

WOMAN of the Year

She's the most powerful consumer in America. And as she starts to turn sixty this month, the affluent baby boomer is doing what she's always done—redefining herself, reshaping society and making us all think again. *By Joan Hamilton*

IN THE hit 2003 film *Something's Gotta Give*, New York playwright Erica Barry—played by Diane Keaton—is turtleneck-deep in the trappings of the good life. She is fiftysomething, rich and thin; has a great relationship with her grown daughter, as well as a sterling professional reputation; and spends weekends in her stunning beach house in the Hamptons. There is that one little thing—the void left by the end of her marriage—but she believes she's coped with it productively: by becoming fluent in French. Being alone, she insists, is no threat to her *joie de vivre*. “Why do I have to defend myself? I was married for twenty years,” Erica tells her sister in a fit of pique. “I’m done.”

Naturally, the audience soon learns that Erica is anything but “done” in love or in any other aspect of her life. That is what makes her emblematic of one of the most intriguing and powerful forces in America today: the affluent baby-boomer woman. A character like Erica would have been rare a generation ago and almost unthinkable when her grandmother was this age, in the 1950s, a period of pulling back, tucking in, slowing down. Instead, as the leading edge of the 77 million people born between 1946 and 1964—more than half of them female—turns sixty this year, the affluent boomer woman is a marquee player in both culture and commerce. She's a thinker, a doer, a spender, an experimenter and an optimist whom all manner of merchants and marketers are scrambling to understand and attract. “I don't see any of my friends slowing down,” says fifty-six-year-old

Nancy Meyers, who wrote and directed *Something's Gotta Give*. “I see them revving up, highly motivated, very active.”

Learn French at middle age? Why not? Invest in real estate, nice cars and trips to Paris? Sure—I've earned it. Want to discuss investment products? Yes, in detail, please, as I have questions. Wear jeans from J. Crew or the Gap with a Chanel jacket? I like that look for lunch, and let's go low fat. Need directions? No, I'll just Google them. Time to simplify my lifestyle? Not necessarily. Need a new car? I like the idea of a convertible, but maybe a hybrid makes sense. Retire? What does that mean? The full effect has yet to be felt, but it's clear that the same women who entered universities and then the workforce in record numbers in the sixties and seventies, who in many cases protested against the Vietnam War and for civil rights and who broke glass ceilings and redefined sexual mores are now reinventing the American woman's third act.

Today's affluent baby-boomer woman doesn't act old, look old or shop old. Studies show that she likes to travel and experiment with new brands and new ideas. She doesn't flinch at the price of fine jewelry or an expensive beauty product or a new car as long as she sees value and quality. She's rapidly warming up to the Internet for travel tips, health advice and even dating, and she stays in touch with friends and family by e-mail. She likes Barneys, Saks and Neiman Marcus—but also Target. She is hardly a clone army, of course. Her home is the scene of one personality split: some boomer women are actively shedding clutter and even square footage from their living spaces, while others are happily pondering and planning new features to add to their residences, if not new residences entirely. But whichever path

Illustration by *Michael Witte*

she's taking, she is a wonderful client, says Lee F. Mindel of the New York architectural firm Shelton, Mindel & Associates, because "she's smart, she knows what it is to work, and she can appreciate the value of getting something done. She has good manners and respect." When it comes to style, he says, she is "more open and freer. [She doesn't] have to prove anything to establish an identity."

And she's curious. Women at midlife are enrolling in classes in opera or ceramics or photography, as well as in rigorous graduate studies such as Stanford's master of liberal arts program, where the anything-but-beach-reading texts run from Confucius to Kant. "It's a wonderful program for people with a life-long intellectual hunger," says Kevan Spence, a corporate attorney turned schoolteacher and one of several professional fiftysomething women in the program. "I think we're going to see that women are going to do what they want to do, to express who they are at the core, to nurture themselves more authentically." The boomer woman is also increasingly eschewing cruises in favor of adventure- and pursuit-oriented travel, and the names of the companies vying to take her trekking up Kilimanjaro or cooking in Tuscany say it all: Adventures in Good Company, Maupintour's Gutsy Women Travel division and Journeywoman.com.

