

Internet and Older Adults: Should Websites Ensure Older Adult Inclusion?

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1 Introduction

“Later life is a time of transition from paid employment to retirement, marriage to widowhood, health to functional impairment and independent living to residence in a care home.” (CRAG, 2008)

These very changes in their lives, have encouraged the older adults to explore the world of Internet. The ability to find information on their stocks, read the daily news, make informed decisions on Medicaid or Medicare, entertainment, and making online travel plans, are just a few of the things, that is taking more and more older adults to the Internet.

Most of all, the opportunity to connect with their families, particularly their children and grand children, and keeping updated with things around them, such as family events, is one of the main reasons for older adults accessing the Internet.

Older adults are typically home bound and isolated. They have a large amount of free time. Internet is gaining popularity among older adults as means of communication and information source. More older adults, are now owning computers and are connected to Internet.

Though, simply having resources available online, may not guarantee that the older adults will be successful in getting the information, or understanding the information they seek. Websites that do not meet the requirements of older adults can actually form a barrier.

2 Barriers to Older Adult's Internet Access

In spite of the positive impact that Internet can have on the well being of older adults, there is still the digital divide between the older and younger adults. The older adults are still lowest among all the other age group accessing the Internet.

“People in the 55 to 64 age group have experienced the largest increase in internet use - up from 29% to 42%. People in the 65 and over age group have seen a steady increase – up from 11% to 14%, but still remain significantly lower than other groups.” (Richards, 2006)

The issues that can impact Web usability of older adults, and pose virtual barriers are:

- normal aging process, including vision, cognition, and physical impairments
- education levels of the older adult population
- slower network access speeds
- Cost
- Complexity of computer technology
- Appropriate location to use Internet
- Accessibility of websites

3 Recommendations

It is necessary to promote senior-friendly websites, to meet the online needs of this ever-increasing aging population.

Web designs must consider the special needs of the older adults, which results from vision, cognition, and physical impairments. Following are some guidelines for making senior-friendly web sites:

- use font typeface that is not condensed
 - use 12-14 point font to improve legibility
 - eliminate patterned background
 - Provide help and contact information
 - Provide visual model (site map) of site organisation
 - use pull down menus instead of mouse clicks for navigations
 - Use translated version to cater to ethnic older adults
 - Simple but faster downloading websites.
- (Becker, 2004)

4 References

Becker, S. A (2004). *A study of web usability for older adults seeking online health resources*. ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI). Retrieved April 13, 2009, from <http://portal.acm.org.libproxy.unitec.ac.nz:2048/citation.cfm?id=1035575.1035578&coll=Portal&dl=ACM&CFID=30813362&CFTOKEN=16417229>

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