



OPINION

Over the Advertising Hill

ADDRESSING THE INDUSTRY'S AGEISM PROBLEM AND RESHAPING THE NARRATIVE. **BY IAN SOHN**

With the noted exceptions of extended hangovers, a few gray hairs and a deep nostalgia for pre-Tattoo You Rolling Stones, I don't feel old.

I'm 48. Only 48.

In fact, I find myself at the very fulfilling intersection of having much to teach and a strong desire to learn. But 48 in advertising makes me a dinosaur.

In advertising, 62% of workers are under 45. The median age is 40.2 and has remained virtually the same for more than a decade. Additionally, according to an IPA Excellence paper, people over 50 represent just 6% of the ad industry workforce in the U.K.

If not for those statistics, I'd feel great about where I am. Because, the thing is, I was never young. My youth was never a professional asset. Being cool wasn't my currency.

In my 20s and 30s, my value was hard work, accountability, thoughtfulness. In my 40s, it's empowering people, leading with empathy, listening, pragmatism in the face of complex challenges. I'm far more valuable at 48 than 28, even taking into account salary disparity.

Still, it worries me, as it does many others.

There are two primary forces

driving this reality. First, and most obvious, we fetishize youth in advertising as if it's a magic elixir for creativity and innovation. The second driving force is the economics of advertising. It's well documented that procurement-led relationships exert negative margin pressure, which puts the publicly held holding companies in a challenging position come earnings season. Obviously, the simplest fix is to jettison bigger salaries in favor of smaller ones. Overwhelmingly, bigger salaries are tied to older workers. While I don't necessarily advocate for this tactic, it's only good business to use more affordable labor if you can maintain the quality of your output.

And therein lies the issue.

As an industry, we've become very good at talking ourselves into youth-based (read: cheaper) solutions as a suitable alternative for experience. Because in creative businesses like ours, we're generally loath to admit we make decisions based on dollars versus art.

What emerges is a situation in which advertising professionals of a certain age must change how we think, work and vocally advocate for ourselves and peers.

I'm grateful for all the dedicated warriors already working on this. I'm equally content letting them put our industry on blast while I figure out how to address ageism in a way with which I'm comfortable.

I've committed to the following four actions:

SHIFT HOW I TALK ABOUT INNOVATION

Most of what we do in advertising is hard-working marketing communications. Innovation doesn't have to come in the form of fireworks and shiny objects. In fact, innovation can be quite boring at first blush: a new way of articulating an idea, a new use of an old technology, a clever way to unearth an insight or entire new audience. Younger creatives have no more claim to innovation than anyone else, but it's not until we stop fetishizing innovation that we can shift this particular narrative.

STOP CONFLATING CREATIVITY WITH YOUTH

Young people are creative. Old people are creative. People of color are creative. People of all genders and sexual orientations are creative. Not every individual human is creative. But creativity is by no means the domain of any single cohort.

RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF OLDER CONSUMERS

We need to shift our thinking to reflect some facts because, according to Nielsen, people over 50 are "the most valuable generation in the history of marketing." And as of 2015, boomers controlled 70% of the country's disposable income, outspending every other generation by \$400 billion annually and providing over 50% of U.S. consumption.

To focus on Gen Z or millennials at the expense of anyone older is just bad business.

CELEBRATE MY AGE

I've had a blessed career, and for both emotional and financial reasons, I hope it doesn't end soon. But ageism is a reality in advertising. To spend the rest of my career in fear is both cowardly and inauthentic to the kind of role model I want to be. So moving forward, I will celebrate my rotations around the sun. I will never apologize for my years. I will share my experience and soak it up from others.

We can blame the institution, which has its merits, but we must also take ownership of our own growth, contribution and story. We must help teams focus on what really matters. We must remember that the brief hasn't changed in 100 years and that any perceived new problem is just an old one in shinier wrapping. People of a certain age must draw on that experience.

If we don't advocate for ourselves—for each other—no one will. We must relentlessly beat the drum, constantly quantifying our value and telling our story.



Specs

Claim to fame

Ian Sohn is WPP's global client lead for the Walgreens Boots Alliance. He spends his free time with his two sons, puppy and chasing fresh powder in the Rockies.

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