

BRIAN LOWRY

PBS welcomes an age-old opportunity

DR. JAMES AUSMAN AND HIS wife, Carolyn, appear unlikely to be making a career shift, what with the two being 72 and 71 years of age, respectively. Even more improbably, they made their belated leaps into the youth-oriented roles of TV producers and



in her case, on-air host.

Frustrated by the media's blind eye toward older Americans, the Ausmans developed "The Leading Gen," a half-hour lifestyle program they are producing through a small public TV station, California's KVCR in San Bernardino, and have placed on more than 100 PBS outlets.

"The Leading Gen" stylistically resembles any other local magazine show, until you look closer — noticing the presence of

Carolyn Ausmus hosts "The Leading Gen" and co-produces with her husband, far right.



Ausman, its septuagenarian female co-host. That's certainly a far cry from most local newscasts, which

might feature a sober-minded middle-aged male anchor — a voice of gravity and authority — but invariably complement that by pairing him with a beauty queen born after the Nixon administration. (Ausman's fellow anchor, Gino Lamont, is a relative whippersnapper at 48 — which we know because they both announce their ages during the introduction.)

The 13-episode series, which deals with a wide variety of topics from health to finances, is targeted to those age 40 to 100 — an almost comically broad swath that nevertheless accurately reflects TV's tyrannical preoccupation with younger demographics. In a world dominated by concerns about reaching adults under 50 (and preferably below 35), it's possible to transition with astonishing speed from beginning of middle age to "Paging Dr.

Kevorkian."

As each episode notes, the current crop of baby boomers will "live longer than any generation in history," adding that people living 20 to 40 years longer than anticipated "may have not planned for this extended life."

James Ausman — a neurosurgeon by training — engaged in extensive research on aging in formulating a program he claims is "relevant to everyone." In part, he was upset to see people being elbowed to retire at 65, which given improved longevity and the importance of maintaining brain activity as we age, he calls "the worst thing you can do."

The couple shopped the project to a Hollywood talent agency, where they were told it couldn't be sold. The next steps were to local PBS stations, whose national service — where older viewers gravitate toward British costume dramas like "Masterpiece Classic's" "Cranford" — shouldn't be quite as beholden to younger demos as ad-supported commercial networks.

Mostly, Dr. Ausman says people need information about aging that the media isn't adequately provid-

ing them, despite efforts by the few entities that dare to acknowledge seniors, like Retirement Living TV and the AARP.

"How do you educate someone over 40? They don't go to school, and they don't like lectures," Ausman says. But they do watch lots of television — which, perversely, is among the reasons advertisers have historically given for feeling at liberty to ignore them. After all, they essentially reach millions of 55-plus viewers watching CBS dramas and

See **LOWRY** next page



BLOG

Brian Lowry examines the state of television and the media at variety.com/BLTV





PBS stations already attract a sizable older audience with British costume dramas like "Masterpiece Classic's Cranford."

LOWRY

Continued from previous page

cable news for free while negotiating ad rates predicated on younger demos.

The Ausmans are hardly the first to highlight the disenfranchisement of upper age brackets and the evolving nature of aging — particularly in media, but other spheres as well. Ken Dychtwald's *Age Wave* is built around charting the unprecedented influence of boomers as their oldest members push into their mid-60s, while Ausman cites David Wolfe's book "Ageless Marketing" among his inspirations. The *Wall Street Journal* also wrote about the trend this month in discussing a website, *Retiredbrains.com*,

which functions as a job board for older workers.

Bringing advertisers around to recognizing untapped value in older demos remains a tall order. If they haven't been shamed into altering their Gen-X-obsessed ways yet — even as Gen-Old guys named Letterman and Leno prepare to duke it out for the foreseeable future in late-night TV — why would they suddenly now?

For PBS, however, which has often fretted about its graying audience and what that augurs for the service's future, catering to those over 50 — the people who are predominantly watching public TV anyway — isn't just good business; it's a no-brainer.