

GOOD SH!T

IT'S A GOOD TIME TO BE AGEIST

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Because old doesn't have to mean uncool.

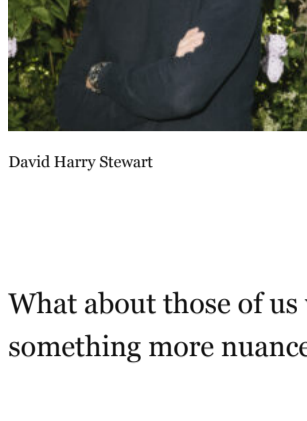
By Heather Hughes
JULY 15, 2020

- The over-65 population in the United States is projected to more than double by 2050, from roughly 40 million to 80 million.
- The "dorky" depictions of retirement-age people are everywhere. It's time to co-found Ageist.

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David Harry Stewart

When I turned 60, I realized that as it did with my membership in the AARP, I don't have a car, I get around by bike.

I also don't own a house or an apartment. I'm not married, divorced or widowed; I don't have children. And "retirement" isn't a word in my vocabulary — as a freelance copy editor and writer, I'll probably be working for the rest of my life.

But organizations and companies catering to those who are 50-plus continue to target their market with outdated, even stereotypical images: Radiant, silver-haired seniors gliding into the so-called golden years alongside their equally radiant, loving spouse and surrounded by children, grandchildren and, yes, great-grandchildren.

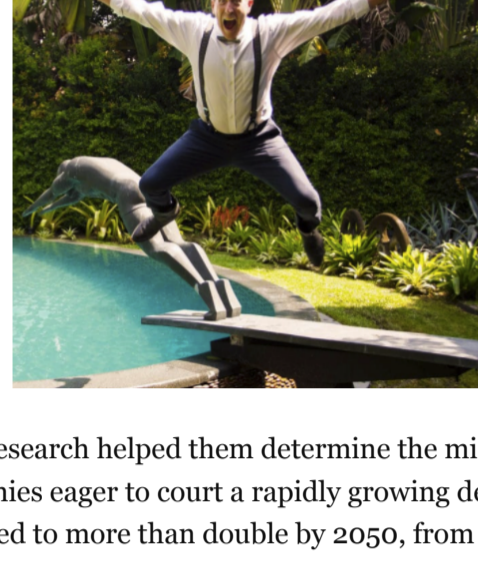
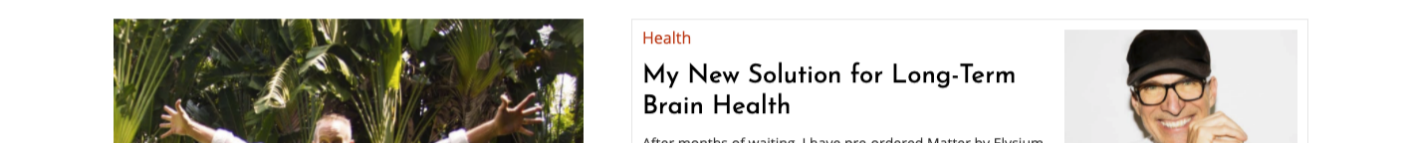
What about those of us who don't fit into the traditional mold of the aging and the aged or are looking for something more nuanced? After all, Gen Xers are now in their 50s.

WE'RE COOL. WE DO COOL.

DAVID HARRY STEWART, ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AGEIST AND AARP

That's where Ageist comes in. The Los Angeles-based media company not only works with companies and brands whose target audience is 50-plus — health insurance companies, financial product firms, automotive companies, for example — but also produces content tailored to the audience itself.

In 2015, then-56-year-old David Harry Stewart, a photographer and an advertising veteran, wondered "why I was getting older, but everyone I photographed was staying the same age." The depictions of retirement-age and older people he saw were "so dorky," as Stewart puts it, and he wanted to find out why. So, Stewart and his friend Matt Hirst started conducting interviews with people ages 48 to 82.



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Their research helped them determine the mission of Ageist. Rather than just serve as consultants to companies eager to court a rapidly growing demographic — the over-65 population in the United States is projected to more than double by 2050, from roughly 40 million to 80 million — Stewart and Hirst wanted to redefine what it means to age. "There's a mass delusion that everyone over a certain age is defective," Stewart, now 61, says, and Ageist aims to make aging "aspirational."