Ken Dychtwald is the founder of San Francisco-based Age Wave, which advises corporations about products and services for maturing adults. Dychtwald, who has studied boomers for thirty years, is also a coauthor of a new book, *The Power Years: A User's Guide to the Rest of Your Life*. "The boomer generation stands apart," he says, because of women's higher educational levels, experiences in the workplace, extent of travel, self-empowerment and, yes, affluence. Not only have these women made more of their own money than ever before, but it is being transferred to them in staggering quantities. Overall, the baby boomers stand to receive the lion's share of the \$12 trillion to \$20 trillion that will be bequeathed by inheritance during the next twenty years. For that reason, and because they have longer life spans than men, notes Dychtwald, by 2010 "women will control 60

percent of all wealth in the U.S." Already, the boomer woman is becoming the decision maker about "which luxury car to buy, which [computer] system to buy for her company and which long-term financial plan will work for her family."

None of that is news to Cathey Finlon, fifty-nine, the owner and CEO of Denver's McClain Finlon Advertising, the Rocky Mountain area's largest independent agency, with 140 employees and annual revenues of around \$130 million. For advertisers, "capturing the ethos and energy and optimism [of this generation] will be interesting," says Finlon, who believes that the group's traits are still evolving. "Boomers' mothers were running households, managing the budget, raising children with Dr. Spock—that is, with prescribed guidelines. We had to violate those ideas. We had to develop a broader range of interests, to cut through and create options." She even sees her contemporaries' attitude toward volunteering as being different. They embrace it not so much as maternal nurturers but as women of power who want to learn, as well as to help—not just as fund-

raisers but as organizers seeking to make an impact.

Dychtwald believes that "advertisers are still disregarding the power consumer of the modern era: middle-aged and mature women." He notes that the number of Americans aged eighteen to thirty-four actually declined by nine million in the 1990s, while those fifty and older grew by twelve million in the same period. Spence agrees: "Magazines are still full of beautiful nineteen-year-olds—as if they can afford anything."

"These women have been teeing up for years. They have the means," says Brent Green, the author of *Marketing to Leading-Edge Baby Boomers*. But Green believes that only recently have companies such as Fidelity Investments begun to really depict affluent women in their campaigns. One reason may be that the tastes of boomer women are in flux. Women used to be well set in their brand choices by their fifties and not terribly adventurous about trying new things. Today, however, brand loyalty does not exist, insists Dychtwald. "This is one of the biggest shifts in the marketplace."

Retailers are starting to adapt. Gary Muto, the president of Gap's new Forth

MORE POWER TO HER

The American Woman

- Approximately 42 million women are aged forty to sixty.
- Women solely or jointly own 87 percent of homes.
- Women control or influence 80 percent of consumer purchases.
- Boomer women are six times more likely to share responsibility for savings and investment than their mothers were.
- Full-time college enrollment by older women has increased 31 percent in the past decade.
- By 2010, 60 percent of wealth will be controlled by women.

The Town & Country Reader*

- Average household income: \$306,932.
- Average net worth: \$2.1 million.
- 62 percent are self-made (less than 10 percent of their money is inherited).
- 81 percent do not describe themselves as "brand loyal."
- 73 percent say they "feel a lot younger" than they are.
- 42 percent say travel will be a top financial priority over the next five to ten years.
- 93 percent shop via the Internet.

*Based on the responses of more than 1,000 *Town & Country* readers to a survey conducted by FGI Research, 2005.

& Towne clothing chain, which debuted in Illinois and New York last August, says the company started looking at consumers thirty-five and older because the numbers spoke louder than words: “Gap had 8 percent of the market under thirty-five and less than 3 percent over thirty-five, yet the over-thirty-five group was the largest demographic, which spends the most on apparel. You look at those numbers and say, ‘Why not?’” In the Gap’s case, “why not” led to a whole new concept in which Forth & Towne stores are designed to emphasize service, user-friendly dressing rooms with attendants and adjustable lighting, and four distinct brands that range from casual to dressy. “Whether she’s a 2 or a 20, she’s proud of her body,” Muto says. “These women are very comfortable with high-low [mixing luxury brands with jeans or T-shirts], and very few dress head-to-toe [in one brand] anymore.” Meanwhile, Millard (“Mickey”) Drexler, the CEO of J. Crew, has nothing but praise for his baby-boomer customer. “I live for her,” he says.

So do others, including Karen Katz, the CEO of Neiman Marcus Stores, who says Neiman’s core customer is forty-five to sixty-four, with an average age of fifty. “Women have a mind-set these days that age is a state of mind. They may feel and act twenty years younger than they are,” says Katz. “They’re adding more contemporary items. Ten years ago they were buying Chanel or Oscar de la Renta. Now they’re mixing in a piece from Chloé or the right Prada bag.”

