The *Greydollarfella*: An endangered species or a market opportunity?

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**Abstract** This paper identifies an ignored and endangered species: the mature male shopper, who we have named the *Greydollarfella*. Based on current research and interviews, we describe this fellow and attempt to differentiate him from other consumer segments. The Greydollarfella, unlike younger men, appears not to like shopping and so is often ignored by retailers or excluded from the retail environment. We argue that the Greydollarfella should be included in, not sidelined from, retail and marketing considerations. He is much wealthier and less time-poor than younger men, and deserves a retail environment that suits his preferences and consumer requirements. We present some examples of how retailers are attending (and not attending) to the Greydollarfella. We conclude that Greydollarfella is not very well understood, is undervalued, and is often marginalised by retail marketing strategies. We believe he offers great value for marketers and retailers (both niche and mass) willing to take the time to understand his psyche, product and service needs, and views on the retail experience. Finally, we call for more attention to be paid to this segment.

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**1. Focusing on the forgotten**

Although the retail marketplace is crowded and growth opportunities are difficult to find, we assert that retailers are not attending to a substantial market segment of mature male shoppers: the Greydollarfellas. To learn more about this group, we reviewed industry and academic literature to assess to what extent the mature male shopper is considered in the development of retail marketing strategies. Further, we interviewed mature men on their attitudes toward shopping and present some of their stories here.
Consumer and market researchers have undertaken so little work in regard to this segment that the research for this article was a frustrating experience. Heretofore, the vast majority of consumer research has centred on the female customer and, more recently, on the younger male consumer, a.k.a. the ‘Metrosexual.’ We discovered that research focusing on mature (50+) consumers is either female-focused or generic; that is, not differentiating between males and females. We argue that much more needs to be done to analyse and meet the needs of the older, male ‘silent shopper.’ Marketers are slowly recognising the economic significance of ‘Baby Boomers’ and ‘Empty Nesters,’ but we have been surprised to discover just how little is known about the male half of this demographic. For example, in their study of male shoppers, Ottenes and McGrath (2001) commented that no national U.S. retail chain had really gotten to know adult males as customers. We propose that this conclusion is still valid in 2005. In response, we present a picture of the Greydollarfella and look briefly at how he differs from female customers and younger male consumers, then report some of the conversations we have had with older male shoppers. We conclude by evaluating how the industry is (and is not) responding and call for more research into, and greater recognition of, the significance of the Greydollarfella.

2. Who is the Greydollarfella?

Assael (1998) asserts that the mature market (50+) is the most powerful buying group in the American economy. The members of this group have high discretionary incomes, as their financial obligations are fulfilled (e.g., mortgages largely repaid, children’s education and support demands reduced or completed). Overall, the attention paid to this market segment seems at odds with its potential. It is reported that people over 50 years of age account for more than 40% of all consumer spending, but represent less than 10% of all targeted advertisements. The AARP (2005), a non-profit membership association focusing on the needs and interests of mature consumers, reported that there are 76 million U.S. residents aged 50+, with someone turning 50 every seven seconds. Janet Kiddle (2005), founder of Steel Magnolia, a marketing consultancy specialising in the 50+ market, identifies what she refers to as the “wow numbers” regarding mature market potential. According to Kiddle, in the U.K., adults over 50 account for 40% of consumer expenditure (around £240 bn) and hold approximately 80% of the country’s wealth, yet only account for 32% of the population.

It is important to emphasise that while the significance of the 50+ market is well recognised and documented, details regarding gender-specific consumption and expenditure patterns are scant. Working from what is known about Baby Boomers, we define the ‘Greydollarfella’ as a male over age 50 with an independent, disposable income, either working or recently retired. He either owns or has significant equity in a home, is likely to be computer literate, uses the Internet, and owns a new car. He may dine out regularly, enjoy significant personal and family leisure time, and spend money primarily on home improvement products and services. We propose that he is likely to have an ambivalent or even negative view toward shopping, especially when compared to his partner or to younger male age groups. Yet, very little is known about him, as there has been more research conducted on female, rather than male, shopping behaviour. Within male consumer research it is the Metrosexuals who are attracting attention, leaving the mature male shopping psyche much less well understood.

