

Real Possibilities

Ageless Opportunities



Barbara Shipley,
Chief Brand Officer
of AARP

AARP's Real Possibilities initiative goes to the heart of the brand and empowers people to navigate the changing face of aging in America.

BY JEANNE HANSEN, OWNER, JEANNE HANSEN EDITORIAL SERVICES

When people think of AARP, they might picture a frail lady picking up her prescription, or elders tottering around a tour bus at a vacation spot, or a wobbly gent negotiating a discount on car repairs.

But they'd be wrong.

People can join AARP at age 50, and that includes 34.5 percent of the entire U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). “That is not a segment; that is the size of a country, and it’s rich in diversity, experience, wisdom, and opportunity,” observes Barbara Shipley, AARP’s Chief Brand Officer.

As a 50-something myself, it may seem biased when I say that 50 is not so old, but you’d never have known it when I hit that milestone birthday. I bore the brunt of much teasing when, to add insult to injury, my AARP card arrived in the mail along with plenty of over-the-hill birthday jokes. (Vengeance was mine when my younger friends reached the same milestone.) Why do we not want to admit it when we pass the half-

century mark? Old stigmas run deep, not to mention the social pressures of staying forever young. But the tide is turning on that old way of thinking, and AARP is leading the way with their Real Possibilities campaign.

With Shipley at the architect’s table, AARP recognized that although not every bucket list item is feasible for most people, there are still lots of possibilities – realistic ones – after age 50. People are staying in the workforce longer than ever, living longer than ever, and staying healthy and more active longer than ever. Scores of Americans are somewhere north of the traditional retirement age, but 57 percent of AARP-eligible members are aged 50 to 65 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). That’s more than 63 million people who might feel

like shredding the first AARP card they receive in the mail, but I’m here to tell you why they shouldn’t.

AARP originally stood for American Association for Retired Persons, but today the name is simply AARP. You could say that the R and the P stand for Real Possibilities (AARP, 2013) to reflect the latest change in the organization’s history of innovation. The roots of AARP date back to 1947, when Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus found inspiration in the most unlikely of places: a chicken coop. Back then, the fledgling organization was called the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA) and was primarily concerned with helping retired teachers. Andrus was inspired by one particular teacher who had enjoyed a distinguished career, but in her retirement she lost

everything to the Great Depression and found herself living in a windowless chicken coop with a sagging door. Right then and there, Andrus vowed to help retired teachers lead lives of independence, dignity, and purpose. In 1958, she realized the organization could help all retirees, not just teachers, and the NRTA became AARP.

The times have changed again. The workplace is radically different, for one thing. People don’t spend decades with one employer and reap the rewards of a retirement plan while rocking on the front porch with grandkids playing in the yard. They provide for their own retirement, keep pace with changes in health insurance and medical care, look after their parents further into their own lives as the average life expectancy increases, cash in on travel deals to visit their kids and grandkids in our mobile society, launch second careers, go back to school, guard themselves against fraud, and keep up with new technology. You read that right: They keep up with technology. The Pew Research Center found that 59 percent of people aged 65 years and older use the internet, and a whopping 71 percent of those internet users go online every day (Smith, 2014). That doesn’t even count people aged 50 to 65 years, many of whom are active employees and keep abreast of technology at work.

Shipley and her team addressed today’s new realities with AARP’s sweeping Real Possibilities campaign, designed to empower people as they confront their fears about shrinking opportunities and forge a meaningful, realistic path through a maze of possibilities. The traditional resources are still there – things like insurance policies, discounts galore, and travel offers – and AARP’s ever-important advocacy presence on Capitol Hill and in every state capital is alive and well. But Real Possibilities takes a fresh approach to opportunities in the second



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half-century of life. It's about zeroing in on realistic goals, conquering some of life's greatest challenges, and leveraging the information age to peer ever further into the future.

AARP recognized that the demographics are shifting and that the organization has a responsibility to create change. Shipley and her team recognized that aging is a changing concept and that people experience it differently, whether they are active workers, traditional retirees, or elderly; whether they live on farms, in small towns, or in cities; whether they are women or men; whether they are rich or poor or religious or political; or whether they are brown, black, or white. Real Possibilities empowers people to choose how they live as they age. It works

side by side with people in their own communities to make the brand familiar and friendly and comfortable.

You may have heard AARP advertisements that say, "If you don't 'think this is right for me' when you think AARP, then you don't know aarp." Part of the humanizing process for AARP has been to embrace the name "aarp." Instead of insisting on the acronym "AARP," the organization realizes there is familiarity in a nickname – it means that people know you and are comfortable with you. You've arrived and are accepted. The phrase "then you don't know aarp" speaks to the evolution of the Real Possibilities campaign and the new offerings for 50-plus people at all stages of life.



A few of the Real Possibilities offerings:



Caregiving

Those who care for others can tap into stress busters, practical knowledge, and apps to manage caregiver duties.



Staying Sharp

Members can care for their mind with articles, activities, recipes, and online games that promote brain health.



Reimagining Life

Inspiration seekers can identify what matters most to them, visualize a new future, and map a new path.