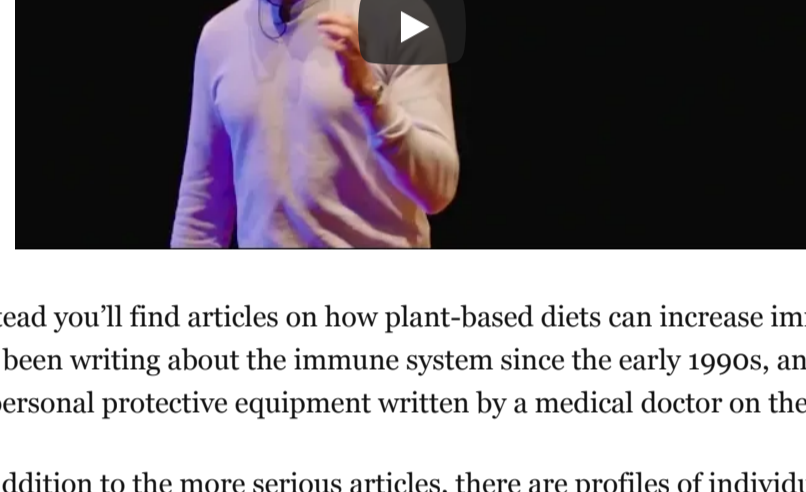
But what about that name? After all, the word "ageist" has a negative connotation, one of prejudice and discrimination. The first options they came up with included "gold," "silver," "beautiful boomer," Stewart says with a discernible cringe in his voice. "We're talking about age, so we're ageist."

When asked about AARP, the organization most frequently associated with those 65-plus in the U.S., Stewart chooses his words carefully. "It's great for my mom [an 89-year-old retired teacher]. They serve a specific group of people," he says. "We see Ageist as an alternative to AARP; we don't see them as a competitor." Why not? "We're cool," Stewart says matter-of-factly. "We do cool."

Stewart's take on AARP is echoed by 68-year-old Nancy Hannibal, a former fashion industry executive who left corporate life at 53 and joined the Peace Corps. "My impression of AARP is that it is a relic from the past," she says. "It used to have some relevance for my parents' generation — they received discounts for products and services; [AARP] would lobby for medical and retirement benefits for seniors and would give nonpartisan information about the policies of political candidates." Today, though, Hannibal sees the organization as "a shell for financial and insurance companies and ... [it] has a political agenda."

Regardless of how cool and astute Ageist's core audience may be, though, they're also among those at greatest risk of contracting COVID-19. And that includes Stewart himself. Although he's in good shape and thinks of himself as being "20 years younger than I am, my immune system is 61. That's a fact. It doesn't matter how good I look. I absolutely feel more vulnerable."

On the Ageist website, readers will find lots of wellness content — COVID-19-focused and not — and all of it is required to be backed up by "a list of scientific abstracts," Stewart says. In other words, don't expect breathless reports, à la Goop, about how jade eggs increase sexual pleasure when inserted regularly into the vagina (spoiler alert: gynecologists don't agree).



Instead you'll find articles on how plant-based diets can increase immune function authored by a Ph.D. who has been writing about the immune system since the early 1990s, and a how-to on repurposing snorkel masks as personal protective equipment written by a medical doctor on the front lines of the coronavirus fight.

In addition to the more serious articles, there are profiles of individuals, ages 50 to 75, who easily fit into the Ageist definition of cool. Among them are the well-known — designer Norma Kamali — and the lesser-known (Wesley Rowell, a gay Black man who became a preacher at age 59). The profiles are also featured on the Ageist podcast — and who doesn't appreciate a good podcast these days, regardless of age?

As for Ageist's clients, the pandemic and its effect on business have caused reactions that "run the gamut, but it's causing a reevaluation of a whole lot of things ... from pricing to delivery strategies to messaging strategies," Stewart says. While some businesses are contracting, for others the sudden, unprecedented change "is not a negative," he explains. "Companies that deal with home education and fitness have seen an increase in business."

And Ageist itself? Since social distancing has gone into effect and almost all interaction has moved into the digital realm, "our web traffic is way up," Stewart says. "We're very well-positioned in comparison with businesses that rely on physical contact."

Heather Hughes, OZY Author

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Julie Smith Merriman
Pretty bad ass! Love it!
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Charlie-Helen Robinson
Great article about a great person redefining age with innovative forward thinking, get up and go. The only thing I always wonder, is why Richard Branson hasn't caught on and pumped research dollars into this, to get it going globally. I'm a long time fan.
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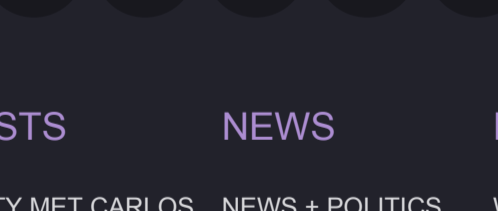
Sharron Davis
I'm happy someone has seen us as vital beings...at 73 years old, I relate to 40 and 50 year olds best!
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