

A close-up photograph of two women, one younger and one older, both wearing bright orange athletic jackets. They are holding tennis rackets, with the older woman's hands prominently featured in the foreground. The lighting is warm and focused on their faces and hands.

# Marketing successfully to age 40-plus women

**What do the changing attitudes and lives of women ages 40 and older mean for active aging organizations? A challenge to get the marketing right, and a competitive advantage for those who do**

*by Colin Milner*

In September 2002, 43-year-old actress Jamie Lee Curtis chose to shake that very foundation on which Hollywood and much of marketing is built: “the illusion of perfection.” In a cover story for *MORE*, a magazine that celebrates women in midlife, she showed the real Jamie Lee to the world. Curtis (whose films include the 1985 movie *Perfect*) was photographed in a sports bra and briefs, without flattering lights and professional makeup, and with no retouching. The picture revealed what she called “not great thighs” and a “soft, fatty little tummy.”<sup>1</sup> Placed beside this photo of the unadorned Curtis was a more familiar image of the movie star—beautified, styled and retouched. Perfection.

Three months later, Oscar-winning actress Kathy Bates, 54, created a similar buzz with a memorable moment in the movie *About Schmidt*. As the free-spirited Roberta, a less-than-perfect Bates, by Hollywood standards, strolled naked into a hot tub with costar Jack Nicholson. Bates’s nudity, in itself, was not what grabbed the media’s attention. Rather, it was the fact that she was an older woman and comfortable enough with herself to show her body to the world, just as Curtis had done.

The above examples illustrate a seismic shift now occurring in the thinking of women ages 40 and older. By understanding these changing views, and what they mean for women in midlife and beyond, your organization will have an important advantage in marketing to and serving this segment.

### Shifting attitudes

“There’s a definite trend going on in society and the marketplace of self-acceptance and being comfortable in your own skin,” says William Wackermann, publisher of fashion and beauty magazine *Glamour*, in a 2005 *Advertising Age* article.<sup>2</sup> Linda Wells,

editor-in-chief of sister publication *Allure*, suggests in the same article that women have changed in how they see themselves. *Allure*’s recent study of 1,000 women revealed that “the words they used most often to describe their looks were natural and real,” says Wells. “Those words were used far more than beautiful and pretty and even higher than sexy and glamorous. That’s a shift.”<sup>2</sup>

How is this change affecting today’s marketers? According to the study *Aging Redefined II* by marketing firm Frank About Women, “There is a real disconnect between advertisers’ perceptions of women’s lives after 50 and what their lives actually look like.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, marketers have to “rethink their perceptions and methods if they intend to tap into the spending power of the 40-plus woman.”

So who are these shift-makers?

### The age 40-plus woman: what the research reveals

Today, more than 63 million women in the United States are ages 40 or older, according to the 2000 US Census.<sup>4</sup> And in Canada, about 8 million women fall into in this age group, reports Statistics Canada<sup>5</sup>—that’s a quarter of the country’s population. AARP’s recent research study of women ages 45-plus states, “These women are, for the most part, feeling satisfied with their lives, self confident, empowered, and optimistic that they will be able to realize many of their dreams in the coming years.”<sup>6</sup> Women are also generally healthier and living longer.

The average life span for American women is now 80.1 years, and 80–96% have *no* functional limitations requiring assistance from another person.<sup>7</sup> “Overall, women 45 plus describe their health positively,” notes AARP’s *Looking at Act II of Women’s Lives: Thriving &*

*Striving from 45 On*. In fact, 4 in 5 (81%) of the study’s subjects say their health is *good* or *better*, while more than half (56%) consider it *very good* or *excellent*.<sup>6</sup>

Age 40-plus women also make a significant market segment. The midlife-and-beyond group is considerably larger than the segment of women ages 20–39,<sup>4</sup> but it is also wealthier. Women spend \$3.3–7 trillion annually on consumer purchases. In addition, they are the primary decision-makers in 80–85% of *all* buying decisions.<sup>8</sup> For companies that offer products or services that help slow the aging process, the mature adult will represent a \$64-billion opportunity by 2007, according to the research firm FIND/SVP.<sup>9</sup> That means women are the primary decision-makers for \$36–38 billion in purchases. Moreover, these figures are sure to rise as the number of age 55-plus women in the workforce keeps increasing—from 8.1 million in 2000 to a projected 12.3 million in 2010, according to the US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>10</sup>

“Compared with their mothers at the same age, many of the women interviewed believe they are better off today,” the AARP research reports.<sup>6</sup> “They feel healthier, better educated, and more financially secure, with more opportunities and life choices open to them.” Of course, a great deal of diversity exists in any population. The study points out that some groups of age 40-plus women are less fortunate, adding that “a combination of ... economic security, health status, social connection, and attitude” shapes their situations. Still, the *Looking at Act II* research “shows that taking steps to control their own lives—including their finances and health—greatly affects how women feel about their mid lives and beyond.”

