boomers and beyond

reconsidering the role of libraries
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introduction

Boomers and Beyond: Reconsidering the Role of Libraries offers a set of new perspectives on aging. It is designed to coincide with growing awareness of the impact of aging on all aspects of American society and with the exponential growth in scholarship on aging. These phenomena are due not only to the maturation of the baby boomer generation. They are also due to the growth in the numbers of adults in their 90s or older and the trend for humans to live longer. They challenge librarians and others to explore the implications of extended adulthood on professional practice.

Boomers and Beyond offers a menu of provocative concepts and applications. It is based on three assumptions. First, the lengthening of the human life span will have profound effects on institutions such as libraries. It is not too early for librarians and others to reexamine their understanding of aging and older adults.

Our second assumption is that the library profession can benefit from greater attention to work going on outside the field of library and information science. The field cannot by itself encompass new scholarship on human development and the functioning of the brain, new thinking about “place,” or new scholarship on adult education and extended work patterns, to name just a few. Our aim was to reach outside librarianship to a broader field of ideas and scholarship.

Third, we expect that with new information, provocative concepts, and a sense of what may be possible, librarians will be stimulated to use their creativity. At this stage in understanding longevity, how-to manuals may be less useful than concepts that can stimulate experimentation. Each community and each library have different assets, capacities, and needs, and librarians are used to adapting good ideas in their local settings.

Selection of our “unexpected voices” was not a simple task. There is an explosion of theoretical explorations and practical developments around aging in areas ranging from gender, health care reform, and housing to family relationships, mental health, and artistic expression. Our challenge was to identify individuals whose work has specific potential to catalyze new thinking about older adults. In meeting this challenge we found it helpful to think about three distinct categories of exploration.

In part 1, “Older Adults: Essential Concepts and Recent Discoveries,” we provide some foundational ideas, an infrastructure for thinking about what Victor and Joanne Marshall call “new patterns of aging.” These chapters focus on older adults themselves—what we know about them today and what we are learning about them as their numbers and influence expand. Along with the Marshalls’ chapter, “New

In part 2, “Institutional Opportunities,” we looked for contributions about how institutions can respond to the new generations of older adults. These chapters include “In Search of Active Wisdom: Libraries and Consciousness-Raising for Adulthood II,” by Mary Catherine Bateson; “Information-Questing Moments: Retirement-Age Americans at the Library Door,” by Ronald J. Manheimer and Miwako Kidahashi; “Reconsidering Age: The Emerging Role of Cultural Institutions,” by Diantha Dow Schull and Selma Thomas; “Reclaiming the ‘Public’ Library: Engaging Immigrants, Building Democracy,” by Nan Kari and David Scheie; and “The Library as Place in an Aging Society,” by Diantha Dow Schull.

In our final section, part 3, “Librarians’ Perspectives,” three librarians bring a variety of experience to the question of how libraries will change in the context of an aging society. These chapters are “Conversations and the True Knowledge of Generations,” by R. David Lankes with assistance from Pamela H. Jureller; “Old Dogs, New Tricks: The Myths and the Realities,” by Stephen Abram; and “Musings on Challenges for Librarians in 2040,” by Pauline Rothstein.

Finally, we should mention that from the outset of our work on *Boomers and Beyond*, we have tried to shape it for multiple uses. One purpose of the volume is to serve as a text for library education. It also offers opportunities for individual enrichment and professional development. As a resource for institutional and service planning, *Boomers and Beyond* will prompt readers to rethink the entire spectrum of services for older individuals.
This chapter will address the role of libraries in serving the large, emerging 55+ market niche of users. This group was one of the largest population cohorts in history (until the Millennials came along), and its members will continue to influence and change public institutions as they age. In this chapter I will focus on the technological impacts of an aging population as well as the opportunities for great library programs that have a positive impact on our communities and the world at large. I will also outline some of the design considerations for older adult users. Libraries have always played a role in making communities great and serving as a form of nonpartisan social glue. As older adults change society with their increased facility with technology and the Web, we should be encouraged to shatter some of the myths about older adults and technology, IM, Facebook, searching, communication, and so on. It’s time for libraries to set priorities for the development of 55+-friendly programs and services, establishing not only a physical but also a virtual presence. This chapter offers some guidance and ideas for progress.

Jakob Nielsen, web usability guru at the Nielsen Norman Group, stated that his study showing a number of issues with the usability of many websites for older adults was predictable.

