

Viva the Vital  
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## Boomers Stymied by the “R” in AARP

By Deborah Usry

Like millions of Baby Boomers, AARP turned 50 this year. Earlier this month the association launched its anniversary commemoration, “Life at 50,” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the plaudits of Buzz Aldrin, Richard Petty and Sally Field. Over the following three days, the likes of Chaka Khan, Chicago, Paul Simon, and Shirley McLain took center stage in the Washington, D.C. festivities.

AARP is a 36 million-member organization. That’s big. Excluding the Catholic Church, it’s the largest member-driven organization in the country. And it shows few signs of age: With a \$1.3 billion annual budget (almost \$25 million dedicated to lobbying) and more than 2,400 employees, the association is adding new products and looking for new members.

The Boomer Project attended “Life at 50” in the hope of divining how Boomers fit into AARP’s future. While AARP has been successful with the GI and Silent generations, it has had a harder time making inroads with the Boomers, who are notoriously resistant to being categorized as “old” or of “retirement” age. While half of older adults are members, only one in five eligible Boomers are. (Anticipating your question: Yes, I’m qualified to belong, but, no, I do not).

The size of the crowds stunned us -- AARP was expecting 25,000 to attend, and it wasn’t far off the mark. Many visitors, we noted, were Boomers. Some were there with their parents. The excitement was palpable.

Exhibitors included the usual suspects -- Big Pharma, Big Medical Devices, Big Retirement Living. But Nintendo was there (*Whee for Wii!*) NASA was there (*Guess who else is 50 years old this year*). Wineries displayed their wares, and even PETA had a booth. Clearly, AARP had worked diligently to be relevant to a wide range of adults - even those who had not yet retired.

AARP understands the task it faces. “Without Boomers,” says CEO William D. Novelli, “we’ll have fewer members coming to the top of the bucket and more leaving the bottom.”

But Novelli is confident of meeting the challenge. Way back in 1999 the organization changed its name from the American Association of Retired People to AARP, ridding any overt reference to retirement. “It will not be hard to attract this constituency, because Boomers are not really different from older members,” Novelli says. “We’re not talking about Martians and Venusians. They have the same interests in financial security and health.”

Based on that assumption, AARP has augmented its Boomer-friendly product line. Motorcycle insurance. Gym discounts. Personal trainers. Branching out from its

discount cruise packages, AARP even markets eco-tours. The association is extending its hand to Boomers in tangible ways.

But does AARP really *understand* Boomers? True, Boomers are interested in financial security. But they are still building their wealth, and they're none too confident about the future of Medicare and Social Security. Only four percent of Boomers have even reached age 62, and most don't know when or if they ever will retire. True, Boomers want good health. But they are fighting the idea of "growing old." They're running 10-Ks, mastering new languages and imbibing neutraceutical cocktails to keep the years at bay. They're tackling the challenges of aging as they have approached so much in life. Differently.

Curious if others had the same reaction we did, the Boomer Project sent out a back-of-the-envelope survey to an assortment of friends and family members. All Boomers. All eligible for AARP membership. We asked if they belonged to AARP. We asked why, or why not.

A few do belong, but most do not. They don't belong because AARP "is filled with old people" - and Boomers are not old. "I'm too young!" one insisted. "I'm in denial. I'm too young," Said another. "Still can't believe I'm old enough." "I'm not ready to admit I'm old." This from a group of people who, between them, had replaced hips and knees, repaired arteries, patched up eyes and planted hearing aids in their ears!

We wonder if AARP, in its quest to be relevant to Boomers, is shooting itself in the foot. Is the association forgetting that Boomers don't think they leave "middle age" until they hit 75? In changing its product mix to appeal to Boomers, does AARP run the risk of diluting its franchise and alienating its loyalists - the GI and Silent generations - who make up 75 percent of its membership? Do any 80-year-olds know or care who Chaka Khan is?

We Boomers may forget where we put our glasses, but we still remember what that "R" in AARP represents. And we aren't ready for it yet.

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