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Considering the above factors, how can you change your marketing to become more appealing to women ages 40 and older? To begin with, you might consider including an appreciation for the “wisdom of age” in your campaigns—as one participant in the Frank About Women study suggests.<sup>3</sup> (The box on page 26 includes other participant comments.)

Taken together, the recent research on age 40-plus women points towards creative ways your organization can attract and serve this market segment.

## Nine marketing tips

Now comes the fun of making it all happen. The 9 tips offered below provide a starting point for marketing to women ages 40 and older; it’s important, however, to continue learning as much as possible about this market segment.

### Tip 1

AARP’s research shows that even though the women in its study feel better about themselves in midlife and beyond, they have trouble “knowing what to do to take better care of themselves; and even those who know what they need to do have trouble moving from ‘knowing’ to ‘doing.’”<sup>6</sup>

*Opportunity:* Your organization could become a resource center for women seeking information on how to take better care of themselves. By creating ongoing educational opportunities such as seminars and workshops, and literature to take away, you will hold more value for both existing and potential clients.

### Tip 2

“Many women 45-plus look for companionship to help get them motivated to exercise,” the AARP research finds.<sup>6</sup> Almost 3 in 5 (58%) of the study subjects say they would be more likely to exercise if they had a friend to work out with, while 1 in 3 (33%) say they would be much more likely. In particular, younger participants (ages 45–49 years) tend more to express this view (66% vs. 57% of older participants), as do Asians (67%) and African-Americans (64%). Importantly, study subjects also rank time with their girlfriends as a top priority.

*Opportunity:* A marketing campaign that promotes the opportunity for women to exercise with their friends, and shows women exercising in pairs, offers a simple, yet effective motivational tool. For these purposes, group exercise programs far surpass other offerings.

### Tip 3

Creating the right environment goes a long way to attracting the age 40-plus woman. One relevant fact: More than 16% of these women say they feel embarrassed or self-conscious when they exercise, according to AARP’s responses.<sup>6</sup>

*Opportunity:* The Kong-like franchiser Curves did not create the women’s only club concept. Rather, the organization took this concept to the market, enabling its business to grow to a member base that now exceeds 4 million. Curves facilities offer cozy neighborhood environments, and they have no mirrors, intimidating equipment or showers. What will you do to make your facility friendlier to older women?

### Tip 4

Marketers famously say that an intended audience should always see itself in an advertisement—whether driving a car through the Alps, basking under the tropical sun or using a product. You want to ensure you create this vision.

*Opportunity:* Almost 3 in 4 (72%) of older women say they are more likely to consider a product when a woman their age represents it. What does this finding mean for your product? It’s vital to use models who resemble your audience. An image of a fit 20-year-old will appeal to a fit 20 year-old; however, it will minimize, if not eliminate, your ability to attract the mature woman. The cosmetics industry has learned this lesson, and numerous companies now use age 50-plus models to sell product lines intended for older women.

The success of Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty offers a particularly powerful example for marketers. Started in the United Kingdom several years

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## Perspectives on advertising

Frank About Women, a North Carolina company specializing in marketing to women, released a study in 2004 entitled *Aging Redefined II: A Frank Perspective on Marketing to Women as They Age*. The women surveyed for this study generally expressed a deep-seated frustration about the advertising targeted at age-50 plus women today. The following are some comments made by survey respondents:

### What they see in advertisements

- “They think all seniors are invalids or half-wits.”
- “They forget we are young people in old bodies.”
- “We’re sick, half-dead and drooling.”
- “They think we’re ‘senility’ waiting to happen.”

### What they want to see

- “A woman of radiance”
- “An appreciation for the wisdom of age”
- “Older people with money to spend”
- “Adventure, glamour”

ago, the Campaign for Real Beauty features women of all ages, races, shapes and sizes—*real* women, rather than models—and asks viewers the question, “What do you think?” Among the first women featured was Irene Sinclair, a then-95-year-old Londoner. The question posed? “Will society ever accept old can be beautiful?” Consumers voted with their buying power. And Dove, a Unilever personal care brand, increased its sales by 700% during the first half of 2004.