Given that most websites are produced by young people who probably take it for granted that all Web users have perfect vision and motor control, we weren’t surprised that the seniors had a tougher time with the tasks than the younger test participants. What did surprise us is what good sports the seniors were about it. They tended to see the positive parts in generally negative experiences. They enjoyed a good challenge. (Nielsen 2002)

Older adults are one of the fastest-growing demographics on the Web, a trend that is not likely to slow down given the dramatic increase in the human life span. This trend is particularly important to library strategists because it means that the diversity of users of our virtual initiatives is likely increasing much faster than our ability to create programs and services. Because the consumer market has extensively catered to the boomer population, we can expect boomers to be equally demanding and have high expectations of their community and public institutions. This will be an exciting challenge for libraries.
THE NEW OLDER ADULT LIBRARY USER

Changing demographics have delivered a very different older adult user. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the Pew Internet and American Life data (Jones and Fox 2009), shown in table 12.1.

In January 2009, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released new data on the proportion of generations online (see figure 12.1) and their behaviors online (see tables 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4). The key tables and charts reproduced here show much about what we can expect in the future from 55+ users.

### Table 12.1  Pew Internet and American Life data: Generations Explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATION NAME*</th>
<th>BIRTH YEARS, AGES IN 2009</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ADULT POPULATIONa</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF INTERNET-USING POPULATIONb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen Y (Millenials)</td>
<td>Born 1977–1990, ages 18–32</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Born 1965–1976, ages 33–44</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger Boomers</td>
<td>Born 1955–1964, ages 45–54</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Boomers</td>
<td>Born 1946–1954, ages 55–63</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
<td>Born 1937–1945, ages 64–72</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.I. Generation</td>
<td>Born before 1936, age 73+</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project December 2008 survey

a All generation labels used in this report, with the exception of “Younger” and “Older” Boomers, are the names conventionalized by William Strauss and Neil Howe in Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069 (1991). As for “Younger Boomers” and “Older Boomers,” research suggests that the two decades of baby boomers are different enough to merit being placed into distinct generational groups.

b n = 2,253 total adults; margin of error ±2%

c n = 1,650 total Internet users; margin of error ±3%
### TABLE 12.2 Differences in Online Behavior by Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>ON LINE TEENS (12–17)</th>
<th>GEN Y (18–32)</th>
<th>GEN X (33–44)</th>
<th>YOUNGER BOOMERS (45–54)</th>
<th>OLDER BOOMERS (55–63)</th>
<th>SILENT GENERATION (64–72)</th>
<th>G.I. GENERATION (73+)</th>
<th>ALL ONLINE ADULTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go online</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teens and Gen Yers are more likely to engage in the following activities compared with older users:**

- Play games online: 78% 50% 38% 26% 28% 25% 18% 35%
- Watch videos online: 57% 72% 57% 49% 30% 24% 14% 52%
- Get information about a job: 30% 64% 55% 43% 36% 11% 10% 47%
- Send instant messages: 68% 59% 38% 28% 23% 25% 18% 38%
- Use social networking sites (SNS): 65% 67% 36% 20% 9% 11% 4% 35%
- Download music: 59% 58% 46% 22% 21% 16% 5% 37%
- Create SNS profile: 55% 60% 29% 16% 9% 5% 4% 29%
- Read blogs: 49% 43% 34% 27% 25% 23% 15% 32%
- Create a blog: 28% 20% 10% 6% 7% 6% 6% 11%
- Visit a virtual world: 10% 2% 3% 1% 1% 1% 0% 2%

**Activities where Gen X users or older generations dominate:**

- Get health information: 28% 68% 82% 74% 81% 70% 67% 75%
- Buy something online: 38% 71% 80% 68% 72% 56% 47% 71%
- Bank online: * 57% 65% 53% 49% 45% 24% 55%
- Visit government sites: * 55% 64% 62% 63% 60% 31% 59%
- Get religious information: 26% 31% 38% 42% 30% 30% 26% 35%

**And for some activities, the youngest and oldest cohorts may differ, but there is less variation overall:**

- Use e-mail: 73% 94% 93% 90% 90% 91% 79% 91%
- Use search engines: * 90% 93% 90% 89% 85% 70% 89%
- Research products: * 84% 84% 82% 79% 73% 60% 81%
- Get news: 63% 74% 76% 70% 69% 56% 37% 70%
- Make travel reservations: * 65% 70% 69% 66% 69% 65% 68%
- Research for job: * 51% 59% 57% 48% 33% 9% 51%
- Rate a person or product: * 37% 35% 29% 30% 25% 16% 32%
- Download videos: 31% 38% 31% 21% 16% 13% 13% 27%
- Participate in an online auction: * 26% 31% 27% 26% 16% 6% 26%
- Download podcasts: 19% 25% 21% 19% 12% 10% 10% 19%

