

Q&A, Ken Dychtwald, Founder and CEO of AgeWave

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Popular perceptions of aging are changing, with people of all ages taking a more positive view of growing older—one of our 10 Trends for 2012. As attitudes shift, we'll redefine when "old age" occurs and what the term means. We discussed new views on aging with Ken Dychtwald, who runs the marketing consultancy AgeWave. With more than three decades in the field of gerontology, Dychtwald has developed a keen understanding of the mature marketplace and its stakeholders. AgeWave advises Fortune 500 companies on how best to reach, engage and motivate Boomers and mature adults. Dychtwald has also published 16 books on aging-related issues, including *Age Wave: The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging Society* and *New Purpose: Redefining Money, Family, Work, Retirement and Success*.

What does it mean to be "old" today, and how is this changing?

There are changes on five fronts. First of all, old age is being relocated. That's one of the more profound things that's going on. In the 1880s, when Otto von Bismarck was asked to create the first pension plan in Europe, he had to pick an age at which people would be so enfeebled and so elderly that they just couldn't get up and work, and he picked 65. The average life expectancy was only 45. If you were trying to use the same formula today and putting old age about 20 years higher than the average life expectancy, we'd be thinking of people growing old at 98.

So now what's happening is that most people who are 65 or 70 or even 75 do not think of themselves as old. Generally, people think old age begins around 80. There have been so many studies in the last decade that it's a pretty convincing argument that the marker, the gateway to old age has been moved back. Because we're living longer, people are staying healthy longer, people are remaining active longer. We've got guys like Mick Jagger approaching 70, who are still pretty fantastic and youthful. You've got Barbara Walters in her 80s. So the gestalt of how we think of what is old and who is old is being restructured. One of the interesting things happening as a result of that is, if old age moves back, what about all that territory between 50 and 80? What is that?

In the beginning of the 20th century, there was a sociologist named Stanley Hall, who declared there was a new stage of life emerging, and he called it adolescence. I would argue the same thing is happening now, and that between around 45 and 65, a new stage of life is emerging that I'll affectionately call "middlescence." I think late adulthood is becoming a genuine stage of life, between 65 and 80. And old age then kicks in at 80-plus.

My second point is that, within the last couple of decades, there was a fairly dramatic shift taking place in how people conduct themselves over the course of their lives. Historically, people have lived a linear life plan. You knew you might live 60 or 65 or 70 years. So you learned until, let's say, 20 years. Then you worked and raised your family for approximately 40 years, and then you rested. In that model, we were inclined to think of old people as people who were done, who were out to pasture.

What's replacing the linear life plan is a cyclic life plan, in which people are continually reinventing themselves and trying new things. That, in a way, erases a lot of the expectations for what you're supposed to do when and particularly the idea that once you reach 60, you've climbed to the top of your mountain and now the rest of your life you'll be descending.

And so, this idea of reinvention. For today's elders, it was considered abnormal. I mean, if you were a dentist, and didn't want to be a dentist anymore, people thought something was wrong with you. If you were in a marriage and didn't feel it was thrilling you, people would say, "Well, you married for better or worse." Most Boomers have changed careers multiple times, 50% have changed spouses. They've relocated their careers, their lives, their friends again and again. And so why would they stop doing that when they have more free time and when they are a bit older?

Thirdly, we're going to see a comparable shift in terms of the marketing epicenter. The marketing epicenter has been largely geared to trend setters, and the idea was that trend setters were most likely going to be young people. So, much of our marketplace is skewed towards the young. Now, I'm convinced that the marketplace is going to be shaped by the "influentials." People look around and they see that their boss has got the nicer office, or someone a little older can afford to sit in first class on the plane. I can afford to buy an iPad, no problem. I'm in a stage in my life where I can enjoy the fruits of my efforts. The marketplace epicenter is migrating towards the 40s, 50s and 60s, where the influentials reside, and everybody wants to copy them.