3. It’s all about the ladies

In recent years, the focus for retailers has been on winning over the female shopper. Many retailers have actively tried to make themselves more attractive to female consumers in what were perceived as traditionally male sectors (D.I.Y. and automotive, for example). Lowe’s (Howell, 2005), Home Depot, and Canadian Tire have all made recent overtures through store design and ‘lifestyle’ marketing initiatives based on the hard evidence of customer visitation and analysis, as well as consumer research into who the real decision makers are in these key product areas. At the same time, shopping centres have increased their ‘family friendly’ focus with priority parking, child-friendly trolleys, better changing and feeding facilities, increased security, and better service assistance. Research into the motivations of the female shopper has been published (Minahan & Beverland, 2005), although male shopping motivations remain largely unexplored.

4. The Metrosexual revolution

Young men are increasingly keen shoppers, as evidenced by the emergence of the Metrosexual. There is also evidence to suggest that some
marketers are targeting teenagers in school (Cort, Pairan & Ryans, 2004). There has been a significant increase in retailing and marketing focused on the younger male demographic, especially in key categories such as health and beauty and clothing and fashion. Many retailers now offer extended categories for young male consumers centered on appearance products and personal grooming. Prior (2004, p. 24) reported that “the Metrosexual revolution is upon us,” illustrating the increasing activity in product development and category management aimed at the image-conscious younger male. In contrast, it appears that the Greydollafella, although a significant eco-conscious younger male. In contrast, it appears that the Greydollafella, although a significant economic force, is being marginalised by retail marketing strategies and is increasingly alienated by retail environments such as stores, supermarkets, and shopping malls.

5. What the Greydollafella says about shopping

In general, the mature male does not enjoy the shopping experience that is offered to him. The ‘grab and go’ and ‘whine and wait’ profiles explored by Otnes and McGrath (2001) appear to be evident, particularly when shopping with a wife or partner. The mature male style of shopping involves moving swiftly into the store, grabbing the merchandise, and completing the purchase as quickly as possible. The Greydollafella does not want to browse; for him, shopping offers little pleasure:

“It’s a waste of time. Sorry, it’s a means to an end. I want something. I know what I want, so I go and get what I want and get out. There are better things to do with my time.” (Bruce, 52)

As well as being conscious of time, delays in finishing the purchase are almost intolerable to some men:

“The time delays bother me enormously. Once I’ve made up my mind that I’ve spent the amount of time in the store, then I want to clear out.” (Peter, 58)

The male shopper can be very impatient and intolerant...and they know it:

“Well, if I think about my wife and daughter, shopping for them is a completely different experience. It is entertainment. It’s recreation. To me, it’s not, and so they are prepared to put up with what I would find intolerable.” (Bruce, 52)

It may be evident that many mature men do not like shopping, but is this sufficient reason for the retail industry to ignore the needs of this growing market segment? We argue that there is more than enough evidence to encourage retailers and marketers to work a lot harder to capture this market. The current reaction of ignoring the Greydollafella is overly simplistic, and we challenge the underlying assumptions.

6. Greydollafella ‘on the bench’

There are suggestions that the issues generated by the shopping-adverse (or at least shopping-ambivalent) mature males are topical. The BBC reported on one shopping centre in Hamburg, Germany, that opened a ‘Maennergarten,’ essentially a crèche for men (German crèche for male shopophobics, 2003). At this mall, wives and partners can, for a fee, leave their men in the company of other men to enjoy a meal or beer, play computer games, participate in ‘how to’ workshops, watch television, and engage in conversation. As one guest said, “it beats sitting around in shoe shops, that’s for sure.” Another crèche attendee remarked that it suited him, as he did not have the stamina for shopping: “After trying on three pairs of pants that don’t fit me, I’m ready to give it up and go home...my wife somehow holds out longer, for some reason.” These guests seem to be willing volunteers as opposed to ‘pressed men.’ As one interviewee said, “We’re not chained here and the waitresses are also pretty. This isn’t a humiliation, it’s a reward.”