Source: Based on Pew Internet and American Life Project surveys. Margins of error vary by subgroup; see methodology.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>GEN Y</th>
<th>GEN X</th>
<th>YOUNGER BOOMERS</th>
<th>OLDER BOOMERS</th>
<th>SILENT GENERATION</th>
<th>G.I. GENERATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Research product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Visit SNS*</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>IM*</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Download video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Play games</td>
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<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
</tr>
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<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Auction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Download music</td>
</tr>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Create blog</td>
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<td>Create blog</td>
<td>Create blog</td>
<td>Create blog</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: Percentage of Internet users in each generation who engage in this online activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90–100%</td>
<td>Over 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80–89%</td>
<td>Over 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–79%</td>
<td>Over 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>Over 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59%</td>
<td>Over 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49%</td>
<td>Under 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39%</td>
<td>Under 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29%</td>
<td>Under 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19%</td>
<td>Under 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–9%</td>
<td>Under 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above this line, over 50% of Internet users in the given generation engage in this online activity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>TEENS</th>
<th>GEN Y</th>
<th>GEN X</th>
<th>YOUNGER BOOMERS</th>
<th>OLDER BOOMERS</th>
<th>SILENT GENERATION</th>
<th>G.I. GENERATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Instant message (IM)</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Visit social networking site (SNS)</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Research product</td>
<td>Get health information</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Watch news</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Research product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
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<td>Watch video</td>
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<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Make travel reservations</td>
<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Buy something</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Download video</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>IM</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
</tr>
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<td>Create blog</td>
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<td>Download music</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
</tr>
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<td>IM</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
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<td>Visit government site</td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Watch video</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Download video</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Visit virtual world</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Get job information</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>Read blog</td>
<td>Rate product</td>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Download video</td>
<td>Read blog</td>
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<td>Research for job</td>
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<td>Rate product</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Get religious information</td>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
<td>Create blog</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>Auction</td>
<td>Create SNS profile</td>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>Visit SNS</td>
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**Types of activities:**
- Information seeking and research
- E-commerce and online shopping
- Entertainment
- Communication and social media
At this point, 45 percent of 70–75-year-olds are online (see figure 12.2). Despite the disproportionate percentage of young people online, we’d be wise to recall that the younger cohort will move through the demographic curve, and we can expect future 55+ patrons to be significantly more online. Virtually all age cohorts were increasing their online access between 2005 and 2008.

Although home Internet access is increasing quickly in all age cohorts, we know that virtually all Americans have access to broadband Internet at home, work, school, or the local library (see figure 12.3). This is a transformational platform. The library plays a key role in bridging the various groups’ access to technology (including printers, scanners, searching help, etc.) as well as integrating access to both hard-copy and electronic information along with training and support. Over the coming years the number of devices accessing the Internet will increase dramatically, including phones, cars, radios, games, and music players. This jump in access creates a very different world where ubiquitous connectivity and a variety of formats, going beyond text into moving images and sound, greatly change the expectations of users about what comprises a positive information experience. This change is much bigger than the one created by television in the middle of the last century, and that change was transformational, too.

**SPECIAL NEEDS OF 55+ LIBRARY USERS**

So there you have it. These 55+ users are a significant proportion of library users and deserve to be treated as a savvy market, regardless of the presence of a minority of e-challenged users. In many respects we have the services we need for the non-web-literate. We call those traditional services, and they don’t need as much strategic attention at this point. What does need strategic attention is the emerging cohort of 55+ users who are quite different from the traditional seniors in libraries. There are specific differences in their needs and interests. They have been using computers as a cohort for decades, and many participated and continue to participate in the development of these tools and innovations.

Two key areas require special focus. First is the physical changes that occur naturally as we age. Indeed, some devices and website designs are not optimized for an older market. This lack of usability is not good if one is targeting that market! Barring the discovery of the Fountain of Youth, the issue of usability must be addressed. Second, our interests change as we mature (or at least get older!). The interest of older adults in story hours, for example, is likely to be for their grandchildren rather than their children. We also know that increased population mobility means families are spread far and wide—all over the United States and the world—and that many in war zones have a strong Web connectivity to home. Also, the long-term trend of family disruption through divorce and blended families means many older adults are dealing with friend and family relationships that are quite complex. This complexity means that electronic communication will increase in importance. In addition, topics of less personal interest to younger users, like genealogy, personal investing, pensions, retirement, and some personal health issues, are significantly more interesting for older users.
Fi 12.2 Percentage of Americans online by age

Fi 12.3 Percentage of all Americans with broadband at home by age

The next two sections of this chapter focus on these two issues and the changing
dynamic of library strategies for 55+ users. The next section will explore adapta-
tions necessary to address the physical needs of 55+ users, including such areas as
eyesight, flexibility, hearing, and mobility. The last section will discuss opportunities
for addressing this sizable market’s demands for programs and services aimed at their
particular interests.

