

# The benefits of age

## Companies roll out promotions to attract over-50 crowd

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Last Update: 12:01 AM ET Apr 30, 2002

**LOS ANGELES (CBS.MW) -- As baby boomers near retirement, more hotels, restaurants and retailers are adding senior discounts and services to acknowledge the right of passage -- and tap into a growing market.**

With each coming year, more than 4 million U.S. men and women join the over-50 gang. Awaiting them are cups of coffee on the house, meal discounts, free admission to national parks, better customer service at banks, and tens of thousands of other perks.

To get a better sense of older Americans like and dislike, many companies are cooking up or rethinking strategies to tap into this lucrative market. Earlier this month, major drugmakers -- including Abbott Laboratories and Bristol-Myers Squibb -- said they're offering elderly consumers a discount card that will let them save on more than 100 brand-name drugs.

"Companies are saying, 'Wow, we have all these new people to go after,'" said Joan Rattner Heilman, author of "Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50," now in its 14th edition.

When Delta ended its senior club last year, the airline sparked concern such discounts would dry up as ranks of retirees swelled, but consumer advocates haven't seen significant changes in offerings or age limits.

"We have 115,000 discounts listed on our Web site, and we've had none cancel in a year," said Doug Brown, founder of [SeniorDiscounts.com](#), which tracks promotions nationwide.

Choice Hotels International, which has had three "mature traveler" discounts in place since the 1980s, expanded its offerings this month by teaming with AARP Privileges. The program entitles AARP's 35 million members to 15 percent discounts at any of Choice's eight brands, made up of six midscale and two economy chains.

About 25 percent of Choice's business comes from senior travelers, said Wayne Wielgus, senior vice president of marketing. "Our brands line up very well with that market."

### **Because you've paid your dues**

Travel service providers and restaurants have typically used senior discounts to promote brand loyalty. And in the end, they've made many seniors creatures of habit when it comes to arriving for early-bird dinner specials or staying at a familiar hotel.

AARP began promoting senior discounts in the early 1970s, starting with Avis, Hertz and Sheraton Hotels. Members pay annual dues of \$12.50 for the privileges.

Traditionally, discounts have been a way to repay older Americans "who have paid their dues," Brown said.

The typical 10 percent break does make a difference, too, he said. The average annual income among SeniorDiscount.com users is \$45,000, and if they shop only at places offering discounts they could "probably save a couple thousand a year."

### **Repackaging services**

Beyond discounts, some companies are reaching seniors through "value added" services. Compass Bank, for example, is breathing new life into senior clubs that ceased to exist following a slew of industry mergers in the 1990s, said Westport, Conn.-based consultant Vicki Thomas, who specializes in helping companies target the "midlife" market.

Thomas has been training Compass Bank's staff in a new program that bundles various services to seniors at its 340 branches in Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nebraska, New Mexico and Texas. "Everything old is new again, and it's being repackaged," Thomas said.

Compass Bank's new service was rolled out this week, and 50-plus-year-old customers who sign up are entitled to perks such as unlimited check writing, financial/retirement planning review, ATM rebates when taking out cash from other banks and a free safe deposit box the first year.

"Companies have become a lot more sophisticated in realizing the 50- plus market is not a monolithic group," said Jean Van Ryzin, editor of marketing newsletter, Selling to Seniors. "Anywhere from 50 to 80, you're talking about a couple of different life stages."

### **Just ask**

While the bank is actively promoting the new offering, some discounts may not be as visible. Mrs. Fields Cookies, for example, began cutting 10 percent off the price of cookies and baked goods for

customers over 60 in December, but stores don't post the information. That's why it's important to take initiative and ask, Brown said. "Oftentimes if you ask, you'll get one."

If you're a frequent traveler, you'll find there are a number of air and hotel markdowns. "They're always trying to fill up seats and rooms in a nonbusy time, and older people are generally flexible and can go midweek," Heilman said.

Here's a look at other discounts Brown, Heilman and other experts noted:

- Public transportation. For example, older New York residents pay half the price of a regular ticket, or 75 cents, to ride on buses and subways, Heilman said.
- Burger King offers free coffee before 10:30 a.m.
- The Golden Age Passport is a lifetime entrance pass for those 62 and over to national parks, monuments, historic sites, recreation areas and national wildlife refuges that charge an entrance fee.
- Movie discounts are typically about 40 percent. Some may vary according to location, however, Smidt said.
- Avis takes 10 percent off for patrons 50 and over.
- Restaurants such as IHOP are run by franchisees, but the majority offers specials, whether that is a senior discount night, a certain percentage off the menu or smaller portions at reduced prices.
- When booking a hotel room with Choice, seniors can ask for a room with special amenities such as bigger push buttons on phones or bathrooms with grab bars.
- At Kohl's department stores, seniors can save 10 to 15 percent on selected Wednesdays.
- Nearly all airlines offer some type of discount -- usually 10 percent -- to people over the age of 62 or 65, but terms differ from one airline to another. ■

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