

“It’s Time for the Ad Industry to Grow Up” Nicole Marquis says the ingrained ageism at ad agencies isn’t just wrong, it’s bad business.

By Nicole Marquis

When creative director Mark Gardiner decided to take a year off from his high-paying job at ad agency Muller + Company to pursue his dream of racing in the world’s oldest and most dangerous motorcycle race, it seemed like a really good idea. In his late 40s, he wanted to compete while he still could. So he quit his job, packed his bags and flew to the British Isles.

Competing in the Isle of Man TT was everything he expected it to be, but he returned home to find that landing his next creative director job was anything but easy. In turning 50, he had become invisible to ad agencies. He had aged out.

Hélène Côté, creative director at Red Cliff Marketing and the winner of multiple One Show pencils and Cannes Lions as well as an Emmy, lost similar ground when she left her creative director position in her 50s to care for her aging mother. When she was ready to take back the reins, she found that agencies weren’t willing to hand them over.

“Nobody ever says, ‘Hey, you’ve turned 50, we’re laying you off because you’re too old’—they’d be opening themselves to a massive discrimination suit,” says Gardiner. “But they find ways to get rid of you. And once you’re on the outside, they find ways to not let you back in.”

Advertising may be a glamorous and hip industry to work in, but it is youth obsessed.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that more than 59 percent of employees in the ad industry are between the age of 25 and 44 years old, with the median age being 38. And the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising in the United Kingdom says only 4 percent of employees in its member agencies are over 50.



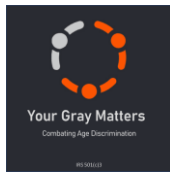
“Youth drives the way you communicate, where you do it and how you do it, and the older generation drives the money being spent. If you can’t talk to both generations, then you’re left out in the cold.” —Hélène Côté, creative director, Red Cliff Marketing

The bigger the agency, the more pronounced the ageism. All you have to do is look at the photos of ad teams in *Adweek*, notes Gardiner, and you’ll see that every face is young and fresh. It is obvious yet remains a taboo subject few are willing to talk about openly.

An independent headhunter who recruits talent for several top agencies offered this: “Advertising is a very ageist industry—more so than any other, next to entertainment. I get

Your Gray Matters, Inc

Combating age discrimination in the creative, marketing and advertising industries ■ (501(c)3)
3191 Grand Avenue, #330183, Coconut Grove, FL 33133 ■ Msalup@yourgraymatters.org



so many candidates with amazing histories and fabulous pedigrees, and I feel bad, because I can't help them. Clients are always looking for that young, sexy, engaging, creative person to pitch new business, not someone who looks like they could be the CMO at Sears."

So what is it about ad agencies that makes them obsess over youth? "Young people tend to be more in touch with pop culture," offers another ad agency recruiter. "The way they dress, all the exciting stuff in the world that's happening when you're that age—agencies want that brought back into the product." And they want young people who are digital natives. "The tools, the imagery and even the style of writing has to be fresh and edgy."

The irony is that while young people are making the ads, it's the older folks spending the cash. According to a 2013 Nielsen study, 70 percent of disposable income in the United States is controlled by those over 50, so excluding boomers from ad agency teams is like leaving money on the table. Says Gardiner, "If everyone working on the ads is young, they'll accidentally alienate older consumers at worst. At best, they simply won't create messages that resonate with the largest market."

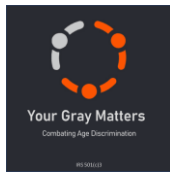
Brands already know that along with age comes buying power, and they're desperate to find new ways to attract people over 60, the fastest-growing group of consumers worldwide.

Luxury brands, especially, have become keenly aware of the influence and purchasing power of older women, and the recent slew of mature celebrity brand ambassadors for high-end fashion houses—Joan Didion for Céline, Joni Mitchell for Yves Saint Laurent and Iris Apfel for Kate Spade, among others—marks a significant change in advertising strategy already taking place.

Gardiner believes this will inevitably trickle down to influence age diversity at the agency level. "Clients will start insisting that their ad teams include more experienced creatives," he predicts. "Culture leads business, and business will drag ad agencies, kicking and screaming, into the future."

In a talk given at the most recent 3% Conference, Côté and Gardiner advised older ad industry professionals on what to do in the meantime. Instead of getting angry about the situation he found himself in, Gardiner started an agency called Revolutionary Old Idea. Today he counsels clients on how to grab a share of the \$3 trillion-a-year Baby Boomer and senior market. And business is booming.

Côté wanted to do something to help aged-out creatives, so she partnered with the 3% Conference to introduce a program called REReturnships, a term first coined in 2008 by Goldman Sachs to describe the internships it offered to moms and other employees to help them ease back into the workforce. Côté gives returnships a fresh spin by focusing on evaluating and training advertising creatives, matching them to a host agency or company,



and assigning them a mentor. The program acclimates creatives to new technology and fresh agency environments while exposing agencies to the strategic benefits of having more mature teams on staff. “If we follow the common belief that you need to be young to advertise to the young, then agencies need to have over-50 talent to advertise to the older generation,” says Côté.



Nicole Marquis (nicole_marquis@hotmail.com) writes advertising copy for clients in San Francisco and beyond. She also enjoys writing fiction and blogging for the 3% Conference to help build the case for more female creative leadership. When she's not working, she's exploring the world with her two girls.