

Opinion

CoastReporter
THE COASTAL COMMUNITY'S VOICE

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VIEWES

When asking for a birth date crosses the line

I called Fido last week to ask about my bill. "We need some identifying information," a woman named Jasmine said. "What's your birth date?" I gave her the day and month. "The year?" she asked. "The year?" she asked. "That would tell you my age," I said. "You shouldn't ask."

Jasmine held enough authority in her job to pose alternate identifying questions. However, other organizations reached from my home recently insisted on birth year identification. These include Aeroplan, VanCity, ScotiaBank and Hudson's Bay Credit. HBC won't let you past an automated phone system unless you state your birth year.

They should change their identification policies. So should other age-prying companies.

Imagine if a phone rep asked about your race. That would be outrageous.

You might think that soliciting a birth year to call up a credit account wouldn't equate with discrimination, because few older people balk at the practice. That may be because they probably once held their own prejudices



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about seniors.

I did as a child when I first met my great-grandmother. I was shocked at her withered appearance, so I avoided talking with her. Withered to an eight-year-old can be as innocuous as bags under the eyes.

I had an email exchange with Michael North, an ageism expert with a Ph.D. in psychology who teaches management and organizations at New York University (NYU). He says when he first researched ageism as a 22-year-old grad student, he thought the older people he had to interview would be boring. "I thought they would smell. I thought they would make me feel weird."

He says society starts to view people as "older and irrelevant" when they are 50 or 55. Coasters should be concerned. According to the 2016 census, 49.8 per cent of

them are 55 and over.

Knowing someone's age is an invitation to discrimination, and that's covered under the B.C. Human Rights Code. People cannot be denied a benefit or job because of the wrinkles etched in their face. Other than in surveys you may refuse to answer and in cases of reasonable justification, a business that provides services cannot ask people over 19 for their age.

"Doing so could be grounds for a human rights complaint," Tiffany Nelson, communications manager from the Office of the Attorney General emailed to me last week.

Age identification for account information isn't justified or needed. I called Telus about my credit, and they asked for my driver's licence number instead.

There are good reasons for doctors and insurance companies to ask your age, but the rampant solicitation of birth year data by businesses should end. The B.C. government should publicize the rule against ageism and act against violators.

In the meantime, when a company asks your age, you can just say "no."