Creating age-friendly websites

Does your website meet the needs of senior surfers? This communications expert outlines how you can make the most of the Internet opportunity

by Brigid McHugh Sanner

Make no mistake about it: today's midlife and older adults form a significant part of the *technology wave.* As a result, the Internet offers you considerable opportunities to reach these audiences and attract them to your health or wellness facility.

According to *Older Americans and the Internet,* a report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 22% of adults ages 65 years or older have Internet access—up from 15% in 2000 and just 2% in 1996. That translates to about eight million *wired* older Americans.

Even greater Internet use is reported by Baby Boomers. The Pew report notes that 62% of adults ages 50–58 and 46%

of those ages 59–68 have Internet access. In fact, the 55–64 age group recorded the largest increase in Web surfers within a recent six-month period, according to Mediamark research reported on CNN.com in 2001.

What else can the Pew report tell you about wired older adults? Firstly, the gender ratio of Internet users is now even—50% male/50% female. Secondly, midlife and older adults who use the Internet tend to be better educated than average and have higher household incomes than their unwired counterparts. And, thirdly, African-Americans utilize the Internet less than both English-speaking Hispanic and non-Hispanic whites (21% and 22% usage, respectively). In 2003, just 11% of African-Americans ages 65 and older went online. However, this percentage compares favorably with the 7% of African-Americans who reported using the Internet in 2000.

Clearly, the Internet is a burgeoning medium for reaching the Boomer and mature audiences. To make the most of this opportunity, your organization's website or webpages must target the 50-plus population. Fortunately, a good deal of information is available on how to design, write and organize information for the Web. However, as with all communications tools, the effectiveness of this vehicle will ultimately rest on how well you identify your audience(s).

Start with the audience in mind

When developing or improving your organization's Internet site, consider the audience at all times. You must be able to define these groups clearly to focus your efforts. For example, if your organization is a health club, you could have several target audiences for a senior-focused website:

Current active clients. These individuals likely realize the benefits of regular physical activity and know basic information about your center. Their interests may include learning how to enhance their fitness levels; information

about new services, equipment, programs or training opportunities; staff highlights; mechanisms to track and monitor their activities; and profiles of older adults who succeed with their fitness programs.

Lapsed or inactive clients. This group may need a little motivation to resume a fitness program. Reasons for discontinuing a program may include conflicting priorities, injury, health, boredom, the weather, or even the death of a loved one. Individuals in this audience may need basic information about how to get started again, hours of operation, and classes—especially low-impact, beginning or short-term offerings that will not intimidate them. A personal touch with these clients might encourage them to return.

Potential clients. Individuals in this audience may know about your center, but be unfamiliar with your programs or services. Information targeted to them would include much of the same basic information directed to lapsed or inactive clients. However, you should highlight your facility's age-friendly aspect with these individuals. They need to know that they will feel comfortable and welcome in your venue, and that your staff can help them begin a program.

The keys to greater success with Internet communication are to understand clearly your intended audiences, including their interests and goals, as well as your communications objectives. In addition, some basic rules can guide your efforts once you have a firm grasp of your target audience and objectives.

Mature audiences and the Internet: 10 rules for effective communication

The Internet provides some specific challenges for 50-plus adults. The following rules outline how you can develop a website that addresses these challenges and allows you to communicate effectively with midlife and older adults:

1.

Make your website inviting and engaging to midlife and older adults. Is your homepage designed to attract older adults or various age groups? If your homepage must appeal to a range of people, it should direct 50-plus adults to webpages relevant to their interests. If you use photos on your site, use a mix of intergenerational graphics to ensure people can easily identify with the visuals. Allow visitors to navigate quickly to text targeted to specific audiences. And don't bury information for active older adults deep in scroll-down menus.

2.

Select words and images carefully. As part of the Active for Life project (funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), AARP conducted focus group research with adults 50 and older about physical activity. The results of this research show that older adults respond best to images of people they say look like them—by which they mean not a *perfect* body type. Generally, individuals in this age group reject images of super-fit athletes, even those depicting people their age or older. And images of fit and trim people often contribute to discomfort and embarrassment in the physically inactive and/or overweight. Likewise, a mature person may feel little connection to a glamorous twentysomething athlete.

Midlife and older adults also tend to react negatively to images of people being physically active in clothing that is clingy, revealing, perfectly color-coordinated, fashionable or expensive. Instead, they like the idea of being active in *regular* clothing, such as loose T-shirts and baggy shorts.

Imagery plays a large role in all kinds of communication that seeks to engage, persuade or motivate people to make healthier behavior choices, which makes the above issues critical. So select your photos with care.

Frame your messages appropriately for the audience. Responses from

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participants in the AARP research projects suggest the *no pain, no gain* admonishment does not work with the 50-plus generation. Most people in this age group see this approach as dangerous and inappropriate for them. Many are reluctant to exercise because they are in pain, or they associate discomfort and pain with physical activity, or they worry they will be injured if they exercise. Older adults also view any rebuke to *get off the couch* or *get moving* as confrontational and critical. They are unreceptive to any information conveyed in this tone.

Words and phrases such as *seniors, senior citizens, elderly* and *old folks* can also create a barrier when communicating to mature audiences. Most people do not want or need reminders that they are aging. Use creative names for programs targeted to midlife and older adults to communicate effectively and positively. Examples include Active for Life, SilverSneakers, Sit and Be Fit, or Gentle Joints.

Keep in mind that not all 50-plus adults want to participate in age-specific programs. Many older men and women enjoy interacting with people of all ages, so strive to appeal to mature adults in all sections of your website—not just in the pages targeted to them.

