

LEADERSHIP & TALENT

Agencies Have an Ageism Problem

Age discrimination in the advertising sector is rampant, but often left out of the conversation



78% of older workers have seen or experienced ageism in the workplace. Malte Mueller/Getty Images



By **Emmy Liederman**

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If you want proof that ageism plagues the ad industry, Grace Creative co-founder Susan Lee Colby points to how older adults are portrayed in creative work.

Advertisements in which older generations are fixated on hiding their age rather than embracing it prove just how much they are boxed out of the industry, according to Colby, who also serves as co-CCO for the agency, which strives to introduce a more favorable aging narrative while offering older adults an inclusive place to work.

"The agency world has a very young expiration date for people, especially in creative and especially for women," she said, adding that applicants aren't advised to include too much experience in their résumés, as it may work against them. "It's no secret that it's very hard to get a job in advertising even over 40."

like "we are searching for a digital native" and "someone who is fresh out of college."

A recent AARP survey found that 78% of older workers have seen or experienced ageism in the workplace, but failure to hire cases in the age discrimination sector are especially difficult to prove from a legal standpoint. Ageism runs rampant in the ad industry like any other type of discrimination, from gender to racial bias, but it is often left out of the conversation. When ad agencies make assumptions based on age, they disrupt internal structures that facilitate learning and lose potential revenue by failing to encompass the entire human experience in their work. While ageism still permeates throughout the industry, some shops are displaying the power of inviting all voices into the room by launching creative that respects older generations, instead of talking down to them.

"There's this presumption that older people don't want to learn new things, but they have long-earned soft skills and people skills" said Steve Koepf, co-founder of From Day One, a conference series that focuses on fostering relationships in the workplace. "Our workforce is aging and that's only going to increase."

When experience works against you

Despite the data that shows ageism runs rampant across industries, age often comes with higher salary expectations, which makes cases especially difficult to prove. According to Susan Crumiller, founding attorney at Crumiller PC, while it is harder to show that "employers aren't just acting out of legitimate business concerns," she sees clients who feel they have been boxed out due to an inability to **keep up with company culture**.

"If you're at a company with a culture that consists of going out and doing shots every night, there might be an assumption that older adults aren't interested," said Crumiller. "That's a form of discrimination because that has nothing to do with their work performance."

One agency executive, who chose to remain anonymous, was let go by OMD due to budget cuts seven months into the gig. He has 30 years of industry experience and has spent the last six months looking for a job, only to be met by a series of rejections. Before job interviews, he makes sure to "shave very closely to get rid of the gray scruff" and dabs cream under his eyes to rid himself of wrinkles as much as possible.

"Sometimes it really just feels like you're pounding sand out there," he said. "I don't have proof of ageism because no one has ever told me 'You're too old for the role,' but questions during job interviews like 'How digital are you?' are sort of suggestive of ageism."

While age discrimination affects all employees, women are especially impacted by this discrimination, according to Bonnie Marcus, an author and speaker who specializes in gendered ageism. Marcus stressed that after a certain age, women are "not only seen as less valuable, but also less competent."



Bonnie Marcus

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To better understand how [#GenderedAgeism](#) affects professional women, I conducted research and collected responses from 729 participants aged 18-70+, with respondents worldwide. Here's what I found out: hubs.la/Q01ffRw [#NotDoneYet!](#) [#Ageism](#) [#WomenOver50](#) [#WomenInTheWorkplace](#)

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"It is often subtle and you don't always know if you are not being hired because of your age, but it is possible to infer when the job is given to someone 20 years younger with a fraction of your experience," said Lisa Solomon, founder and CEO of professional training and coaching company Antheum Collective, who said she herself has faced ageism during her career in the ad industry.

Producing age-diverse teams

A campaign by Grace Creative called "Age is Not Just a Number," which launched during the pandemic, showcases the experiences of women over 50 whose lives are defined by a series of highs that are often left out of the narrative. Instead of succumbing to the cultural pressure to hide their age, the spot showcases older women embracing the beauty of getting older, which often includes enjoying their time as empty nesters while "gaining perspective, confidence and wisdom." This concept came to life because women over 50 themselves were behind it, according to Colby.

"Age is not a deficit. It is really a benefit," said Colby. "Saying that age is just a number is a way of denying and disregarding what age brings."

Non-profit marketing agency Media Cause was inspired to launch its Rally Against Ageism campaign after listening to LinkedIn users call out the exclusivity of "30 Under 30" and "40 Under 40" lists. The initiative invites employers to sign a pledge to recognize the benefits of age inclusion and foster age-diverse teams, as well as encourage publishers to get rid of these pieces. The campaign stresses that limiting talent pools results in a loss in potential profit for companies, and when older adults are recognized by publishers, companies will realize that there is no correlation between age and talent. According to founder and CEO Eric Facas, encouraging publishers to abandon these lists feels like a "meaningful, yet reachable, progress toward the bigger goal."

ThinkLA, a non-profit organization network for employees in media, marketing and advertising, also wants companies to understand the danger of boxing out employees on the premise of age. The company is taking action through its Gray Matters initiative, which pairs seasoned industry professionals with companies looking to fill interim roles and part-time positions. According to executive director Don Lupo, combining differing perspectives by creating teams with both older and younger staff benefits both the company and the employees themselves.

"If I was working with someone who was 30 and just starting out in their career, I would be learning a ton from them and would look forward to collaborating," said Lupo. "It's a great opportunity for everybody."



BLOOM AIMS TO SUPPORT MARKETERS IN THE WORKPLACE BY DEMYSTIFYING MENOPAUSE



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