**ADAPTING LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY TO 55+ PATRONS**

**Website Design Considerations**

Although there is a wealth of literature and studies on the needs of older partici-
pants in computer-mediated experiences, the following lists cover some of the major
considerations. Selected reports, recommendations, and studies are included in the
recommended readings for this chapter. However, much of this work owes a debt of
gratitude to the work of Jakob Nielsen and the Nielsen Norman Group.

General research supports the following website design choices to increase com-
fort and usability for older users. Interestingly these guidelines generally apply to
younger users as well, although for different reasons. Teens and young adults tend to
be outliers on issues of color, smaller font size, and variety.

✦ Use sans serif typefaces such as Arial and Helvetica. Avoid condensed or
  narrow fonts and serif or novelty typefaces.
✦ Use 12- or 14-point font size for body text.
✦ Ensure that text is not frozen and can be adjusted by the user. (Many
  older users are quite comfortable setting the defaults in their browsers to
  enlarged text.)
✦ Use medium weight or boldface type.
✦ Don’t use all caps except in headlines.
✦ Use underlining for links only, and ensure followed links change color.
✦ Double-space all body text.
✦ Use left justification for body text for older adults.
✦ Avoid using yellow, blue, and green in proximity.
✦ Avoid patterned backgrounds.
✦ Avoid unnecessary animation.
✦ Less is more.

**Website Content and Organization Considerations**

✦ Write with a positive tone and strive for simplicity and familiarity.
✦ Use the active voice and simple plain language, avoiding jargon.
  Remember that the older generational cohort is quite diverse with respect
to speaking English as a new language.
✦ Use standard formats, and strive for consistency.
Break up long text pieces into smaller chunks, especially text that will be read on-screen.
Do not display text so that it runs landscape style on the full monitor.
Ensure that images are relevant to the content.
Use icons and symbols consistently.
Strive for straightforward organization of the website.
Ensure all icons have associated text and tell the story they are meant to tell.
Use pull-down menus sparingly.
Avoid flash animations.
Avoid unnecessary application downloads.

Website Usability and Training Considerations

Ensure that help by telephone and electronic means is easily identifiable and available. Help should be available at every point and not require backtracking to a home page.
Allow for feedback. Respond to feedback in a timely manner.
Reduce barriers to entry, such as difficult bar code sign-in pages.
Allow for testing of adaptive technologies for users with vision, hearing, fine motor skill, and mobility issues.
The Nielsen Norman Group website (www.nngroup.com) design rules are a good place to start with respect to design consistency.

Usability testing and some research show that the 55+ user has core needs similar to those of all users but that there are some life stage differences that are worthy of focus and consideration.

INFORMATION NEEDS AND THE 55+ USER

The “Generations Online in 2009” report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Jones and Fox 2009) discovered that more than 50 percent of 55+ web users used the Web to

1. E-mail
2. Search
3. Get health information
4. Research products
5. Buy something
6. Get news
7. Make travel reservations
8. Visit government sites

Significant numbers of 55+ web-accessing adults also used the Web to

1. Bank
2. Do research for a job
3. Get job information
4. Watch a video
5. Play games
6. Rate products
7. Participate in auctions
8. Get religious information
9. Read blogs
10. IM

A small but significant number of 55+ web users created social networking site profiles, blogged, podcasted, or downloaded music. Don’t ignore these activities, because they will grow as the younger demographic cohort ages and continues its current Internet behaviors. Indeed the numbers are likely similar to those of many hobbies, such as philately, numismatics, genealogy, or gardening, which most libraries have no trouble supporting.

Topics that float to the top as key subjects of interest in the 55+ cohort include health, finance, travel, sports, religion, genealogy, politics and advocacy, news (local, national, homeland, and foreign), hobbies, and retirement. Each individual user in this group has quite personal and specific goals. Unlike young users who may be exploring a wide range of issues within these topical areas for educational or personal reasons, older users are often specifically interested in their own or a loved one’s health condition, their own financial situation, their own family’s history, and the news from their homeland or in their other language. They are usually not trying to cast about widely for general information but are seeking information that matches their specific interests and often their own points of view. The challenge for librarians is to assist and train this group in broad searching skills rather than finely tuned “finding” skills. Added to this is an increasing awareness of the need for safety, confidentiality, and privacy skills.

