be managed. What innovations are the Boomers going to look to when it comes to this area? They also want more stamina, greater mental clarity and better immunity.

Four, with life stage transitions, shocking events cause people to rethink what matters. For Boomers, the financial hit they took [in the "Great Recession"] was a real blow. So what are the implications of still fighting student-loan debt, or helping a family member with a caregiving situation?

And, five, Boomers want to find purpose and spiritual satisfaction. But they are willing to learn the new technology because they want to stay involved—and they have a lot to contribute. They have the wisdom of these years. Not everybody will start a business, but there's a compelling desire to stay in the game.

WB: Americans want somebody else to take care of their health, instead of accepting responsibility for it. They want a pill. To accept responsibility, you must have knowledge. That's why I take it as

almost a sacred obligation to inform people that aging is not a disease, but that it's very much up to our design.

LS: *What needs to change moving forward to improve the aging experience and quality of life for older adults?*

WB: There's no proxy for energy. It means some sort of involvement. It's engagement—my single most important word. How do you keep people engaged? You must have a role for them to play. There are just fundamental realities: People have to move (non-movement is not an option), and people have to stay involved.

MF: The leisure-oriented view of retirement is a blast from the past. What has replaced it is more of a mosaic. It's part-time work, it's more time spent on health; also, a vast number of older adults are doing some form of caregiving. Those who have taken the plunge into the on-demand or independent marketplace as entrepreneurs must figure out how to get someone to pay them for what they know. Being *active* is a key piece of building a business. I also think people are going to be looking for balance.

KD: Right now, there's a profoundly ageist culture. It's in our language, in our media, in our clothing, and it's in the way we talk and think. We want to look young, feel young, stay young—and underlying that desire is gerontophobia, a discomfort both with older people and the aging process.

We really have not had many breakthrough revolutionaries in the fight against ageism. When you think of most movements, there are individuals who lead the charge, but not so much on the ageism front. The very ageism that causes people not to want to be thought of as old, also causes them to not want to stand up and fight the fight and lead the revolution.

We also have serious inertia. We want to keep doing what we've been doing and thinking about things the way we have thought about them. So breaking that mold—breaking people out of their habits and their marketing patterns—requires really shaking things up. It's going to take some time.

At the end of the day, is it about marketing to people because they've had a particular birthday? Is age really relevant? Yes, but are there things that are more relevant? Should it be age-specific marketing or around lifestyle? Life stage? Affinity? Interest? I'm more and more appreciative of what we'll call universal or transgenerational marketing.

LS: *What advice do you have for those looking to get into this market or improve their outreach to the active-aging audience?*

MF: Look at the landscape of business opportunity and discover the riches in the niches in the market. Look at the whole landscape. For example, anything that supports cognitive fitness is a niche, and so is anything that supports mental stamina, mental clarity or bone density. Every dissonance of aging is a market opportunity. There are also opportunities in the blessings of aging. Grandparenting is one such niche; another huge niche is local services for people who are aging-in-place at home.

So discover some niches. Look at the partnerships that are happening. And don't underestimate the intelligence, wisdom and desire of the active-aging audience to make a difference. They are a real force. Expect them to keep reinventing, and try to ride on the wave of what they're going to do next.

KD: I can't imagine any industry or sector or government organization that couldn't benefit from a greater understanding of active aging. It's what I've tried to do through my career: "Shake

'em and wake 'em" to the fact that older adults are not some segregated little island of gray-haired encore folks, but a big chunk of every family, community, workforce, and consumer group. I don't care if your business is bicycles or high-end condominiums, you should tune in to the active-aging phenomenon, because it is one of the largest forces at play and may be the greatest growth and opportunity you'll ever see.

People are starting to realize that active aging is a massive opportunity if you're in business. And it's a serious challenge that we will live long lives if you're in national or global leadership. Whether we live long lives and it turns out to be a tragedy or a triumph will be up to how we do it, and active and healthy aging is a massively important, economically critical piece of the puzzle.

WB: Active aging is the drum I've been beating all my life. I'm translating it into molecules. I am working on a paper called "The Physics of Aging," which has to do with energy exchange. How do you encourage energy exchange? Be necessary. That means we must have roles for older people to play. Everybody agrees that retirement is dangerous. Why? It fundamentally comes back to the first principles of energy exchange. If there's a reason for people to stay in the mainstream, that's where they will be.

I want us to get old, but I want us to get old actively—that's where active aging gets its strength. Prevention is the ultimate solution. One hundred healthy years is within our active grasp if we fulfill basic principles, which all have to do with being necessary. Then add doing something for somebody else.

LS: *Any other thoughts about active aging?*

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WB: I call it Bortz's law: It's never too late to start, it's always too soon to stop. You have to reset your expectations. Aging is a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm in the business of trying to set a brighter future. If we can create the image that when you're 90 you can play golf or have sex or whatever you like to do, it should become the new normal. I believe it's starting to happen.


People are smarter now. It's important to promote the idea that getting old is not something to be shunned. If there's a single watchword, it's "make your potential."

MF: It's an imaginative, creative, participating, engaged audience. My whole work has been about resubstantiating the role of older people. The Boomers have not walked away and checked out; they are going to be a vital contributing part of the conversation in a lot of different ways. Marketers need to respect the intelligence of the consumer and then try to share with them why they should engage with a brand. Look at it in a fresh, creative, opportunistic way. But be solid about your business model.

KD: I would love to see us measuring life by the metric of maturity—wisdom, perspective, knowledge, empathy, contentment, urgency. If we had the frame of reference of long-lived people, we would realize that young people are still developing. What is the metric by which we measure people? Life, beauty, money. It's a youthful metric. It would be wonderful to flip that and see if we could gain greater appreciation and respect for the qualities and assets of living a long life.

In addition, we're far more focused on the "now" and what's happening today. That causes people to not give much thought to their future selves. If we more fully appreciate that the decisions we make about our health today literally feed and fuel and create the later version of us, then it's not only a matter of

how much fun we'll have this week but whether we'll be broke or comfortable when we're 60 or 80 or 100. Living in the now is a horrible strategy for your fiscal or physical health. The decisions you make at 20 or 30 will impact your aging. So it is about a life course approach, and I think lessons we all benefit from.

If I could wave a wand, it would be for us to see more continually the connection between the decisions and choices we make today and the outcomes we're going to be feeling and experiencing and dealing with downstream. If we all live long lives sick and frail and diseased, the age wave is going to be the sinkhole of the 21st century. On the other hand, if we can be healthy, vital, contributing long-lived men and women, that's the dream of history. So, the stakes are very high. 

Liz Seegert is a freelance health journalist focusing on aging, social determinants and policy. She writes for numerous online and print media, coproduces the HealthCetera radio program on WBAL-FM, and is the topic editor for aging at the Association of Health Care Journalists. Follow her on Twitter @lseegert.

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