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Society
on Aging

Telling age-inclusive stories



Introduction

Population aging is a permanent, global, demographic trend. In many countries, people ages 65 and older already outnumber children.⁽¹⁾ Yet older people are shockingly underrepresented in popular culture. [Shutterstock's 2021 Diversity in Marketing Report](#) showed that over half of respondents agreed that representing older generations mattered to them in their marketing materials, yet just 5% of U.S. advertising is aimed at people older than age 50, even though this demographic dominates spending.⁽²⁾

The reason is ageism—discrimination based on age—an invisible force that affects how we feel about our own aging and older people. Ageism harms our health, longevity, happiness, and well-being. Ageism is expensive, costing the healthcare sector an estimated \$63 billion annually.⁽³⁾

The longer we live, the more different from one another we become. Yet we most often see images of older white people, and they commonly portray frailty, dependence, and isolation: a woman looking forlornly out a window, or disembodied hands clutching a cane. While these experiences are part of capturing age diversity, it's time to expand how advanced age is represented—and to dismantle ageism in the process—by creating and using images that more widely depict the experience of growing older.

I. Showcase the diversity of aging

Here are some ways to change how aging is depicted:

- **Redefine beauty.** Challenge the equation of youth, thinness, whiteness, and lighter skin with beauty.
- **Defeat the invisibility that too often comes with growing older.** Ensure your commitment to age equity is as clear as your commitment to racial and gender equity.
- **Increase racial and ethnic diversity.** Seek out older models of color, Black, Latino, Asian, Southeast Asian, Indigenous people, and those we often do not see represented.
- **Represent all gender identities and sexual orientations.** Older people sometimes come out later in life, and too many are forced back into the closet as they age. Embrace older, cisgender, trans and nonbinary models, and represent the entire LGBTQIA+ spectrum.
- **Conquer work and retirement stereotypes.** Find older women working as executives and tradespeople, older men as caregivers and performers. Show older politicians, teachers, and essential workers. Show people working in homes, in cafes, and in offices. Show volunteers of all ages.
- **Spotlight how capacities change over time.** Represent older people with and without impairments: people who use assistive devices like reading glasses, canes, walkers, and hearing aids, along with people who do not. Represent people who run, walk and use wheelchairs and people with different disabilities.
- **Embrace how bodies change over time.** Hire older models who have hair of all colors, wrinkles, and smooth skin. Celebrate the full range of body sizes and shapes.
- **Be inclusive across religions.** Many older adults are members of faith-based communities, but not all are Christian. Portray older people across all religions and faiths.
- **Honor diverse families, too.** Include grandparents raising grandchildren, multigenerational and bi/tri-racial families, blended families, and chosen families.





II. Expand how aging is portrayed

Many of us are apprehensive about growing older and anticipate a decline. The reality is very different. The majority of people enjoy interesting lives as they age. To visualize actual aging, we need to show older people and families across an array of scenarios, from daily life and love to activism and healing.

We need more visual stories that celebrate aging and:

- **Natural, untouched beauty**, in addition to stylized shoots.
- **Looking forward and anticipating**, rather than reminiscing or longing for the past.
- **Day-to-day life in the community**, like shopping, reading, gardening, using tech devices, walking dogs, working, exercising, worshiping, driving, using public transportation, cleaning, cooking, and streaming movies. Represent urban, suburban, and rural community life.
- **Different income levels** through scenarios depicting people who are high-, middle- and low-income.
- **Day-to-day life in diverse families**, like running households, and caring for family members, friends, and pets, with and without spouses, children, and grandchildren.
 - **Traveling** abroad, **learning** in classrooms, online and on worksites, and **teaching** others.
 - Engaging in **activism, advocacy, and political activities**.
 - Real individuals and couples expressing **sexuality, intimacy, and love**, in queer and heterosexual scenarios alike.



- **All types of dress**, from high fashion, street fashion, sportswear, swimwear, casual wear, and everything in between, across all gender identities.
- **Interactions between people of all ages**, with younger people talking with, not to or at, older people, and where older models are in positions of authority.
- **A range of emotions**. Older people go about their daily lives in different states of mind—not specifically happy or depressed or pensive, just as is.
- **A broad spectrum of health and capacity**: older people with and without disabilities, older patients who are recovering and getting good news from medical professionals, and older models portraying the doctors, nurses, etc., who deliver care.
- The nuances of **giving and receiving care**, where older models are sometimes shown as the caregiver, and through scenarios that depict joy, sadness, humor, and frustration.
- Experiences of **Alzheimer's disease and memory loss**, especially in communities such as African-American and Latino families in the U.S. Show sadness, uncertainty, fear, hope, humor, love, and struggle—all of which are part of these experiences.



Maximizing on keywords

Describing age is important for showcasing the who of a model in any demographic, and incredibly valuable for our customers. Preferred keywords include age milestones like 30 years, 40 years, 50s, 60s, 70s, adjectives like mature, senior, and inclusive ranges like multi-generational family, two-generational family. Keep your tone as neutral-positive, use adjectives instead of nouns when referring to characteristics, and always choose people-first language.

III. Cast and work with older models

By 2030, one out of every five Americans will be 65 or older, and this is already the case in Germany, Italy, and Japan.⁽⁴⁾ The number of older people across Africa will triple, and the number across Asia will more than double in the next three decades. All this is to say—older subjects and models are not in short supply. But how do you find, cast, and work with older models?

Locating and Casting

- **Recruit and draw inspiration from social media.** The number of older influencers is growing daily. But beware of anti-aging accounts that promote aging as a disease to be cured, slowed, or prevented.
- **Inquire about older models when working with modeling and talent agencies.** If older models are underrepresented, ask why and suggest they do better. Some agencies do work with older models but there is much more progress to be made.
- **Think intergenerationally.** Involve people of a variety of ages in the creation of content and images featuring older family members, friends, mentors, and community members.
- **Engage organizations working with or on the behalf of older people,** like local governmental agencies on aging, local AARP offices in the U.S., home-delivered meal programs, and housing communities with many older residents.
- Draw on **your own social and professional networks.** Reach out to older people in your community and encourage other creators to do the same.





Working with older models and subjects

- **Ask each older model what is needed** to feel comfortable and to work effectively—just as you would with younger models.
- **Avoid making assumptions** about ability levels or the need for assistance, as models may not need any assistance. Ask about accessibility requirements in advance, and have ramps, railings, step stools, or other needed equipment available on site. Consult local accessibility experts if you need help.
- **Talk to older models as you would to anyone else.** Avoid assigning labels like “granny” or “grandpa” to someone just because of their age and avoid calling someone “cute.” Avoid using patronizing terms like “honey” or “dear.” Don’t speak especially loudly or slowly unless the model asks you to. If an older person is accompanied by someone younger, take care not to speak to or look for answers from the younger person, as sometimes happens in conversations with people of different ages

Find older models through searching specific hashtags on social media:

[#advancedstyle](#) [#silverhair](#) [#grayhair](#) [#agelessstyle](#) [#proage](#) [#ageism](#)
[#over60](#) [#oldermodels](#) [#fashionover60](#)



We all have a role to play in ending ageism. Portraying older adults through age-inclusive visuals that show the full range of diversity in aging is a critical step that will influence others. Shutterstock and the American Society on Aging are excited for contributors to add more of these images that reflect these guidelines to our collection, and for marketers and the media to use more of these types of visuals in the content they create.

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