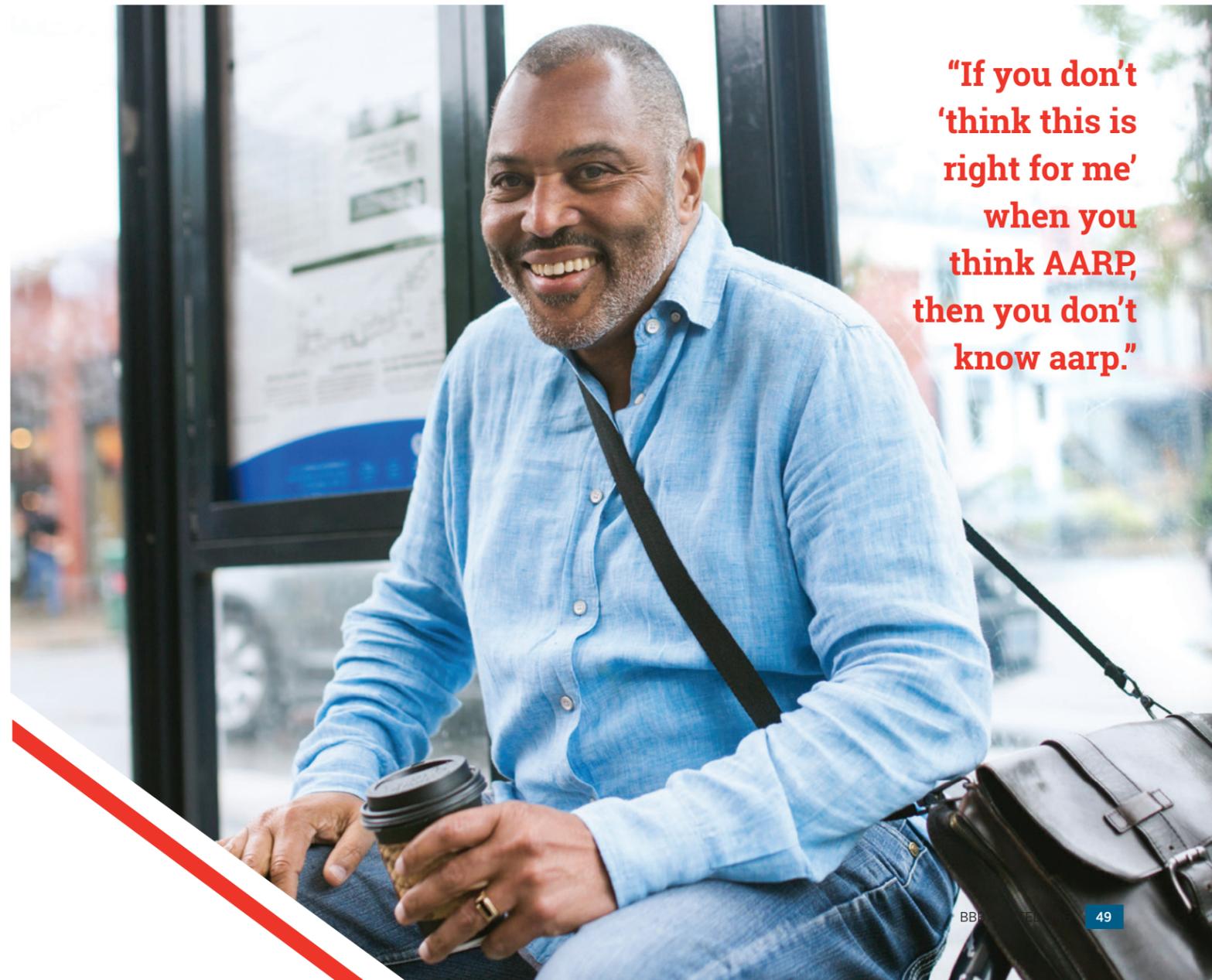
Working

Career changers can brush up their resumes, practice their interviewing skills, build a LinkedIn profile, and connect with companies that value experienced workers.



Going Mobile

Techies can download the free AARP Now app to stay connected with news, events, and savings – both big and small – on the go.



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Real Possibilities is not just about perks and tools. The real challenge, says Shipley, is to address both individuals and the social environments they operate in. She says, “We could be providing tools for people to survive in today’s work world, but if we aren’t also changing the mindset of the employers to recognize the value of experience and the value of an age-diverse workforce, it’s going to be a barrier for their success.” She continues, “We really believe the world needs AARP, and if AARP weren’t here, who would be fighting ageism and securing lives, regardless of whether people ever want to retire?”

Ageless issues drive AARP: “affordable health care for all, financial security, good health, and work opportunities,” says Shipley. When such weighty decisions are at stake, people need to depend on someone to help them navigate the bewildering array of choices. “That is why brand trust is our most precious asset. We make decisions based on what people need, and we aren’t held to some of the financial requirements that a for-profit [corporation] would be,” Shipley says. Part of what Real Possibilities addresses is the fact that the old rules don’t apply anymore. Real Possibilities helps people stay nimble in an environment where the rules have changed and are constantly evolving.

Shipley’s message is this: “Don’t fear that your possibilities will shrink. There is an advocate, a champion, and an ally here, and you can be empowered to seize on those real possibilities.” Indeed, with its innovative Real Possibilities campaign, AARP is a legacy brand doing legendary things.

I admit that I shredded my AARP card when it arrived on my 50th birthday. I guess, like they say, I didn’t know aarp. Real Possibilities is not a membership drive, but how can increased membership not be an outcome? I’ve seen the error of my ways and just became the newest AARP member. Now please excuse me while I download their app. ■

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