

Give your creativity a much needed nip 'n tuck

 By [Marie Rocher](#)

6 Oct 2014

With the US Bureau of Labour Statistics stating that close on 60% of all employees in the advertising industry are aged between 25 and 45, it's no wonder that growing older in this industry is the elephant looming large in the room.

Never go down memory lane! That, and having fun, said the indomitable [Joan Rivers](#) - who was front and centre of the fashion and entertainment industries right up until the day she died at 81 - is the secret to remaining relevant in a notoriously fickle world. But if that's all it takes, why is such longevity in the media and creative industries so rare?

While there is insufficient hard data in South Africa, according to the US Bureau of Labour Statistics, close on 60% of all employees in the advertising industry are aged between 25 and 45. Growing older in this industry is the elephant looming large in the room, says Betty*, a 38 year old graphic designer, on the hunt for another creative position. 'Where once experience was a sought-after attribute, now it seems that highlighting my many years' experience just makes me sound like I've been around the block one too many times.'



Age is the elephant in the room

Age discrimination in the workplace is officially outlawed in South Africa, with both the Labour Relations Act and the Employment Equity Act offering protection, but according to [Inge Fisher Consulting](#), it's the last of the great taboos - not given equal footing with race or gender discrimination and seldom confronted or discussed. Betty agrees: "We don't want to think about it - either we whisper to each other about being locked out of job opportunities, passed over for promotion or not considered for big-ticket briefs because we're considered over the hill, or we simply put on a funky pair of sneakers and some highlights in the hair and hope that'll do the trick.'"

A quick look around any agency reveals a sea of fresh faces while a superficial scan of industry job advertisements seems to suggest a skewing towards younger persons - most notable in the lower salaries offered, and the limited experience in number of years required. But where did the maxim that advertising and marketing is a young man's game actually come from? Does yesterday's creative child really have to give way for today's up-and-coming whippersnappers the moment they reach some predetermined (random) age?

What's age got to do with it?

Part of the media industry's obsession with age stems from the notion that, as people age, they lose their creative edge - put another way, that it's the young 'uns who hold the monopoly on creativity. [Science](#), though, seems to suggest otherwise - that there is no optimal age for creativity, that the so-called *decline model* - where creativity peaks at 30 and then slides - does not exist, but rather that there are two distinct paths that creative individuals take in realising their best work:

The precocious prodigy

These are the geniuses who spring to mind when people discuss youth and creativity in the same breath - the exuberant, energetic, brash and bold creatives like Picasso (who painted many of his greatest works before his mid-20s) or Michelangelo (who carved the magnificent *David* at just 26). Precocious prodigies tend to be conceptual thinkers, who firmly hold specific creative ideas in mind, then work to execute them one by one.

Late bloomers

These are the creatives we conveniently forget - artists like Cézanne (who produced his best works in his 60s), author George Eliot (real name Mary Anne Evans, who wrote her magnum opus *Middlemarch* at the age of 55) or legendary ad copywriter David Ogilvy ('At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls Royce is from the electric clock' - regarded as the best ever car ad, penned when he was 48). Late bloomers are experimental, enquiring and ever-searching. They also pay meticulous attention to detail, technique and achieving perfection.

Neither approach is better than the other - both precocious prodigies and late bloomers have made valuable creative contributions to arts and culture.

Unfortunately, however, it seems to be a function of the bottom line that the former exist in greater numbers in today's creative careers - we simply don't have the time and money to wait for a latter-day Cézanne to come to creative fruition, while prodigious early talents can simply be replaced when they burn out.

Then, there's the trend towards the commoditisation of content that's the downside of technology - master craftsmen (think about the movie matte artists or animators of old, who trained for many years to acquire the necessary techniques) are making way for technicians (software operators who can do it cheap 'n fast, and don't need as many years training to get it done).

You can't teach an old creative new tricks?

While it seems that no causal relationship between age and creativity actually exists, it is true to say that people can fall into cognitive traps *at any age*, which have the potential to stifle creativity. These include:

- Conforming to societal expectations - which can hit us as early as the age of six, when we first start school, and slowly grinds away at us over the years
- Being described as an expert in some field - in which our field of experience grows necessarily smaller, as we hone in on a particular skill
- Habitual ossification - where we become stuck in our ways, or happy in our comfort zones. This happens to some people sooner than others, and to some people never at all.

To remain relevant in our careers, then, whatever our age, we need to watch out for the cognitive traps and work on nurturing our individual and collective creativity.

The salty dogs:

- Keep mind and body fit by challenging yourself physically, mentally and creatively
- Embrace experimentation - just because you've always done it that way, doesn't mean that it can't be done another way to achieve better results
- Avoid lecturing younger colleagues or lamenting the state of the industry today
- Keep it fresh - take a different route to work, try a different coffee shop, go to see that new hip-hop act just to see what the fuss is about
- Keep up your energy - things can get dull when you've been at it for a decade or two so liven up your life by taking on passion projects that stretch you in new ways
- As digital immigrants, you'll have to work harder at keeping up to speed with new media, methods and tools, so make a conscious effort to stay on top of it
- Don't stay in one place - offer your current market something different or find a new market for your current skills and talents.

The young pups:

- Work at honing your craft by sucking up all you can from the Old Masters
- As digital natives, you've missed out on some cool old school stuff, like writing real long copy, actually cutting film or copying-and-pasting, and the joy of watching a gigantic printing press spitting out newspapers - knowing something about how it was done then can give you greater appreciation and perspective on what you do today. Not only that, but there is some evidence that [learning the old tricks of the trade](#) actually makes you more creative.
- Prepare for a possible exit from agency life when you're older - think about how you will pursue your own business and creative interests, for example.

We can all:

- Remain open to new experiences and people
- Expose ourselves to a wide range of opinions that give us different perspectives on the world around us
- Have a wide social circle, encompassing people of different ages, genders, religions and cultural backgrounds
- Decide not to feel intimidated by working with someone younger or older than ourselves
- Recognise that all creatives - young and not-quite-so-young - have something to learn *and* something to teach!

**Name has been changed.*

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