

Midlife Is Having A 'Moment'

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By Lori Bitter

And I think it is important to understand why. No less than ten new books have been published in the last 18 months on the subject of how to find purpose, careers, re-imagine your late life years, and most recently disrupting the idea of aging. Everyone from television personality Jane Pauley to aging guru Dr. Bill Thomas has weighed in how to live a fuller, more connected life.

As an armchair anthropologist in the longevity marketplace, the zeitgeist is critical. The why! For many years, turning 50 or 60 was celebrated with “over the hill” parties and sense of impending crisis or stagnation. As a generation, Baby Boomers have rejected the very idea. They don’t have time for it. They are working, raising kids, helping with grandkids, caring for elder family members and wondering how to work in a life of their choosing as well. In the quiet hours of their sleepless nights, they wonder how their parents managed to retire at 65, and why that felt old then but doesn’t seem old at all now. It’s a divine “who moved my cheese” question.

Amidst the anxiety and discontent is a simple answer. We are experiencing a new stage of life. Since 1900, we have added about 35 years to our life expectancy. In 1900, life expectancy hovered around 47 years. Today it is in the 80s, and, depending on lifestyle factors, many people will be much older. Contrary to conventional thought, those years have not been added to the end of our lives, they have expanded the middle years of life. Because this is a new phenomenon, we aren’t sure what to do with those years.

Barbara Waxman, a leadership coach and author, calls this lifestage “middlescence” and compares it to the time years ago when “adolescence” joined our vernacular to describe, understand and give language to that period of time between puberty and adulthood. This is midlife’s moment!

There is a cultural lag. Just as we went from children moving right into adult life in the early 1900s to children growing up to experience teenage years (also a relatively new term) and then adult life, “middlescents” – those from 46 - 65 – are breaking new ground. The world must now rush to catch up.

As Waxman says, we need language to describe it and a new set of expectations (for lack of a better word) about what this new stage of life will mean – not just to the individuals, but to families, the workplace, communities and the world at large. In terms of human capital, this is the population with the most expertise, experience and resources. How will we embrace it?

This is more than policy about where the retirement marker and Medicare should kick in, though that is important. Though the Baby Boomers now occupy this lifestage in droves, it is also bigger

than a single generation. They are the generation setting the tone for future generations of aging people. If you follow the work of Ken Dychtwald, this is the manifestation of the move from a linear life that had clear guideposts and expectations to a cyclical life, where we move in and out of a number of lifestages at midlife, creating opportunities that were not imagined by previous generations of older adults.

If you market to older adults, understand that the essence of this new lifestage is critical to communicating effectively. Much like adolescence middlesence is confusing, it is dynamic with a great deal of change, and there is reason for optimism. Resonating with the midlife experience and finding those micro-moments to leverage is key.

Our research has always indicated that lifestage changes signal key consumer opportunities. These are times when consumers are searching for products, services and solutions that may have never been in their consideration set before. Middlescence is no different, as news ways to work, live and experience these expanded years are emerging.

And should you personally need a guide, there are about 10 new books on the market to help you find your way.

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