

A Look at the Ways Boomers and Aging Adults Are Using the Web

Moderator: Andrea Brands, AT&T

Panelists:

Debbie Berlyn, Consumer Policy Solutions

Linda Criddle, LOOKBOTHWAYS

Jill Nissen, Ning

Judy Diaz, PBS

Daniel Wilson, National Caucus and Center on Black Aged

The panelists discussed the increasing popularity of the Internet among the older generation and the advantages and problems that this phenomenon brought with it. The rapid increase was repeatedly attributed to the fact that there were very low numbers of older people on the Internet a few years ago and statistically that remains the same today. Debbie Berlyn cited a 2009 Pew Study that showed that only one third of adults over 65 have broadband in their home. Part of the discussion was therefore focused on how to connect the remaining two thirds. From the same Pew study it was stated that the older generation use the Internet primarily for email and general online searches. In more detail this tends to be relating to shopping, banking and searching for health information rather than for socializing and entertainment. However this may be changing since the fastest growing demographic on Facebook are women over the age of 55.

Berlyn stated that the Internet allows seniors to reduce the feeling of isolation and to connect with family and friends. Furthermore, Internet use has been shown to reduce instances of depression. Criddle later confirmed that seniors are the biggest gamers on the Web, especially when it comes to single person games and that online dating is becoming increasingly popular.

Daniel Wilson addressed the barriers that are standing in the way of connecting more baby boomers and aging adults, he alleged that it mostly related to cost. Whilst a broadband connection fee may not seem too much to those who are working full time, to some older people the cost is simply prohibitive. They are keen to get online, and in places like Florida there are 2 day wait periods to use the computers to access the Web in local libraries. This was important to note as an example of how to make the online world more accessible to this generation.

When challenged by Andrea Brands as to whether the low uptake was owing to fear on the part of seniors, Wilson replied that they didn't know enough about the risks to be fearful of anything and so that was not a factor in keeping them offline. He went on to say that they should be shown that their information is secure as well as how to protect themselves.

Linda Criddle tackled the detrimental online practices that seniors should be aware of. She distinguished it from the types of dangers present for children instead stating that the real problem that they faced was a failure to understand the content that they are really sharing with the world. There was an inherent failure to understand the foibles in the trustworthiness of the information seniors are viewing and a tendency to be too trusting of companies and written information. Furthermore, she stated that it is not a lack of computer skills that limits this generation rather it is a lack of Internet skills that is holding them back. Another problem is cyberbullying though in many cases it tends to emanate from close family members. An increasing problem was shown to be that the older generation failed to understand the potential repercussions stemming from the information that they put onto the Web.

Jill Nissen, from Ning stated that seniors enjoy their services because it affords them more control over whom they interact with and that makes them feel safe. After all it is this interaction that is one of the main reasons that they are online in the first place.

Judy Diaz stated that the use of the Internet often mirrors the stages of life. The younger generation, who have time on their hands, use it for socializing and entertainment, then when they grow up and during the middle of their lives it is used as a tool to make life more efficient, since they have less time, and then finally in the latter stages of life, when time is no longer an issue, the Internet is used to reconnect with people and the outside world, when access to it becomes more of an issue. She compared getting older people online to the digital TV transition and stated that it needed to be a combined effort of government, industry, non-profits and volunteers.

The statistic that 12% of children in the US are cared for by their grandparents was brought up in response to a question from Will Gardner from Childnet. The panel responded that the education of caregivers, including parents and grandparents, needs not to be so focused on young parents but must be accessible to seniors as well.

All in all it was agreed that the use of Internet by seniors needed to be put in a positive light in order to encourage them to connect to the Web. The wealth of information that is available to them as well as the health benefits of being online means that extra efforts need to be made to connect seniors by all involved.