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By Adam Remson



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BRANDS ON THE VERGE

Marketing to Old Guys Can Rule, Too

BY BECKY EBENKAMP

As with most product categories, youth dominates the market for SoCal-inspired apparel, and brands such as Quiksilver, Hurley and Vans reign. But one company is making waves in the sea of surfwear by realizing a simple fact: Old guys rule—and so do their wallets.

This is not your father's surf bum. As baby boomers continue to gray and—concurrently—seek out youthful pastimes that can be accessed at the lifestage thanks to grown-up bank accounts, post-retirement leisure time and health-boosting medical breakthroughs, a Ventura, Calif., vintage-surf-inspired clothing line called Old Guys Rule is tapping this duality-driven dynamic.

The five-year-old company is known for its goofy graphic Tees—the types one would spot on the walls of Urban Outfitters—only these \$18-25 shirts are meant for men who sport AARP cards.

“Surf and California lifestyle presents a passion point for many men, young and old,” said Tom Julian, director of trends for McCann Erickson, New York, who added that the brand's “tongue-in-cheek attitude works well for the male psyche.”

On designs, the “Old Guys Rule” expression is placed alongside retro/relaxation icons such as RVs, 45 rpm records, muscle cars, BBQs and vintage surfboards. The sentiment is morphed into parodies of brand logos, everything from beers to baseball teams. While the target is men, the brand also is popular among women, who buy the shirts as novelty gifts for their husbands and dads. The laid-back, coastal brand has expanded to hats, jackets, boxers, glasses and other accessories that sport the phrase, and it will soon stretch beyond surf shops and styles.

“Old Guys” was started on a lark. Five years ago, pro surfer Don Craig coined the slogan and created stickers sporting it as a tribute to his father, Doug Craig, an early California surfer who was still catching waves into his 70s. A local surf shop asked for some stickers, and they sold “overnight.” The retailers then asked Craig for T-shirts sporting the statement,

so he printed up a few. Those sold, too, and the store wanted more.

“He made more and more, and before he knew it, about a dozen stores were selling the T-shirts and stickers,” said Thom Hill, president of Old Guys Rule (and Coastal Classics, the sportswear company where Craig the Younger was working). “He approached me about a year later to take it to the next level.”

Today, Old Guys Rule is a \$6 million “lifestyle” apparel and accessories brand that, much like the more successful Life Is Good brand, is poised on a phrase/philosophy. The “about” page on oldguys-rule.com says it all: “There comes a time in your life when comfort meets substance. When all your hard work seems to have paid dividends, and the world is at your command. All the things you hoped you could do someday, you're doing.”

The Old Guys Rule brand has been growing by about 30% each year and Hill expects



Attention choppers: Graybeards like this one are the core target for Old Guys Rule, a California apparel and lifestyle firm.



Boomer chic: A brand for those fessing up to aging, ruling.

BRAND:

Old Guys Rule

HEADQUARTERS: Ventura, Calif.

PRODUCT: Vintage-surf-inspired apparel and accessories

LAUNCH DATE: 2003

SALES: \$8 million projected for 2008

TARGET DEMO: Well, old guys, and the gals who love them

COMPETITION: No direct competitors

DISTRIBUTION: Surf shops (Jack's Surfboards, Huntington Surf & Sport); regional specialty chains (Bealls, Sportsman's Warehouse)

CLAIMS: "... a badge of honor for a life well spent, but not nearly over"

NEW PRODUCTS: 2008 collections include golf, resort and Western-inspired designs that will allow the brand to open more store doors

2008 sales to surpass \$8 million.

While real surfers were the inspiration, the brand is aspirational. “They don't have to be surfers; it's about what that activity represents,” he said. And while it's not terribly common to see a trend among the senior set trickle down to teens, there have been sightings of young men wearing the shirts, whether for solidarity or irony. “The marketing of boomer guy to young guy has worked well for companies like Tommy Bahama,” Julian reminded. “And look how big that business has become.”

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