To address the program needs of 55+ users, we need to understand the specific activities they are undertaking and determine how library staff and programs might assist and improve the experience. Core end-user considerations involved in these types of web pursuits include the following:

- fact finding and searching
- comparing and contrasting
- retrieving information
- buying an item (retail, web only, or auction)
- conducting banking, insurance, investment, and financial transactions
- communicating (e-mail)
- learning
- managing privacy and money

Each of these pursuits comes with its own set of issues and challenges. Because 55+ users did not grow up with an education system that taught critical information literacy skills in an Internet environment, their skills can be a hodgepodge of competencies, likely learned on the fly at work or play. These skills also cover the gamut in this cohort from expert to naïve. Libraries can play a key role in this environment. With respect to search and fact-finding activities, for example, older adults need to develop critical information evaluation skills. These skills are especially important for key subjects like health, politics, and travel. Because many people in the 55+ cohort buy things online using credit cards and sharing personal information, libraries can
teach safety measures for online purchases, including the identification and reporting of scams. Building stronger skills for navigating online financial environments (banking, pensions, insurance, stocks, etc.) is also a unique opportunity for libraries.

Although e-mail is now routine for almost all web cohorts of 55+ users, a good deal of training is required for instant messaging and communicating among the generations as well as for appropriate social networking behaviors and the sharing of pictures, videos, and recordings. Many older adults are also very involved in e-learning. They may have been laid off from companies affected by changes in the economy and find their core skills no longer in high demand. They choose to take courses on the Web or local courses that include an online learning or research component. You can see the high number of 55+ users who spend time job seeking online in the Pew data (Jones and Fox 2009). Some retire or semi-retire and start to study topics that may or may not be related to their work life. E-learning allows them to explore interests that may have been postponed for many years. A few even turn these avocations into paying work. And some are just lifelong learners. It is interesting how many discover, or rediscover, the library as their partner in these pursuits. Teaching meta-learning skills and how to use the suites of skills required to adapt to new modes of learning in an e-learning environment is another opportunity for libraries. Of course, many of these skills involve just the sorts of applications in which libraries are becoming expert: wikis, collaboration environments, blogs, and other Web 2.0 applications.

This is the background of the 55+ library user at the start of the twenty-first century. As a group they are neither poor nor rich, strong nor feeble, healthy nor unhealthy, or anything else that pigeonholes them into some narrow stereotype that limits their skills, abilities, and opportunities. By most measures this is a cohort that is very supportive of libraries, so engaging and delighting them has positive benefits on many levels.

The last section of this chapter focuses on various programs for libraries to consider implementing for the emerging 55+ cohort of users. Integrating the new technological context of Web 2.0 into these ideas is part of the plan. It’s not necessary for the technology to lead or be obvious, but it does help to make these tactics leap off the page.

**LEARNING, COMMUNITY, AND PROGRAMS FOR THE 55+ USER**

The emerging challenge is to break the mold that largely considers programs to have a date, place, and time. Although these can be great programs and many are listed here, all types of programming need to be considered. Other options include asynchronous programming, such as e-learning and web-based programs, as well as asymmetrical programming (programming that does not have to follow a regular schedule, such as drop-in events). The web technologies that are largely collected under the rubric of Web 2.0 or Library 2.0 offer many opportunities for innovation. In the following program suggestions, I mention a number of useful topics, but it is the format that I’d like you to consider as the program.
The Local Library Gardening Club Wiki

Build a wiki for your local gardeners. Involve local gardening clubs as partners. You could even partner with local nurseries and greenhouses. You have the basics already: you collect books that align with gardening in your climate, and you answer questions. With a wiki, people can share tips, trade shoots and plants, review books (and plants) for your climate zone, and meet up at the library (inside or in the parking lot/garden). Consider putting the gardening collection on a cart and joining the sidewalk sales during planting season or move it right into the Garden Center. Build a collaborative blog, with photos of successful gardens and plants. Make the library plantings a community garden initiative. This is the library at its best—as social glue.

Podcasting for Adults: Sharing Community Stories

Do your local folks have stories? Yes, they do. Scratch anyone and she or he has stories and memories of your town. Collecting local history has gotten so easy. Set up podasting days to record your folks’ stories. Try theme days—the state fair; memories of WWII, Korea, the Great Depression, or the Sixties. Collect these stories, add them to your blog and iTunes, and you’ve got a library radio station broadcasting interesting community memories. I’ll bet you find a few stars of the spoken word.

