

# AARP Tackles the Question of When, Not If

**Q**uick now, for \$2,000. What does AARP stand for?

If you said, "American Association of Retired Persons," you win.

The amazing thing is that for the last 11 years, not one of AARP's major controls has spelled out the "American Association of Retired Persons." The acronym stands alone.

The reason is obvious: AARP keeps mailing to younger and younger people. Currently if you are 50 and older, you will start receiving AARP pitches. If the words "retired persons" were anywhere in sight, the mailings would be discarded as irrelevant. AARP does not wish to be known as the club for retirees.

So by avoiding what the acronym stands for, the organization has transfigured itself into a kind of avuncular presence in the lives of all that are in late middle age and up.

From the Jan. 22, 2001 edition of *The New York Times*:

**New AARP Magazine Is Courting Younger Readers**

*In a play initiated to broaden its readership, AARP has changed the look of its lead magazine, Modern Maturity, and unveiled a Modern Maturity sister publication called My Generation. The new magazine is directed at the baby boomer set, or people between the ages of 45 and 55. AARP hopes to persuade middle-age people that it is "hip" to be old, and is beginning the task by giving itself a*

*makeover. Modern Maturity now boasts a bold, new cover design that features two large M's, with the words "Modern Maturity" in small type. AARP plans to reduce Modern Maturity's current readership of 20.8 million to 17 million by next year to make room for My Generation readers. Hugh Delehanty, editorial director of Modern Maturity, said circulation for My Generation will then be raised from its maiden circulation level of 3.4 million to 10 million, as distribution for Modern Maturity*

*Ed Harris is slated to appear on the first cover.*

AARP is doing something right. *Modern Maturity* and its sister publication *AARP Bulletin*, have more circulation in terms of subscriptions and newsstand sales than any other consumer magazine in America.

## The Grand Control

Basically it is not a question of whether a senior will join AARP but rather when. Those people 50 years and older who receive their first AARP mail-



*Snap-packs typically offer little in the way of copy and graphics on the outer to entice recipients. But that's the point: The look is that of an official message, and the logo and simple membership teaser copy make it obvious that the recipient has joined the millions of Americans who cannot pretend to be 29 any longer.*

*continues to shrink. AARP hopes to capture My Generation's target audience with articles about beauty, aging, and profiles of celebrities in that age group. Actor*

*usually go through a powerful momentary depression—leading perhaps to a martini or two, very dry, very cold, shaken, not stirred. But the mailings become a familiar sight and eventually even the oldest young-at-heart succumbs.*

Generally in the direct mail business, you want to test—offers, envelopes,

By DENNY HATCH

(Over please)

copy approaches, formats. Otherwise, the prospect will say, "Hey, I've seen this," and toss it into the round file.

In the case of AARP, consumers who see the same effort over and over again look upon it as an old friend. The controls over the years come in either a plain white envelope or one with the AARP logo up big on the corner card. Inside, the message may be slightly different, but the contents essentially are the same: a personalized temporary membership card, a letter talking about the benefits of membership, a registration (order) form and a BRE. Simple, neat, expected.

Ted Grigg, proprietor of direct marketing consultancy DMCG in Lewisville, Texas, had been tinkering with the snap-pack format for years when he used it to beat AARP's seven-year monarch envelope control by 40 percent in 1994. Response had been a steady 2.5 percent for AARP's prior control; Grigg's snap-pack—which was a format test only—bumped response up to 3.5 percent.

Grigg first found success with this format in the 1980s when he was marketing director for Veteran's Life, once a division of the Philadelphia-based National Liberty insurance firm before it was acquired by Manulife. "The problem today is getting the snap-pack produced. Hardly any printers can do [impact printing]," he explains.

Snap-packs are rough and ugly, he says, but they do have a kind of "official" governmental look and thus command attention.

Grigg's snap-pack for AARP was the control for at least five years, and served as the starting point for another AARP snap-pack with slightly different copy and creative that's in the mail now. In addition,

