How to Reach Seniors With Your Agency's Communications

By Lisa Harris

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When it comes to communicating with seniors in your community, it's not one-size-fits-all. Some seniors have computers and use the internet regularly, some don't and never will. How do you reach them all?

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Small communities across the country have waning newspaper circulations and many are losing their newspapers altogether. The City of De Soto has faced this issue; five years ago, the local newspaper went out of business. This affects the city's ability to reach citizens with notices about public meetings and other time-sensitive information — especially older citizens and others who don't use the internet.

"Ever since the paper went out, it's been a struggle for us to reach our older citizens who can't or won't use electronic communications," said Mike Brungardt, De Soto city engineer. "Frustrated citizens tell our council members, and our council members tell us. These citizens really feel left in the dark with no reliable way to get good information."

Brungardt said that the city has tried to figure out ways to reach citizens who don't use the internet, but, in his opinion, they are coming up short, compared with a newspaper. For example, the city has teamed up with the school district and the *Lawrence Journal-World* to produce a quarterly newsletter with city information. "It's nice, but it's not news," he said. "The information is provided by the city, and it is not objectively reported."

Brungardt said the *Journal-World* used to send an e-reporter to public meetings to report both sides of an issue, but they no longer do that, and even then, that content was only available online.

"The only private news publication left in De Soto is a little online newspaper that reports obituaries," Brungardt said, "but again, many seniors don't or can't access it."

So how DO you reach seniors? We will provide some ideas in the article, plus discuss some considerations for reaching the growing numbers of seniors who are using the internet to communicate.

Reaching seniors who do not use the internet

We did not find a lot of information out there on this topic, but we did find a useful report from our neighbors in Canada about how to reach seniors in rural areas. Some senior residents may not want to use the internet or may not have the ability to access the technology in remote areas.

The sidebar on this page shows ideas for reaching senior citizens, including those who do not use the internet.

You will likely have to think of innovative ways to get the word out, perhaps partnering with organizations or services with frequent contact with seniors. It may be helpful to put together an advisory group of seniors to brainstorm ideas for better communication.

Internet users who are seniors

Email considerations. An article at govdelivery.com said studies show that senior citizens are fast adopting email as one of their primary methods of digital interaction and communication. The article cited a Pew Internet and American Life Project that said that 87 percent of senior citizens (age 66-74) and 82 percent of seniors age 75-plus

Are Seniors Using Social Media?

The Neilsen Company did an interesting survey in 2009, to investigate how seniors use their time online. The top types of uses of the internet for seniors were the same as for most other users: e-mail, mapping, checking the weather, and paying bills. What sites did they visit most when surfing the web? #1 was Google search, #2 Windows Media Player, and #3... Facebook! Just the year before, Facebook was #45 spot among online destinations for seniors. In a year, Facebook went up 42 spots in use by seniors. And that was in 2009.

We checked a few prominent websites serving seniors, and sure enough, they have Facebook and Twitter accounts. Check out those links for the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability (http://www.kdads.ks.gov/) and AARP Kansas (http://states.aarp.org/category/kansas/).

The Neilson study indicates that seniors are a growing demographic in use of social media. That is good to keep in mind as your city or county uses this avenue for communication.

Source: http://rescuealertofca.com/who-are-social-medias-newest-members-seniors

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use email and search engines. The Nielsen Company found that checking email was the primary online activity for 88.6 percent of seniors. With these statistics, it is clear that government organizations could benefit greatly by reaching out to seniors via email.

Government organizations can greatly benefit from implementing email outreach campaigns and other digital communications efforts to engage and inform the senior citizen demographic. One benefit to email, unlike other forms of more costly communication, such as direct mail or telephone calls, people's preferences and response to emails can be tracked, allowing you to understand what is most interesting to this demographic so you can send information that is most relevant to them. Instead of waiting for senior citizens to come to your website, you could proactively send these citizens notices and news they are seeking.

Website and social media site design considerations. The Pew study shows that more than half of the senior citizens — even more than Millenials — are going online visit a government

website to find information relevant to them. When tech-savvy baby boomers mature into the senior demographic, the US Census Bureau predicts nearly one in five Americans will be seniors — and likely using the internet. However, with age comes some impairments that affect the ability to see and process complex information. Governments should strive to have their internet comunications be senior-friendly.

A publication titled *Age Friendly Communication: Facts, Tips and Ideas*, contains some excellent information on ways to design online sites to be more attractive and usable for seniors. Its website checklist (pg. 26 of the publication) contains tips for typeface, writing style, use of images and animation, and navigation that can be helpful for communicating with seniors. For example, the checklist recommends using a sans serif font in upper and lower case for the body text, for easier readability. It suggests presenting information in a clear,

simple, and familiar way, and to use the active voice. It suggests supporting any icons with descriptive text, if possible.

All these tips help senior website users who may be become confused navigating a more complicated site for the information they need.

Recommendations for Communication Strategies in Reaching Seniors

Letter
Hard copy letter delivered to address

Notices and information at natural gathering places
Doctor's offices
Senior centers
Public library
Public functions
Mall or grocery store displays / booths
Nursing homes or senior housing

Two-way dialogue
Education and information programs
Meetings and presentations
Workshops
One-on-one meetings

Outreach via professionals / volunteers
Public health
Home care
Long-term care staff
Volunteer bureau
Book delivery services
Public transit services

Websites and social media

Partnering ideas
Seniors' newsletter
Welcome wagon package for new seniors
Community directory
One-stop information center

Adapted from. Terrace and Area Seniors Needs Study, 2006. Cited in Communication Mechanisms for Delivering Information to Seniors in a Changing Small Town Context. Journal of Rural and Community Development. Volume 6, Number 1, 2011.

Conclusion

Start a dialogue with your government's communications manager, or with other departments, to see if you can improve communication and outreach to seniors, not only to report things that have happened, but to announce programs and meetings seniors might wish to participate in, or attend. Consider innovative ways to share information — or to partner in sharing information.

Some seniors are tech savvy, and more will be so in the next few decades. Keep in mind their information needs as you develop your web site and social media. Learn what makes website and social media site design more senior-friendly, and make some changes to your site designs, if needed.

For more information, consult the sources below. ■

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