Teens and Seniors Partnerships—The Flickr Event

Just about everyone has a digital camera (or can borrow one). Are you looking for ways to bridge the gap between the teens in your community and older folks? It’s easy. Send the teens out on a mission. Ask them to take pictures of important places or events about town. Again, you can choose a theme—historic buildings, local fairs, school events, elections—then ask them to load the photos on Flickr (teach them CC [Creative Commons] licensing, too). Next, have a group of interested adults organize the photos using tags and labels and blog them into a story. Ultimately, you’ll end up having the best visual tourist site in town! And you’ll have bridged the generation gap, too.

Building Our Local History Vault—Scanning and Flickr Again

Have you heard about library scanning parties? It’s a safe bet that the 55+ user has boxes of old photos (not hard drives’ full). Set aside a Saturday or Sunday morning. Connect an easy scanner to a PC and ask folks to come in and share their photos. Set a limit (for example, twelve photos per family), and choose a theme: The Fifties: The World in Black and White, Christmas (or any celebration) through the Years, Fun on the Farm (or in the City), or My Homeland/Roots. Folks get excited about searching their photos and selecting the best to share with the community. Again, the social glue strengthens, and people share their experiences. It all goes into an image database that grows, and people learn tagging skills, blogging the photos, and creating albums and online exhibits. It’s a wild ride that can grow the library’s presence and impact on communities and connect to the 55+ patron.
Telling Kids’ Stories—Podcasting Made Easy

Do your users have a favorite children’s story? Has someone made one up? Is there a classic story (that is to say, out of copyright) that users love? Ask them to come to the library and record the classic or original stories that the children they care about loved. It’s simple, and the stories will be archived in the library for every local child to hear. There’s storytelling talent out there to be captured. You can even include stories in heritage languages. You’ll likely be pleasantly surprised at the voice talents of your users and the passion they put into a project like this. A side benefit is that this program inexpensively adds new resources to the library collection for prereaders, adds bedtime stories to your collection for use at home, and helps visually impaired kids. It can all start when you engage your 55+ neighbors.

The New News: Finding the News That You Care About Online

Newspapers, sadly, are closing or shrinking quite quickly. Most urban areas are limited to one local daily. Readers in the 55+ age range grew up in an era when news came on paper, TV, or radio. Now people have access to an enormous number of news sources, including online magazines and radio and TV available on the Web or through their local library’s resources. Times have changed. Is everyone ready to handle the deluge? This is where the library steps in. Teaching searching, RSS, aggregator, and quality evaluation and discovery skills is a big opportunity. One of the top online papers in the United States is published in the United Kingdom. People are casting their nets widely to be better informed and to address the decline of the print media. The 55+ patron is a key target market for this training. The magic is in addressing these users’ specific goals, not just generic news. Focus on their top topics like health, finance, and hobbies.

[Insert Major Ethnic or Language Group Here] and the Web

You know the census results for your area. What are the top ethnic and language groups in your catchment areas and communities? Where are people’s homelands? What are the local clubs and associations that are based on ethnicity? Often, in the 55+ cohort, this localization can be a strength or a weakness. You may have a built-in social group, or you may have a prescription for isolation and loneliness. These groups may also be less connected to the Internet than other groups are. Here’s where libraries can play a big role. Teach folks how to reconnect with the news in their first language or from their homelands where friends and relatives may still reside. Teaching them how to use Skype and free long distance can have obvious benefits. You don’t really need to know their language to be successful in this strategy—they’re the experts here. Dive in and make a difference. Again it’s not about the technology but the engagement with users to meet their social and information needs.

Blogging for the Next Generation from the Big One

Setting up the library as a place for adults to blog is an interesting concept. Can your library identify community leaders (or create a place for community leadership to
emerge)? Do you have someone like Nancy Pearl, the famous librarian, author, and NPR book reviewer, in your community? Who are your chief book lovers? Can they blog for you? Can they comment on what they read and make recommendations? I suspect the answer is yes. Is your library open enough to your communities?

**Hidden Dollars—Getting the Most Out of Auction Sites**

We know that older adults often have too much stuff. Yet they buy more and sell quite a bit online. Some of the best-selling Dummies series books are the ones about eBay and online auctions. We also know that this process is fraught with risk unless it is well understood. Many libraries are full of books and electronic resources that assist users in identifying antiques and collectibles and in valuing items. Libraries could do very well in offering training and advice in handling these new economic opportunities. In fiscally difficult times, the library can step up to assist with these online yard sales on steroids.