This ‘crèche’ for men seems designed to remove the Greydollafella from the shopping experience completely. Are retailers giving up on trying to satisfy the mature male consumer? We argue that this response ignores both the niche and mass market potential for this group. If the retail offer being presented is actively discouraging mature male shoppers, we propose that retailers should review and adapt the offer rather than marginalise the group. The Metrosexual may be alive and well, but is anyone interested in his much more wealthy and time-rich father?

7. The neglected Greydollafella

The retail press abounds with examples of retailers who seek to lever the potential of youth markets (‘Tweenagers’), Generation X markets, and the mature female market. In 2004, Target launched its Linden Hill private label brand initiative aimed at the ‘Boomer mom’ (Scardino, 2004); however,
there are far fewer examples of retailers who seek to accommodate the ‘Boomer dad.’ Recent insights into JC Penney’s retail strategy provide an interesting example both of demographic priorities in focus and the difficulty we, as researchers, have in finding retailers who are ‘Greydollarfella friendly.’ As Scardino (2005) reported, JC Penney clearly stated its intentions under new leadership: “‘We want to be the preferred choice for middle America’...referring to the company’s core audience of 35- to 54-year-old consumers with average incomes of $35,000 to $65,000.” We would propose that, like many mass retailers, the outer limit of demographic interest is mid-fifties, with the core age range being much lower. Scardino’s article goes on to reveal the company’s plans for greater marketing to ethnic minorities and the development of younger male fashion brands such as nick(it) and Perry Ellis’ Havanera brand. However, once again we struggle to find evidence of anyone exploring the preferences and potential of the older male demographic.

Launched in 2004, Sears Canada’s prototype store suggested a merchandising strategy that seemed largely female-orientated. Among other characteristics, the store featured a “Sears craftsman hardware department with a warmer, more female-friendly atmosphere,” and a strong reported focus on women’s wear brand management (Duff, 2005). The lifestyle messaging, wide aisles, reduced point of sale, and easier customer navigation that define the prototype may well be of equal benefit to both male and female consumers, but the overall driver seems to be the female shopper.

Asda, the U.K. supermarket chain owned by Wal-Mart, recently announced the formation of a second executive board made up exclusively of mothers, the purpose of which is to provide feedback on a quarterly list of products and services. Angela Spindler, chair of the ‘mum’s board’ was quoted as saying:

“Mums have to perform an amazing juggling act every day of the week. They probably face the most demands and are the most time conscious and value conscious customers we have. If we get it right for them, we reckon we’ll get it right for everyone.” (Asda’s motherly advice, 2005, p. 33)

In an age that is witnessing an increase in the number of single-parent families and a reported demise in the effectiveness of mass-marketing strategies, it could be argued that males, particularly mature males, are being asked to fall in line with strategies designed to meet the needs of the younger female shopper.

8. The power of the grey (or greying!) male dollar

In Japan, there has been a well-documented resurgence in male spending. In that country, spending has historically been led by ‘working women’ and ‘middle-aged women,’ but the retail period spanning April to June 2003 revealed a decrease in female-orientated consumption and an increase in male spending. According to Made for Men (Boom in products targeting male consumers, 2004), “Rising expectations of higher corporate profits and share prices are persuading men, and especially around the age of 40, to start spending again.”

The recently opened Isetan department store in Tokyo has sought to accommodate male buying strategies through its store design and merchandising, focusing on product type rather than brand categorisation and providing a single destination for accessories. The store also offers a sales floor dedicated to male cosmetics and appearance products. Sales for the remodelled store were reported to be 30% higher than in the same period the year before. It appears that mature male consumers like to shop by product type rather than product brand, and prefer functional and focused hot-spots to reduce the time and effort spent hunting for solutions. The inclusion of an authoritative cosmetics offer capitalises on the 4.3% growth in this sector in Japan, mirroring Western trends and demonstrating that the male market can yield some interesting product opportunities. Even in this growth area, however, attention is centred on the youth and Metrosexual markets. For example, how well understood is the market for Greydollarfella hair colour and anti-aging skin products?

