

Reply from an Audience

AL BOND

DEAR FRANK AND RALPH:¹

Referring to your paper in the October-December AAACE Quarterly, will you frank and earnest seekers after truth permit a comment from the audience?

As a member of the Geritol brigade, it seems to me that retired persons share many of the characteristics of other adults with a few noteworthy exceptions.

You mentioned independence as one of the prime desires of the retired. Right on, chums, right on! Everybody desires that, I reckon. You scored again with a concern for health. Again a universal concern but of greater interest to older persons, I expect, because they are more subject to debilitating ailments and because good health contributes to independence and to mobility, which you cited.

At the recent White House Conference on Aging, participants drafted a four-point "bill of rights," to wit: The right to be safe; the right to be informed; the right to be heard and the right to make choices. Mayhap some cues lie therein.

Older persons are addicted to the common need to be respected and if possible admired by others.

Older persons read, view, listen and discuss. They read newspapers, magazines and books. They look at TV and displays. They listen to the radio and to friends and neighbors.

They also talk. Lord, how they talk. You will recall the Ancient Mariner, "who stoppeth one of three, etc."

¹ Frances Cooper, Florida, and Ralph Reeder, Indiana, who reported on communicating with "senior citizens" at the 1971 AAACE annual meeting.

For the purpose of this epistle, let me exclude that portion of the senior audience which is (a) virtually without funds and (b) which is composed of persons so infirm as to require considerable or constant care. I exclude them not because they are unimportant but because communication with them is likely to involve methods and channels unlikely to be used by AAACE members.

So we arrive at the significant differences in building a fence around the audience.

To begin with the obvious, older persons are not as physically spry as once they were, and some of them, lamentably, are not as mentally quick either.

But this is not to say they are inert. They like to keep busy. It's the way they were brought up.

Some of them, as Frank can testify, keep right on doing what they did before retirement either because their work was their love or because they never learned anything else to do. Many, however, take on new hobbies or pursue ones that they dabbled with while gainfully employed.

And they don't let physical handicaps stay their stiffening limbs. I've seen wheel chair gardeners and, believe it or not, an expert wheel chair pool player.

Activities cover a broad range. Gardening claims many. Woodworking attracts a number. Crafts such as knitting and hooking rugs have their adherents. Some paint. Others are avid collectors of things like stamps, coins and pretty pebbles. Quantities of film are exposed. Sports such as fishing and golf have their devotees.

Retirees often remain reasonably active in professional organizations, service clubs, and chambers of commerce. They give time to church and community affairs. They are addicted to communal activities such as group singing, "programs," and pot-luck suppers.

Not all of them, of course. Loners choose to ride their hobbies by themselves or merely to sit and contemplate their wrinkled navels.

It's an even-money bet that the average individual is engaged in more than one so-called leisure time activity. This goes for both men and women. In fact, it goes more for women because there are more of them.

Another enterprise occupies the distaff side, especially in households where both spouses remain. Grandma didn't retire from housekeeping when the old man hung up his workaday tools. And she is more likely to be concerned over such subjects as nutrition and health than is Grandpa.

She'd like to learn more about nutrition and cooking for two, for instance. Both of them are interested in money management and welcome consumer information. Both would like to learn more about whatever hobbies interest them.

Older persons can learn. They may react a bit slowly. They don't trust their memories of recent events. But they have years of experience to start from.

So that's the audience, or anyhow, a slice of it. Awareness and interest exist. It remains to convey information and to stimulate favorable reaction.

But how: There's the rub.

One of the most cogent remarks on this point was quoted in the *Quarterly* by my former colleague and successor plus one, Jim Johnson. Bill Stellmon's daughter was right: "Talk louder."

And clearer too.

For instance, take printed matter. I would prescribe large, open type, say 12-point; and Roman not sans-serif. Printed withal on non-glare paper with plenty of white space.

Let there be many large but simple illustrations for clarity and reinforcement.

Let there be an abundance of reinforcement. Oldsters need multistimuli. For example, some hear better than they see and vice-versa.

Visuals, including displays, posters, and slide-sets will help. Audience participation would be a boon if there's a way to get it. Maybe AAACE members can provide suggestions to program people when they are planning presentations.

I doubt that a commercial radio or TV station would devote time to this special audience even if it could figure an appropriate hour. Senior citizens don't keep uniform schedules. Some go to bed with the chickens and arise with the birds. Others are night owls and sleep late. Naps at odd times are likely. After sundown the elderly, like common people, seek entertainment not education.

Educational stations might want to take a whirl at programming for graybeards and their ladies. Late morning or mid-afternoon would be my guesses for the best bets.

A provocative future possibility is suggested in *U.S. News & World Report*, January 3, 1972. It forecasts a vertical and horizontal growth of CATV with increased emphasis on educational programs . . . even the possibility of audience feed-back through two-way TV.

I've drempt up another far-out possibility . . . series of tape-recorded programs, perhaps on cassettes. Each segment shouldn't exceed a half hour. Fifteen minutes might be better. They would be supplemented by printed material. Disc recorded programs of similar nature are available to the blind.

Production and distribution would be costly and playback equipment a problem. Some organization would have to subsidize the deal. Probably the idea's lousy. Chalk it up to old age maundering.

In any event, with all thy communication with the elderly; be sincere, be friendly, be explicit, be simple, be redundant . . . and beware the jargon of academe. But that's what AAACE members strive for with any audience, ain't it?

Thanks for your time.

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