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[The all-new 2005 Corvette](#)**BECOME A MEMBER**[Special Offers!](#)[My Portfolios](#)[My Alerts](#)[e-Newsletters](#)[Discussions](#)[View all member benefits](#)**FREE!****RETIREMENT LIVING****Off the radar****Aging boomers derided, or ignored, by ad campaigns**By [Andrea Coombes](#), [CBS.MarketWatch.com](#)

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[E-mail it](#) | [Print](#) | [Discuss](#) | [Alert](#) | [Reprint](#) | [RSS](#)**SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) -- Despite the well-publicized fact that baby boomers are sliding inevitably into middle age and beyond, companies' attempts to market to them are having only limited success.**

Every seven seconds marks one more American's 50th birthday, according to current estimates, but boomers say they're being ignored in large part by corporate America. And, despite the occasional cursory nod such as Cadillac's Led Zeppelin-laced ads, most marketing attention is directed at either a much older or younger crowd, according to a new survey.

Sixty-six percent of boomers age 50 and older said more ads target younger people, and 64 percent of those age 39 to 49 agreed, according to a survey of 450 boomers by The Boomer Project, a joint effort by Richmond, Va.-based ad agency Boisseau Partners and Southeastern Institute of Research.

And 35 percent of boomers 50 and older said advertisements target people older than them, while 30 percent of those 39 to 49 said the same thing, the survey found.

"They're in this never-never land," said Matt Thornhill, founder of The Boomer Project and chief marketing officer at Boisseau Partners. "They don't relate to the lifestyle of a senior senior, and they're not young anymore."

While it's a group that spends an estimated \$2 trillion a year on consumer goods and services, Thornhill said, "traditional marketers target the ideal demographic as 18 to 49, and everybody else is lumped into the 50-and-over group," he said.

The marketers are "not interested or they lump them in with the gray-haired folks who are 65 or 70. Bruce Springsteen is 54, Kim Basinger just turned 50, Robin Williams is 51. Are you going to call them seniors? Those aged 50 to 57 are at the peak of their earning years. They've got the kids out of college. They've got time and disposable income."

**Shallow attempts**

And the cursory commercial nod does not always appeal. Boomers gave the Cadillac ad low points in the survey, Led Zeppelin soundtrack and all.

That indicates a deeper problem: Attempts to address this cohort are often laden with stereotypes, easy references to a peace sign, a Woodstock

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image or the idea of boomers as a selfish lot. That will only prove detrimental to companies over the long term, marketing experts say.

"The issue isn't just throw a few people who are 50 into our commercial, or let's be sure to throw Jimi Hendrix into this commercial," said Brent Green, a marketing consultant and author of "Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers," published earlier this year.

"We're not a bunch of lemmings. Just because we hear Led Zeppelin doesn't mean that product and company resonate with me," he said.

For instance, one recent Pepsi ad shows young boys at a rock concert staring at some gray-haired rock fans. Then they turn to each other and one expresses the hope that their elders "don't go skinny-dipping again." To Green, that kind of boomer reference is a disparagement that's likely to backfire.

"Does that build relationships? It sure didn't in my mind," he said. "Does it affect sales? Probably not. But a brand is not just about next month's sales. It's about building a relationship, and is that relationship going to be based on the denunciation of others and ridicule?"

## Harley-Davidson, Disney lead the way

By all accounts, Harley Davidson ([HDI: news, chart, profile](#)) and Disney ([DIS: news, chart, profile](#)) are companies that succeed where others have so far failed. Advertisements for Disney's recent anniversary suggested "come back and see it again without your kids," Thornhill said. "They showed a mid-fifties couple coming back."

Harley-Davidson has also managed to strike a hit. "Most Harley-Davidson motorcycles are being sold to people over 40 and 50," Green said. "It isn't about creating clichéd images of people. They're talking to broader themes about living life to its fullest."

Also, they've tapped the idea of community and connection. "Harley groups are very, very involved in civic engagement and fundraising ... it's tapping into people's later-life needs to make a difference, to have relevance, to leave a legacy. Those are the themes that (companies) need to be marketing to, not 'hey, man, peace and love,'" Green said.

In companies' ongoing attempts at marketing to boomers, Green sees ads getting worse before they get better. "Generational prejudice is the last area where we can openly be prejudicial and stereotypical and comfortably get away with it in mixed social situations," he said.

For instance, as a marketing consultant, Green was recently asked by an ad agency to discuss advertising to boomers. A list of questions he was asked to answer in preparation for the event was this: "Are boomers relatively set in their eating habits, or are they open to new types and forms of food?"

Said Green: "Set in their ways' is associated with the traditional American stereotype of aging. It's a ridiculous question. But it came from someone in marketing whose job it is to be successful at marketing new products to boomers."

## Younger than I look

The survey touched on another tricky point for marketers: Boomers who are 54 years old consider themselves 41 and, for those earning \$75,000 or more a year, that psychological age dives to 39.

Most marketing agencies assume anyone in his fifties is about 54, but given this survey's findings, any such ads are likely to miss their target, Thornhill said.

However, that doesn't mean companies can simply resort to using 30-somethings in ads, Thornhill said. A 57-year-old boomer, for instance, may not relate to an ad featuring parents with very young kids. "You have to find a way to match up that youthful attitude with the reality of their life," Thornhill said.

Like it or not, marketers will be forced to address the complex needs of this generation, he said.

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"Boomers have controlled the economic engine and everything else in America for so long," he said, "they're not going to be lumped into the terms and expressions used to describe previous generations. Marketers are slow to figure out this is a new segment that they need to target."

Andrea Coombes is a reporter for CBS.MarketWatch.com in San Francisco.

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