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Enjoy those senior discounts, they're the only tangible benefit of aging

*By Diether Haenicke
October 07, 2009*

I entered seniordom several years ago, when a very young girl at the D&W check-out counter looked at me with the taxing eyes of an appraiser and then inquired if I was a senior.

I was totally unprepared for that question. I presided at the time over a large university and felt full to the brim with energy. But her question was not impolite. On that particular day senior shoppers were receiving a storewide 10 percent discount on their purchases, and she wanted to ascertain if I qualified.

I have always loved a good discount. So I threw my concerns regarding privacy to the wind and inquired at what age a person becomes a senior. At 55, 60 or 65? Does one have to be retired? She was not sure. But I could read her mind. It told her that senior status is reached a few years before people started looking like me.

When I told her I was 60, she audibly gasped and immediately rang up the discount. In the eyes of teenagers — and I have seen it in their eyes many times since — a man of 60 is right up there with the biblical patriarchs and close to a wheelchair and incontinence.

It was a life-changing experience. Ever since that day, I ask for senior discounts whenever I open my wallet. The local movie houses reduce my ticket by a few dimes; selected restaurants shave off a dollar or two by serving me senior portions on smaller plates; the video store has my senior status logged in to its computer and automatically reduces my bill; the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts sports special senior donor categories; certain “participating” hotels let me sleep for a few bucks less; airlines are deducting from my fare an amount equal to two bags of peanuts; and the national parks service

allows me to peek into the Grand Canyon for \$5 less than the young father with a family of five standing next to me.

It often occurs to me that the young father raising four kids might probably need the discount more than I. In fact, many of my contemporaries in the discount brigade are by no means impecunious. They travel extensively to exotic locations; they lavish gifts on their children and grandchildren; they drive expensive cars; and they donate generously to local charities. But they love that senior discount and wallow in delight each time the usually minuscule deduction appears on their check. It is the only tangible benefit of seniorhood.

In my more philosophical moments, I view the senior discount as life's attempt to recompense us for the many distinct shortcomings of old age. But when I consider all the inconveniences and exasperation that accompany advancing age, I must conclude that a 10 percent discount in return is neither fair nor sufficient.

The fact that national data banks now identify me as a senior has activated the mail order industry, which peppers me with catalogs offering items presumably of special appeal to people my age. There is the Tai Chi course for seniors promising the participating grandpa the "flexibility of a child, the vitality of a lumberjack and the wisdom of a sage." A California company wants to sell me its "Age Spot Fade Cream," which makes its user look 30 years younger. Magnifying glasses are advertised for reading the telephone book accompanied by a phone with triple-sized numbers. Then there is the portable urinal, "a godsend when restrooms aren't near," combined with the sharply reduced "Incontinence-related Rash Protectant Cream."

I am not ready for any of this yet, thank heavens! So far, I am keeping only the ad for the Cotton Terry Bib, reduced for seniors from \$12 to \$6, which the ad promises, "gets you the protection you need and keeps you dry and comfortable during every meal. Generous size extends to your lap for total coverage while eating." I have often longed for this item while eating spaghetti. The people who clean my ties probably think I should have bought the bib 30 years ago. But I do wonder what our local restaurateurs would say if I showed up with this senior protection tool, giving myself total coverage while eating my senior portion. I guess I'll find out eventually.

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