The fourth point is that I think we're gaining a greater appreciation and knowledge about the life stages that come after the 50th birthday. You might be a 64-year-old going back to college or a newlywed at 70. There are different life stages you're likely to be in, which have never really been the focus of the marketplace and therefore have been in the shadows. One example is empty nesting. All of a sudden you go from having no free time to lots of free time. What else? Grandparenthood. Today, grandparents are doing mountain treks with their grandkids. They're buying 25% of all the toys. They are a hipper, cooler, younger, more affluent cohort than we've ever seen populating that stage of life. Another stage is mature singlehood. There are over 20 million [Americans] over the age of 50 who are single. Obviously there's the retirement life stage, which the financial services companies have taken notice of. But have the travel and leisure companies fully embraced retirement as a gold mine? Not really. Have colleges and educational systems realized that today's retirees want to learn? Not really.

The fifth point is that aging is becoming more ageless. More and more people are bonding together and sharing interests based on mindset, lifestyle, religious beliefs or enjoyment of fitness, even a particular kind of dancing. Rather than people ghettoing and clustering into age groups, you see people increasingly comfortable in transgenerational settings.

Do you think there are fewer prescriptions about how one should act at a certain age?

Absolutely. One of my favorite examples of that changing was when John Glenn announced he was going back up into space at 77. People said, “Wait, 77? He’s supposed to be in a rocking chair.”

As definitions of age change, how do you think relationship dynamics are changing?

For me, one of the historic moments on this transgenerational dynamic was about a decade ago, when Carlos Santana came out with his Supernatural album. He did something quite clever, which was that he partnered up on every song with a Gen Xer. For example, the song he did with Rob Thomas from Matchbox 20.

More and more, we see examples of people rooming with, being friends with, working in partnership with, sitting down and enjoying lunch with, sharing emails with or sitting in on book clubs with people of all ages.

What do you think is driving this shift?

During the 20th century, we isolated the generations, and each generation seemed to draw a boundary around itself and identified heavily with its own kind. That was, of course, further motivated and suggested by advertising and marketing. Most advertising became focused on ages, mostly young, and basically picked apart the generations. So it was a combination of public mores, attitudes, images, music. The generations sort of pulled apart.

What’s happening now is something that’s better, healthier. We don’t think of different generations as so different. We evaluate each other more in terms of, What are your interests? Who are you as a person? What do we have to share, what do we have to exchange?

I’ve noticed that Millennials and Gen Xers are far more open-minded, more comfortable with diversity, far more likely to connect with people across lines. And I think age is just another one of those things.

In people over a certain age, we’ve seen two trends. More people seem to be accepting the signs of aging, like embracing grey hair. And then cosmetic procedures are so widespread. What do you think this means for the aesthetic of aging and how people feel about the process?

There are several dimensions of aging. For example, there is the fact that as one lives longer, one gains greater experience. If you were to ask people, “How would you like to have more experience and wisdom and perspective?” people say, “Count me in.” However, people don’t like the dimension of aging where people become socially marginalized. And then the other side of aging is physical aging, and nobody likes that. Even that one breaks into two categories. One is health, and the other is vanity. If we were an enlightened people, we’d be interested in remaining healthy through all our days, and let our bodies physically age on the outside however they might. But we are not that enlightened.

Previous generations of older people were inclined to move to the sidelines and go quietly. Boomers are going to absolutely refuse. You say to a Boomer, “Now you ought to just be quiet and go to the sidelines, let the next generation have their day”—that’s not going to happen.

Could you give a specific example of this?

Bill Gates. When he got tired of being a computer executive, he became a philanthropist. So he could have gone off and played golf for the rest of his life. But rather than moving to the sidelines, he’s a role model. Look at Oprah Winfrey. I don’t see her relaxing at all. If you were to say to Oprah, “Your time is over, stop,” she won’t. If you look at Steven Spielberg, he’s still making movies. Look at Diana Nyad, who’s been attempting to swim to Cuba in the last few months. She’s in her 60s. You go to any of these Ironman triathlon events, and there’s more and more 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds doing great.

The last point has to do with where the money is going to be made. Generally, people want to look either young or ageless. So whether that’s going to the gym, or wearing clothing that features their look appropriately as they mature, Botox injections. If you look at the numbers of people who are doing plastic and cosmetic and injectible therapies, it’s unbelievable. And the people dying their hair, women and men. Years ago, the entire skin care world had to do with acne; now, it’s all age-defying products. So, in those neuroses, there’s trillions of dollars of opportunity.

Our research found clear differences in the way the sexes approach aging. Can you speak to why this is?