3.
Write clearly and concisely.
"Writing web documents is different from writing for print, and if you simply move your print documents onto web pages, you are not using the medium to its best advantage," advises Sarah Horton, an instructional technology specialist at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. "Web readers tend to scan text online and read text offline," she notes. "They typically do not read a page from start to finish on the computer screen."

Experts agree that most people read more slowly on a computer screen. "Reading from a computer screen is about 25% slower than reading from paper," states Jakob Nielsen, Ph.D., principal of the Nielsen Norman Group, based in Fremont, California. Web development professionals such as Nielsen suggest that online text should be half the amount used in print materials, to enhance ease of reading and comprehension.

Nielsen and colleague John Morkes have found that concise and scannable text results in 124% better usability, based on time, errors, memory and site structure. "Skimming instead of reading is a fact of the web and has been confirmed by countless usability studies," says Nielsen.

4.
Use a few good graphics.
Select graphic images that are relevant to your audience and relate to the copy. And don't go overboard with a large number of photos, video clips and other technology that can require a lengthy download time. Many people who use the Internet from home still rely on dial-up connections. You risk losing your visitors before you ever engage them if multiple graphics make your website difficult to open.

5.
Type size and style are important.
Changes in vision that occur with age can make it more difficult to read a computer screen. To address this issue, the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine have developed the excellent resource *Making Your Web Site Senior Friendly: A Checklist* (see the reference on page 24 for information on how to obtain a copy).

Some key design recommendations include the following:

- Use a 12- or 14-point sans serif typeface, such as Helvetica. (Note that serif typefaces, such as Times New Roman, are recommended for print materials, but sans serif fonts are more readable online.)
- Stay away from an *all caps* format for emphasis, as this proves difficult to read and, in an electronic format, is tantamount to shouting. Feature uppercase (capitals) and lowercase type instead.
- Reserve underlining for links.
- Double-space all body text.
- Align text to the left margin to promote easier reading. A left justified format presents an even left margin and an uneven (or *ragged*) right margin.
- Avoid using the colors yellow, blue and green in close proximity, as some older adults have trouble discriminating these colors and juxtapositions.
- Choose dark type or graphics against a light background for an easy-to-read contrast. If you use white lettering on a black or dark-colored background, consider what the copy will look like printed.
- Shun patterned backgrounds on webpages. And avoid placing text on top of photographs or illustrations.

6.

Hyperlinks are a good thing.
Hyperlinks are an excellent tool on webpages, as they lend credibility to your site and aid the user in finding additional information. Keep in mind the following pointers when creating hyperlinks for older audiences:

- Make hyperlinks easy to find by setting them in bold type of a different color than the rest of the text.
- Position hyperlinks at the end of copy, rather than embedded in text. Many older adults have reduced motor function due to arthritis or other degenerative conditions and may lack the fine-motor skills to position a cursor on a small link.
- Ensure hyperlinks change color when *active* (or clicked), so readers realize they have navigated to that information.

7.

Make basic information easy to find.
Provide a site map to show how your site is organized. Also, avoid complicated pull-down menus, as they can make navigating with a mouse a challenge for people with reduced motor function.

Make sure individuals can easily find your facility's address, phone number and hours of operation, as well as directions on how to reach your location by car or public transportation. Many people visiting your site for the first time may want this information initially. These surfers may move on to different sites if they have trouble finding these details.

8.

Seek feedback from your audiences.
You need not invest in formal focus group testing to get valuable information from your target audience. Look for opportunities to visit your site with people who represent your target audience.

Ask age 50 and older clients, parents, grandparents, friends and neighbors to

visit your website, then pose specific questions to them, i.e. *What do you find most helpful? What do you like best? What do you like least? What would you like to change? What information would be useful that you cannot find?* When you ask questions about your website, be open to feedback. Thank people who suggest changes for their ideas and their help.

9.

Promote your site.
If you build it, they may not come. You have to advertise and promote your website. Position your website address prominently in your print materials and promotional items. Excellent vehicles include printed newsletters, flyers for special events, class schedules and business cards.

10.

Keep things fresh.

No one reads the same edition of a newspaper day after day, or the same magazine over and over. The same holds true of your website. If you expect your audiences to visit your site regularly, you need to feature new, up-to-date and captivating information. Have a process of regularly updating information and graphics. Depending on your content, you can archive or delete outdated materials.

Maximize your results

In addition to your website, you should consider using two important Internet communications vehicles: email and *e-zines.*

Email offers an easy, personal and nonintimidating means to keep in regular touch with your audience. You might consider a monthly note to both interested and lapsed clients about new programs, schedules or changes in your facility. E-zines are simply electronic newsletters, which you can also send on a regular basis. Both email and e-zines offer you opportunities to drive people to your website for more information.

Mature adults want the same thing from electronic communications as everyone else—easy-to-access, easy-to-understand information of relevance and interest to them. By following the 10 simple rules for Internet communications, you will go a long way towards meeting your organization's objectives and, most importantly, the needs of your target audience.❧

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The online activities of senior surfers

As midlife and older adults navigate the Internet, what are their interests, needs and preferences? A report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project lists some of this group's online habits as follows:

94% use the Internet to send and receive email.

82% regularly use search engines to find information.

59% seek information about a specific disease or medical problem.

45% try to find information about a certain medical treatment or procedure.

28% look for information about diet, nutrition or nutritional supplements.

23% search for information about alternative treatments or medicines.

13% want information about exercise or fitness.

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