**Modern Writing Skills: Getting Published**

On the popular 43 Things website (www.43things.com), one of the most common things that people want to do is write—a book, poetry, short stories, a play. Many people find that with their children grown or with retirement setting in, they now have enough time to fulfill this dream. Of course, they don’t know where to start, where to publish, where to get advice, and so on. What a wonderful opportunity for libraries. We already have the resources to help folks. Now, can we develop programs, using the wonderful 2.0 tools now available, to connect latent writers to other writers, to support groups, to training at the library and beyond? Can we provide a place for them to publish their first creations? It can start with a blog or a short-story writing contest or a poetry jam. It can start with a coffeehouse atmosphere or in a classroom setting.

**Driving to Florida (or Wherever) with Kids**

Imagine (or remember) driving from New York to Florida with three kids in the backseat. What do you need to know to make this ride bearable or even pleasant? Think of a program that recommends books for the ride to each kid. Think of a program that shares games and tricks for making the ride great. Think of travel planning for kids and finding sites of interest along the way. Think of a program that shares what kids are interested in today—have they grown past J. K. Rowling to Stephenie Meyer? Is it EverQuest, Wii, or WoW? Is “sick” in or out? “What’s hot and what’s not” training for the 55+ set. I’ll bet Young Adult librarians can program for older folks, too.

**Online Financial Planning for the 55+ Adult**

The 55+ user is more focused than any other demographic group on financial issues: retirement, part-time work, wills and estates, health insurance, and more. Libraries
have the collections and resources to support these topics and often provide pro-
gramming to assist this group. Through partnerships and effective design of web-
based information resources, the library can make a difference.

**Internet Safety for Older Adults**

Kids aren’t the only ones who need awareness and competency training in safe Internet use. The solution isn’t in blocking sites but in developing individual and community competencies about personal information management, privacy, scams, phishing, viruses, and more, not only on general websites but also on online dating sites (one in eight Americans married in 2008 met online first), information sites, and health sites. We know from Pew research that the 55+ user visits financial management sites for online banking and investing and purchases items online at auction sites like eBay or on retail sites. We must build twenty-first-century skills in our communities, and libraries are best positioned to do this. Libraries that position themselves as sources of good advice can only delight their communities and create greater local success.

**Great Grandparenting from a Distance: E-mail, Instant Messaging, Blogging, and More**

Being a grandparent in today’s world can be difficult. Families are spread out across the nation and around the world. Thousands of people are overseas fighting wars, and with most of these folks being Millennials and having quite facile skills with the new technologies, we have a communication technology gap that could disrupt families and our communities. Libraries can step in by offering training on and access to these services, which are mostly freely available. When libraries target 55+ users with embarrassment-free training in advanced e-mail, instant messaging, blogging, Skype, YouTube/TroopTube, and more, they connect patrons and their families in marvelous ways. Knowing the basics as well as more advanced skills, such as attaching photos, MP3 conversations, and so on, can create a world of difference for families separated by hundreds or thousands of miles.

**Saving Money Online**

As I write this chapter, the world is immersed in a difficult recession. Libraries do well in difficult times—we’re often free and deliver good value! Use increases. Can we offer other money-saving tips to our patrons? Sure. How about a series of sessions on saving money with the Web? Individual sessions on saving money with research, Skype, coupons, tax preparation, and more can all be popular.

**Wii Play, Too—Gaming for Adults**

One of the surprises for me in the Pew Generations Online study was the high placement of gaming by 55+ Internet users. I think different games are involved, although there is probably some overlap. It seems that Wii, for example, is a gaming
system that spans the generations. On the other hand, I’ll wager that bridge, euchre, Jeopardy, Scrabble, crosswords, and so on trend to older populations in popularity. I hear that research shows that gaming activity helps in keeping brains and motor skills nimble and can potentially stave off Alzheimer’s! Either way, electronic games are a far more social activity than usually thought, and, according to Scott Nicholson at Syracuse University, the vast majority of libraries offer gaming activities. It’s time to think strategically about the demographic niches beyond teens when planning gaming programs.

“Borrow a Senior” with Your Library Card

A few libraries around the world offer the ability to borrow people—yes, people. For teachers, schools, recreation centers, and other cultural institutions, this is a great way to find free speakers and programs. People have life experiences and stories. How about folks talking about their collections, hobbies, travels, homelands, jobs? Another popular group might be veterans. Libraries can catalog people just as well as they catalog other resources!