New York interior and product designer Thomas O’Brien, of Aero Studios, says these women’s more eclectic, open style derives from their experience as well as their intelligence. “It’s about showing what you know,” he says. “It’s smart not to waste money. There are wonderful, amazing things at Target [for whom O’Brien has just designed a line], at vintage stores, at Barneys. There’s a game in learning what’s in those different places. It’s something important that you’ve done, and you’re showing it” by creating home decor and personal fashion looks that are layered and have different points of view. “Women don’t want to mature into something that makes them feel generational.”

Not all makers of luxury goods believe age-tuned advertising is the secret to success, however. At forty-two, “I’m halfway between a boomer and a Gen Xer,” says Maureen Chiquet, Chanel USA’s chic president and COO. “But I don’t tend to look at age as much as attitude.” Chanel’s brands are stronger than ever, and that includes both venerable fragrances such as Chanel No. 5 and contemporary fashion from Karl Lagerfeld. Chiquet does see market shifts—more affluence and willingness to spend, but also an interest in luxury experiences as well as products. When it comes to advertising, though, “I look at an ad and I react either because it’s amazingly beautiful or because of the mood or emotion it evokes. There’s no formula. Women want to >152

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look beautiful. Good advertising makes products covetable.” Such Chanel ads as Baz Luhrmann’s ethereal urban fantasy featuring Nicole Kidman, Chiquet argues, invite customers to “engage in a beautiful dream that’s current and relevant.”

Finlon agrees that current is the key to turning her head. “I want to look good and have style. I care about feeling modern. I don’t mean youthful. I don’t mean trendy. I mean fresh, on point, ready to go. I have facials, I take care, but I am not in the group remodeling their faces.”

Because so many boomers are taking care of themselves, “sixty looks and feels different than it did for the last generation,” says New York salon owner and stylist Eva Scrivo, whose clients include Hillary Clinton and Lauren Hutton. “The fountain of youth is their energy,” she believes. “Their minds are more open, and they want the outside to reflect the inside; they want something professional but also sexy; they want brightness around the face.” Salons themselves may end up getting a makeover, thanks to the changing needs of affluent boomer women. Scrivo’s salon has started offering cosmetic acupuncture, which she says produces dramatic results in skin tone and color. Her acupuncturists also are treating some clients for menopause-related symptoms such as hot flashes. “Menopause used to be a point when it felt like things were over for you,” Scrivo observes. “I don’t get that sense from women anymore, but one of the problems is they have trouble sleeping. I’m hearing from clients that acupuncture helps with hot flashes and getting sleep.”

Dychtwald says boomer women are not so much looking for a fountain of youth as they are a “fountain of health.” They believe in exercise and eating well. Yoga’s popularity has been growing dramatically. Spa attendance is soaring. Beyond that, Dychtwald says, boomer women are taking advantage of the myriad of sources of information about health, such as Web sites and self-help books. Brent Ridge,

M.D., an assistant professor of geriatric medicine at Mount Sinai Medical Center, is already seeing more active, better informed patients. In the future, Ridge predicts that geriatric medicine (typically, the care of adults sixty-five and older) will put the patient and doctor in a medical “coaching” relationship, in which the doctor focuses on keeping patients able to do what they enjoy as opposed to just treating a growing list of ills. To help patients stay active, he says, “we’re already trying to get people to change their perception of what it is to age.”

For all the exercising that boomers do—and their access to such interventions as Botox, acupuncture and even sexual restoratives like Viagra that help them look, feel and act younger than ever—there are a few trends that don’t bode quite so well. One is that baby boomers are the first generation that listened to loud music from an early age, so their rates of hearing impairment are on the rise. Ridge is starting a company that is trying to do for the hearing-aid business what LensCrafters did for eyewear—make hearing aids more mainstream by selling them in sophisticated, stylish stores.

Such ventures will likely become more commonplace as those serving aging boomers work their way through uncharted territories in housing design, travel options, financial-service products and other areas, both to accommodate and to capitalize on the needs of affluent boomer women. While sixty may not be the new thirty, it’s certainly producing interesting dilemmas. Finlon, for example, is struggling to decide how to celebrate the dawn of her sixties this year: by bicycling in Burma or sitting in a gorilla nest in Rwanda. As for Meyers, she has four years to work on her sixtieth-birthday goal: “I’d like to be happily in love and living in the same city as my daughters.” In the meantime, she’s shooting a big, new film with Generation Xers Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet. Doesn’t sound as if boomer women are *done* with much of anything. ❧