Overall, the anecdotal evidence that men do not like shopping was supported by our research. However, this may be due to the fact that the needs of men are not being acknowledged and, mirroring the German shopping centre, that these men are being relegated to ‘playing’ in crèches. Otnes and McGrath (2001) research on male shopping behaviour indicates that men do, in fact, engage with, assess, and compare products, although ‘waiting and following’ was more noticeable amongst older males accompanying partners. It could be argued that these men are prime candidates for the Maennergarten; however, the contention could also be made that they are an indication of a demographic that has no tangible stake in the retail environment or exchange process as currently presented.
9. Connecting with Greydollarfella: Practical guidance

Retail sectors that successfully target the mature consumer include health products, holidays, and financial services. Some car retailers (e.g., Cadillac, Lincoln, Mercedes-Benz) have clearly aligned themselves with the Greydollarfella. More specifically, retailers like Orvis and Harley Davidson have strong appeal to mature male consumers through their promotion of product-centric aspirational lifestyles and the development of marketing messages that centre on heritage, patriotism, adventure, a ‘club’ or ‘membership’ appeal, an outdoors mindset, and an implied freedom from the constraints of work, domesticity, and convention. For example, Harley Davidson’s current promotional messaging includes the slogans “A Harley connects more than just two dots on the road map” and “Find your exit ramp to parts unknown.”

In particular, opportunities to make stronger connections with mature males exist within clothing and fashion, soft and alcoholic beverages, mobile phones, and magazines. We believe that retailers in these sectors need to recognise and respond to the opportunities that the mature male segment can offer. This will be achieved through more detailed consumer analysis to understand the nature and implications of the brand values and marketing cues that mature males seem to respond to well; for example, freedom, individualism, quality, and a sense of belonging. Subsequently, retailers will need to tailor their mix and messages to really ‘hit home’ with the Greydollarfella. This will result in more effective marketing and more appropriate loyalty strategies. Retailers should also explore on-line retailing and marketing opportunities in more detail, as mature males over 65 outnumber their female counterparts in terms of on-line shopping. Retailers and marketers need to become much better acquainted with this customer and encourage him to participate in a wider range of shopping experiences. The principles that underpin successful Greydollarfella attraction (as demonstrated in categories such as electronics and home entertainment, and hobbies and DIY) can be adopted and applied more effectively in categories currently unattractive to this vital consumer segment. It is important to remember that Greydollarfella has the same aspirations and need for self-esteem and renewal as the better attended mature female consumer. As Ivan, 63, stated:

“At the end of my marriage I wanted to rediscover who I was, and an important part of that was to replace all the odd bits of furniture I’d taken from the marital home. I emptied my house of its old furniture and replaced it with totally new décor in every room.”

We have illustrated the importance to the economy of the mature male segment of the retail market, and have made a first attempt at defining Greydollarfella based on what is known about the segment overall. It remains for retailers and associated industries to get to know Greydollarfella and provide him, in a format he finds engaging and motivating, with the goods and services he requires. Retailers need to see Greydollarfella as possessing real market potential, not as a problem to be removed from the retail equation and put in a crèche while women shop. As retail channels become increasingly blurred and research into multi-channel retail strategies expands, we conclude by proposing that, in the true Darwinian spirit, researchers will have to consider not just the psyche of Greydollarfella, but also the psyches of distinct subspecies: the mature male store shopper, known as Greydollarfella-at-store, and his home-based relative, Greydollarfella-on-line.

Box 1 Sidebar: The study

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with males ranging in age from 20 to 65+. Ten of these exploratory interviews were with professional males over 50. The interviews were semi-structured and covered a broad range of issues focusing on their experience as retail customers. The interviews were conducted in England, South Africa, and Australia in early 2005. Broad-ranging, open questions were posed about their shopping experience; for example, when did they last go shopping? Where and with whom? What were their views on the retail experience? What did they like and dislike about shopping? How did they perceive their partners’ views on shopping? When the results of the interviews with mature respondents were analysed, it became apparent that the opinions offered by this segment differed significantly from those of their younger counterparts.

We considered the results of these interviews against the findings from our own literature review, which resulted in our conclusion that this mature male segment is significant in terms of retail potential, although little understood in terms of retail significance.
References