Having proven itself in the UK, the Campaign for Real Beauty launched in North America in September 2004. Recently, the campaign’s advertising won the top honor at the annual EFFIE Awards, sponsored by the New York American Marketing Association. These national awards recognize the most effective advertising in the industry.

### Tip 5

Overall, 24% of women ages 45 and older feel that exercise never seems to make a difference, notes the AARP study.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true of women who describe their health as less than *very good*, and who are single, unemployed and have a household income of less than \$25,000. The research found this a larger issue among African-American (35%), Hispanic (37%) and Asian participants (32%). Would you buy a product that does not work? The answer is obvious, isn’t it?

*Opportunity:* You can use peer-to-peer testimonial marketing to help change the above view. But instead of your clients just talking about the results, they should discuss the struggles they went through as well. This marketing should focus on how exercise had never worked for these individuals before and, most importantly, what they changed to gain the lifestyle they now have.

### Tip 6

Everyone needs energy to function. According to the AARP research, 40% of the women who participated in its study say that, on most days of the week, they feel too tired to exercise.<sup>6</sup> Factors that have an impact on their energy levels include caregiving, which affects nearly 28% of these participants and leaves them little time for their own health.

*Opportunity:* Your task becomes to create a time-based, energy-boosting

program. The message: Do this for 30 minutes, 3 days a week, starting off slowly, and you *will* gain the energy you need to live life the way you want to. Also, you might consider tying in with a volunteer group that could act as caregivers during this time—an added bonus. Caring for your clients and their families is simply good business.

### Tip 7

Fully three-quarters of mature adults distrust advertising.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, you might want to use this opportunity with the age-40-plus-women market segment to differentiate your product from your competitors’.

*Opportunity:* It’s important to focus on the longevity of your brand and why women trust it. Remember how Tylenol positioned itself against Bayer Aspirin? *Doctors and leading health organizations recommend Tylenol more than other brands.* The thought was, If doctors recommend Tylenol, and I trust my doctor, the product must be effective. Your goal, then, involves finding a position that will help enhance your credibility with this group, and build trust.

### Tip 8

The Frank About Women’s research shows that 83% of its study subjects say that younger friends, family members and coworkers regularly come to them for advice.<sup>3</sup> How can you tap into this huge referral base?

*Opportunity:* You can build strong traditions and connections by engaging both your clients and their friends and families. Whether through social outings, parties, clubs within your facility, social support groups or weekly coffee breaks, your organization should focus on loyalty programs. Your clients are your most effective marketing tool.

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## A message that works

The Active for Life Program created a successful campaign that we all can learn from. The headline grabs your attention: “I stay active because strong arms give better hugs.” The advertisement copy tells a story about a grandmother and grandchild, a strong message that most people can relate to.

The models used in the ad were healthy-looking older women, who were shown participating in life rather than sitting on the sidelines. And to ensure there was no confusion about what *active* meant, the advertisement gave an exact definition: “Get your heart rate up—30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week.” Lastly, the ads engaged readers, asking them to take action by “calling for a *free* handbook on how to be active for life.”

The Active For Life marketing campaign shows that our efforts can and will be rewarded, when we portray images of older women as active, healthy, having fun and celebrating their relationships.

## Tip 9

“Not only are many 45 plus women happier than ever, they are also entering a time in their lives when they are experiencing a greater sense of freedom to be themselves,” the AARP research says of the participants in its study.<sup>6</sup> “Over 75% of women consider this a time for pursuing their dreams and doing the things they have always wanted to do.”

*Opportunity:* Your offerings will help women in midlife and beyond have the energy to do the things they have always wanted to do. Your aim is to position your programs or facility as a way to keep their passions alive. Dottie Drake, owner of Miracles Fitness, relates the story of training a client in her mid-90’s who wanted to take a hot air balloon ride. The balloon company required this woman, who was confined to a wheelchair, to be strong enough to stand for the entire ride. After training with Drake for a year, the client made the balloon ride. Passions prove compelling motivators. Which passions could you tap into with this market?

## Engaging the market

In the book *EVEvolution*, author and futurist Faith Popcorn states, “In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the dominant brands with women will be the brands women join.”<sup>12</sup> When you understand the changing lives and views of women ages 40 and older, and adopt marketing and programming approaches that appeal to them, you will increase the likelihood that these women will not only frequent your business, but also help it to grow. ☺

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## Resource

### AARP Foundation Women’s Leadership Circle

*Looking at Act II of Women’s Lives: Thriving & Striving from 45 On*  
<http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/wlcresearch.pdf>