Chapter XIV

Portal Services for Older Australians

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Abstract

The World Wide Web has the potential to be a major source of information for the older (55+) Australian demographic as well as an important recreational vehicle through the use of facilities such as e-mail, chat, current affairs (news), and music channels. Portals are varied in nature, have evolved on the Web over time, and can have tightly geared content to suit the needs of a particular demographic. This chapter reviews the needs of older people and then explores two Australian older-person portals, Greypath (www.greypath.com), and About Seniors (www.about seniors.com.au), within an older-person needs framework. The concepts of virtual communities and Web site loyalty are also discussed in terms of Greypath and About Seniors.
Introduction

The proportion of older people will increase dramatically over the next 25 years. There are several different definitions of what constitutes an “older person”, but for the purposes of this chapter older people can be defined as those of 55 years of age and over, regardless of whether they are still in the full-time workforce. Globally the importance of older people is demonstrated by their large numbers: in 1999 world statistics showed 578 million people over the age of 60 (Scott, 1999). Between 1946 and 1998 the proportion of people over 65 in Australia increased from 8% to 12% (to 2.3 million people). By 2025 this figure will be 17.2% (around 4 million), and by 2051 this proportion will increase to 24% (6 million; Scott). The number of older people accessing the Internet is increasing markedly. A recent survey (Nielsen//NetRatings, 2003) reports that the number of older people 65 and above using the Internet is increasing by 25% year over year. As of October 2003, it was estimated that there were 9.6 million Web surfers using the Internet from home and work.

The Internet, a communication and informational access technology, has the potential to improve the older person’s lifestyle (Fozard, Rietsma, Bouma, & Graafmans, 2000). The Australian Federal Government has demonstrated a commitment to older Australians by releasing a number of lifestyle issues papers which “impact on older people’s capacity to remain active and independent” (Bishop, 2000). A key feature of these papers is an emphasis on communication, in particular, through the Internet, which enables older people to communicate via e-mail with family and friends, to access information, and to purchase goods. This emphasis is also consistent with literature sourced from overseas (Coulson, 2000; Franklin, 1997). The use of e-mail can also reduce social isolation for those older people with reduced mobility or living in remote or rural areas (Bishop, 2000; Parekh, 1998).

The Spry Foundation (2000) based in the US sees the needs of older people revolving around four interrelated themes: financial security; physical health and well-being; mental health and social environment; and engaging in intellectual endeavours. One of the key concerns for older people is their health, physical and mental. The Internet has the potential to provide health benefits due to communication (e-mail; Noer, 1995; Philbeck, 1998; Wright, 1999) and information about their health concerns (Cooke, 1999; McNamee, 1998). Some common concerns are arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, cancer, and mental illness (“Focus on Health Issues,” 2000).
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