Healthy Living: Health Information Online for the 55+ Adult

Health information is a top search request of the 55+ adult. And the Web is full of high-quality medical information along with loads of garbage. Finding the good information and advice and identifying what can be trusted are important skills for everyone. Libraries have access to quality print resources as well as the skills to teach how to access appropriate health information on the Web. We must also consider the proper alignment of health information with the medical literacy of each end user. Some patrons can be quite expert about their own condition while others are newbies just starting out.

Twenty-three Things for the 55+ Adult

Over the past two years, the 23 Things—Learning 2.0 movement worldwide has made a huge impact on libraries and their ability to deal with new technologies. Many libraries have extended this free, self-directed Web 2.0 skills training program to their communities as well. Learning about how to learn online, blogging, digital photos, RSS and newsreaders, wikis, portals, online applications like Google Docs, podcasts, streaming media, and digital audio in a group or community is very powerful. Many older adults find the 23 Things program very energizing and empowering as they learn to learn again and find that there are no barriers to achieving success in the web-oriented world.

Genealogy Online

Libraries have been riding the genealogy juggernaut for years. This is a top hobby of the 55+ cohort, and libraries have the skills to empower people to succeed even more
at this family-oriented hobby. Because so much information is online, there are new
skills and sites to learn every day. A library blog and online training course can make
a huge impact. In addition, many libraries have photographed and indexed local
cemeteries to attract ancestry tourism groups to their area.

**Travel Tips Online: Planning Your Next Trip**

Travel is different for the 55+ user. As a group, they have less demand for hostels and
campsites and a greater chance of traveling long distances. Most travel is now booked
online, and identifying hotels, destinations, side trips, and the like is not only an
engaging process but also one that is filled with potential for fraud. Anticipation is
half the trip! Training in finding the most exciting and useful sites online as well as
sharing trips with neighbors represent opportunities for libraries.

**Getting the Most Out of Your Mobile Phone:
Introductory and Advanced**

Virtually everyone has a mobile phone today. That doesn’t necessarily mean that
everyone is using their phone to its full potential. Indeed, many folks in the 55+
generations had VCRs and couldn’t program them. The emergence of G3 smart
phones has produced an even greater demand for training to use all the features on
a cell phone. With the ability to access web and library services via the phone, it’s in
the best interests of libraries to provide help and advice.

**YouTube: Tell Your Story**

Has anyone missed the YouTube revolution? Just as we are experimenting with pod-
casts and blog postings for users to share stories and experiences with others, we can
do the same thing with YouTube and other streaming media. Set up events to film
older adults. People psychically connect to institutions that care about them and
their opinions and needs. It’s the library as theater!

**Book Reviewing Skills**

Libraries are about books for sure. And the world of books has changed immeasur-
ably since Amazon.com arrived on the scene. A large part of Amazon’s success goes
beyond its vast inventory of new and used books to its capability for users to share
their opinions with a community of readers. Can we bring this excitement into the
library on an even greater scale? Initiatives such as LibraryThing for Libraries and
BiblioCommons allow library cardholders to comment on and review books they
have read. Some libraries have book review blogs that are shared by librarians and
end users. Others use APIs (application programming interfaces) to link to informa-
tion on the websites of Amazon.com, Borders, Barnes and Noble, and so forth. Are
libraries prepared to encourage and train end users to share their opinions about
books and reading on our blogs and websites and OPACs as well as the retail sites
do? I think we are.
Website Links for (Older) Adults

Many libraries have web pages on their sites for “seniors.” As we have seen throughout this chapter and this book, seniors are not a homogeneous population, and they have as much in common with the general web user population as they have differences. They do have special needs, but these might be better promoted through topical and interest-based pages. One way to target specialized messages is to use the birth date in the patron record. Lists of links that have not been developed to address the specific interests of this population are not as successful as they could be.

Social Networking for 55+ Users

Users in the 55+ age range are significantly less likely, at this point, to have a social networking profile than are younger demographic cohorts. Older Americans are more likely to suffer from shrinking social networks as they age. They may also desire to be connected to younger family members. Teaching the facts about social networking and its potential for connecting to friends and family can reap big benefits. It also allows people to make informed decisions about whether to participate. Where there is interest there is an opportunity for libraries to communicate, share, and play a role. Many libraries have Facebook and MySpace presences and are learning along with their users. Some have been successful in adding OPAC and reference services into their social sites.

CONCLUSION

So there you have it. If you follow the goals of good website design and ensure that your online presence is easy to learn, remember, and use, and if you combine that accessibility with real and virtual programs that are interesting and engaging, then you win. Your library wins, and your community wins. And the older adult is recognized as a viable and important market for customized library services.

RECOMMENDED READING (WITH THANKS TO K. DAVIS)


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