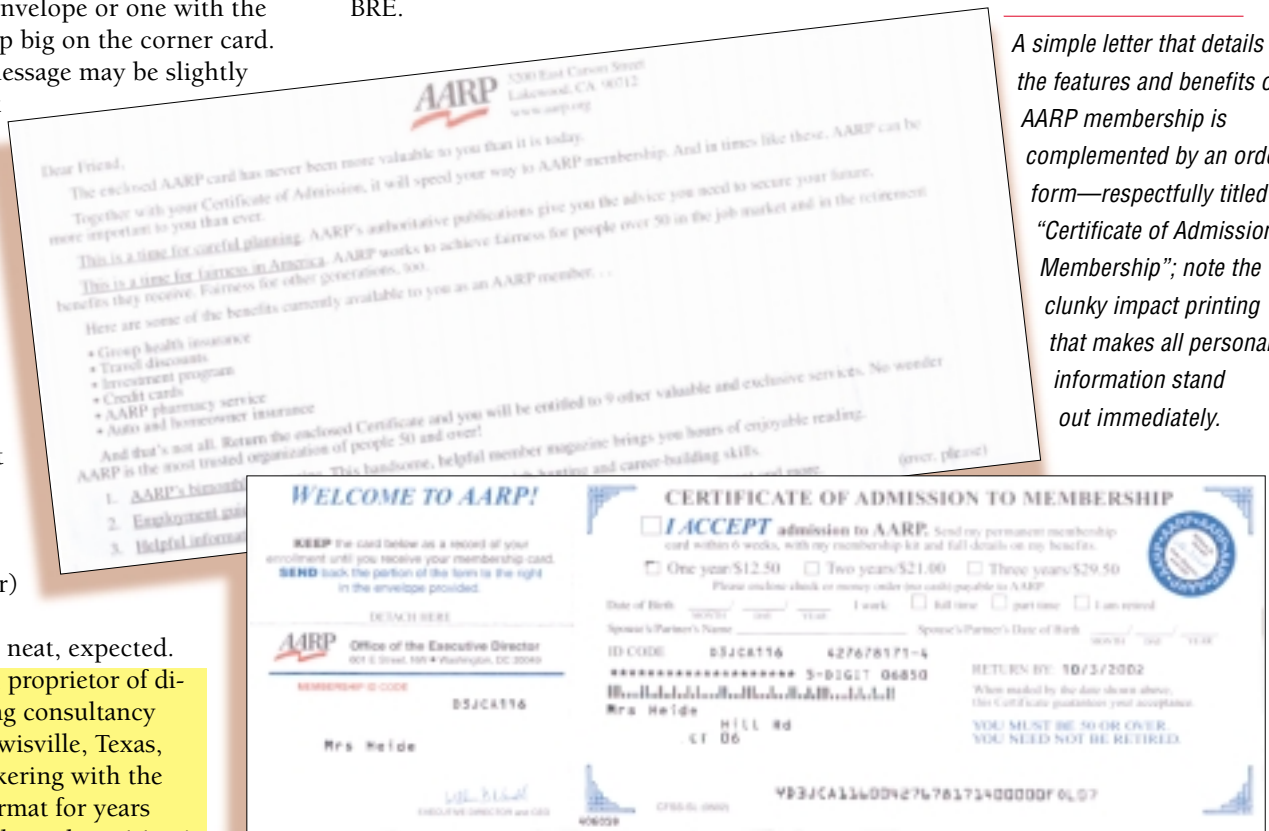
AARP is testing a small envelope package that uses similar copy and creative elements.

But the point is, these are minor tweaks. The guts remain the same—membership card, letter, order form and BRE.

investment programs.

How can AARP afford to send out in excess of 50 million mailings annually that ask for a paltry \$12.50? Easy. It mails at nonprofit rates, which means postage costs are somewhere around 11 cents. And its packages are extremely efficient;

*A simple letter that details the features and benefits of AARP membership is complemented by an order form—respectfully titled "Certificate of Admission Membership"; note the clunky impact printing that makes all personal information stand out immediately.*



### The Inimitable Secrets of AARP's Success

AARP is very astute in terms of lobbying, public relations and getting its name in the newspapers and on television. AARP functionaries testify regularly in front of congressional committees. The organization gets piles of print coverage. Incipient geezers cannot help but notice these good works on their behalf. The thought process: "Okay, I really should join. When I get the next mailing I will sign up." And when the AARP mailing does arrive, there's no mistaking it, since they all look basically alike.

Further, a year's membership is only \$12.50—a whale of a deal. AARP's marketing philosophy is that of Gillette's: give the razor away and sell the blades forever. *Modern Maturity* and other AARP publications basically are promotional vehicles for a vast array of services: insurance, travel, credit card and

Grigg recalls that switching to a snap-pack reduced the cost per thousand by \$5/M. He thinks it's possible that the new envelope package with a combined order form and letter now might just be less expensive than the snap-pack format.

In short, AARP is operating under its own set of rules that cannot be duplicated by any other organization, because prospects are being worn down by the aging process that continues to take a physical and psychological toll ... and worn down by AARP's persistence.

It's not a question of IF one will join; it's only a question of WHEN. And the good old reliable, instantly identifiable AARP mailing is there for you when you are ready. ■

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