

AGING AND OPINIONS

What a Difference a Day *Can* Make

A friend of mine named Chris turned 55 the other day. He didn't think too much of it. He was still doing all the same things he'd been doing 24 hours earlier when he was 54. He didn't feel older. He didn't feel marginalized. And he certainly didn't feel insulted.

That didn't happen until later in the day.

It all started with a research survey. The afternoon of Chris' 55th birthday he received an invitation to take part in an online survey. When asked for his age, he put a check in the "55-64" box and was immediately tossed out of the study.

Chris didn't think much of it at first. He is a marketing researcher, having been in the

business his entire working career, and is familiar with how studies focus on certain demographic segments — like women instead of men, or younger people instead of older people. He volunteers to get online surveys regularly so he can stay current in his field.

Then Chris got another invitation to take part in another online survey and he was kicked out of that one, too, right after he checked the "55-64" box. And then it happened again on yet another survey two hours later.

THIS GOT CHRIS to start wondering whether because of his age his opinions no longer mattered. He still held the same beliefs; he still planned to stop by Best Buy to get a DVD on the way home from a trip to Lowe's, where he was buying some compact florescent light bulbs. Chris thought he was still a consumer. One with opinions that should matter. But that no longer seemed to be the case.

We know Chris isn't alone. We hear from older boomer consumers all the time who feel as if they are being marginalized by the marketplace. Think

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A series on boomer-related issues.

about the commercials and ads for products you buy regularly. Do they ever show anyone who looks anywhere near your age? Probably not. When they do show someone in their 50s, it usually consists of men eager to deal with erectile dysfunction or women seeking "age-defying" cosmetic products.

The ads in this year's Super Bowl were no exception. We didn't see any featuring a person who appeared to be over the age of 35. What a strange condition in a country where boomers, ages 44-62 this year, are one out of every three adults.

For Chris, his complaint was that he was only one day older. Does he now really have more in common with people 10 years older than himself than he does with people one day younger? Is he

supposed to take his Jimi Hendrix records and just fade into the background? Or, can he still plug in his iPod (that he got at age 53) and listen to the latest song from The Fray?

At issue is the use of chronological age as the right, or even accurate, way to classify people. For boomers, age is now at best a trivial data point. That number is not what describes most of us these days. Instead, most boomers would describe themselves using terms based on who they are (values), how they live (lifestyle), what they face in their daily lives (life stage), and what they hope to accomplish (aspirations), rather than on some artificial chronological measuring stick.

WE COULD ROUND up a dozen 55-year-olds and find some who are "old" and others who are still "young" in terms of health and fitness. Some would be grandparents; others might be still dealing with teenagers, or even younger kids at home. Some would be ready for retirement after long careers; others could be starting new careers. Some would be liberal and some would be conservative. How someone thinks, feels, and acts is much more important — and identifying — than his age.

We think a shift toward "age-neutral" thinking in our society and culture has started — at least for boomers and their elders — and will forever change the definition of "old age" from a chronological condition to a state of mind. We like to tell people that boomers today are growing older, but they aren't aging.

Right now, age simply isn't an acceptable indicator of much of anything. Except for Chris, because his 55th birthday changed him. After 30-plus years in marketing research, he now collects the opinions from consumers of all ages, and uses other measures if he needs to dismiss some participants, usually based on their purchase behavior. Turns out that day really did make a difference.

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