Women and men are not running the same race, because women have a longer distance to go, and they have more time than men. There are a couple of drivers here. One of them is that, psychologically women are more likely to have identities that are fluid. They’ve defined themselves in various ways: “I’m a woman, I’m a wife, I’m a mother, I’m a lawyer, I’m a caregiver.” Men are much more rigid, more firmly defined in the sense of, “I am a vice president of marketing,” or “I’m a schoolteacher.” And so as that piece of their identity begins to have an end, they get lost. They don’t know who they should be and how to maintain their masculinity and their virility and their identity. But also, they don’t even know how to make the shift, because they’ve made so few shifts of self-definition.

However, society still generally thinks that as men grow older, they become more distinctive looking, more wise looking. As women grow older, they tend to look—society believes—more frumpy. I do think that women are more rigorously evaluated for their attractiveness as human beings, based on how they look, than men. And that can become a tough battle, because of the forces of physical aging. If you look at the percentages of women who do plastic surgery versus the men who do Botox, who get facials, dye their hair, the numbers really skew very much towards women. And that would argue they’re fighting that battle with a lot more determination than men feel they need to.

But it seems that men are paying more attention to looking youthful these days?

They are...Take health spas, for example. Around the 1990s they appeared on the scene and they became sort of wellness spas. Initially, the people were almost all women. Now it's almost 50/50. Men are also going to the dance classes, the aerobic sessions, the yoga classes and going to get massage treatments. Men are becoming more inclined to look after these kinds of vanity elements and wellness elements than they used to be.

What do you think is going to happen in five to 10 years? Where is this trend going?

If I were to look at the opportunity that this "age wave" is causing for the marketplace and how far have we penetrated that opportunity, I'd say only about 10% so far. And there are three things that are holding it back, all of which are going to come unglued.

One of them is that most of the creative people in the field of marketing are not over 60. I gave a presentation a few weeks ago to one of the major consumer products companies, and the whole focus was targeting the 55-and-over population, and I asked the group, "How many people in the room are over 55?" And there was not one hand that went up. The older generation is not likely to be at work, or at these creative meetings or the brainstorming sessions, or to be thinking, "Here's what I'd like to do for me and my friends." As more people stay at work longer, we're going to hear more of what older consumers are wanting. Most people who create products and services are thinking about "what I need." So there's been an almost absence of creative intelligence in pursuit of this market.

There's never really been a big enough market to be taken seriously. Now, 70% of all the wealth in America is held by people over 50. And the spending power of 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds is absolutely unrivaled, particularly in financial services, travel and leisure, health and wellness, pharmaceuticals and real estate.

The other thing that's happening is that we are finally beginning to think about, let's create some new things. You know, do I really want to wear the same clothes at 61 that my dad wore at 61? No. What do I need to keep my eyes healthy? What kind of skin products am I going to spend a great deal of money for?

The Boomers have shaped markets as kids, as teenagers, as Yuppies. Now that they're migrating into maturity, service and product developers and creators are going to really have to get their thinking caps on, because there are so many opportunities and so many new ideas that have simply not yet been brought to market.

With the definition of "old age" becoming more unstable, how should marketers adjust their messaging?

Dove hit the market with its campaign of real people, not only every color but every shape and size. If I'm 61, 67 or 72, do I need to see an ad where there's only older people in it? No. I do watch some campaigns and feel like they're not talking to me at all. I do feel insulted and offended by some of the things I see.

It's a sensitive zone, because how does one communicate with people at different stages of life in a way that allows them to feel spoken to and respected, celebrated, but not necessarily put into an older age bucket? A lot of people who are 60 and 70, they listen to the language, look at the models and look at the ads, and they feel offended. That's Marketing 101: Respect your customer. Marketing 102 is "Celebrate your customer."

But we have yet to see companies willing to not only effectively market to and communicate with this new generation at this new stage in their lives, but to even take it to the next step, and celebrate and advocate for it, and be a part of the excitement of that new experience. I think we are on the verge of seeing more and more of that with both middlecence and late adulthood and old age.

[We must] at least reframe the issue so that a 40- or a 60- or an 80-year-old could be attractive or appealing or in love or alive or trying something new or discovering new possibilities. And that's what's coming next!

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