

#### “SENIOR” CENTERS: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Current conventional wisdom blames the name “senior center” for some of the difficulty the centers have in attracting “new” customers. According to the 2000 report by Northwestern University’s Buehler Center on Aging done for the Suburban Cook County Area Agency on Aging,

Most Congregate Nutrition Programs operate out of senior centers, and many younger older adults don’t see themselves as “senior enough” to attend. The name alone is often enough to make them decide “that’s not for me!” An image can be conveyed solely by a name. “Congregate Meal Program,” “Elderly Nutrition Program,” “Senior Lunch Program,” “Senior Friendship Center” and other commonly used names may connote too institutional an image and can cause potential participants to self-select themselves out of the program. Many programs are interested in linking their meals and other services with good health but have difficulty deciding exactly what to call the program to highlight that connection.

Other efforts to address the “name issue” include the following:

- An inquiry on the listserver for Gerontological Nutritionists (a special interest group of the American Dietetic Association) in March 2001 solicited ideas for more appropriate program names. There were very few responses, with most of them containing the word “senior” or “elderly.”
- Program staff at Senior Services of Seattle/King County in Seattle, Washington, conducted a “name the program” contest among participants. Many responses incorporated “senior,” and some also included the word “café.”
- “Café” was a popular choice of students in a senior marketing class at Purdue University who developed marketing plans for Midland Meals, Inc., of Frankfurt, Indiana.
- The Evanston, Illinois-based Mather Foundation used the word “café” to describe its three community-based programs in middle- and working-class neighborhoods in Chicago.
- Choosing a name that has cultural relevance is important, whether it be the English name translated to the native language or simply another name, such as Rochester, New York’s “Centro de Oro” (Center of Gold) in the Hispanic community.
- West Suburban Senior Services in suburban Boston changed its name to “Springwell,” in part to attract new funders.

Of course, a number of highly respected “senior centers” have kept that name and attracted increasing numbers of attendees — for example, the North Shore Senior Center in Winnetka, Illinois, in the above-mentioned Suburban Area Agency on Aging catchment area, and the Fort Collins Senior Center in Fort Collins, Colorado.

#### SENIOR CENTERS AND THE “NEEDY”

Unfortunately, the client base traditionally served by senior centers brings with it issues that make the “selling” of a senior center to younger populations more difficult.

An obstacle to attendance for some older adults is the belief that participating in a senior center reflects a need for charity. This impression exists even though means testing is not required, and many centers suggest donations by their members and participants. The study for the Suburban Area Agency on Aging supported this finding.

Although low-income older adults are a primary target group of many senior centers, most programs realize the value of attracting others from a broad socioeconomic range. A 2001 study conducted by Meals on Wheels of Shawnee and Jefferson County, Inc., in Kansas found that the stigma of a welfare program was more pervasive in urban than rural areas; and that participants in rural areas were more likely to bring a friend.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

*"There are times when I go to senior centers and the centers look the same – dark, dirty, and smelly. This is not a place I would want to hang around nor do the majority of the seniors in America. Unfortunately, the staff at some of these centers thinks that this atmosphere is acceptable. I believe that this attitude, 'be happy with whatever you get,' continues that welfare mentality. I also know that when we do the exercise in senior centers called 'Creating the Ideal Senior Center,' the designs that the Directors and seniors come up with are wonderful. They are positive, outrageously different, fun and doable. So I think it is time to put a 'New Face on Aging' by all of us in the field." - Pat Bohse, Consultant*

By and large, most programs have been in place and operated in the same facilities for some time. As these facilities and equipment have aged, capital dollars for updates and improvements have been difficult to secure. Often, scarce dollars are prioritized for programs and services, and the facility and equipment needs have, by necessity, assumed a lower priority. Consequently, senior center directors and volunteers are forced to ask a difficult question: "Even with the best programming, would I want to come here for a meal, an activity or a class?"

Often, a little redecorating, such as general painting and/or painting murals, wallpapering, hanging curtains, and landscaping, can go a long way toward making the facility more inviting. Effective capital campaigns have been launched in many areas, specifically for the purpose of improving the site's appearance. Many potential donors respond well to a list of specific items that are needed, such as paint and wallpaper, tables and chairs, light fixtures, landscaping materials, curtains, tablecloths, dishes, transportation vehicles, and kitchen equipment.

Some successful ideas for facility improvements include the following:

- Midland Meals, Inc. required a new kitchen facility. MMI created interest and enthusiasm by giving tours of the old facility and displaying the plans for the new one. Their capital campaign raised \$2.2 million.
- Monroe County Office for Aging's "Centro de Oro" in Rochester, New York, is located where many older adults live. The eating area of the center has a skylight, providing a sunny ambiance year-round. Native plants and pictures of Puerto Rico decorate the center. One room has a table for playing dominos, a popular activity among the men. Transportation is available, and the food is prepared by a Hispanic cooking staff. Nutrition education is provided by an English-speaking dietitian, but most materials are in Spanish.
- The Kansas State Nutrition Task Force recommended that centers change their institutional atmosphere and move toward a homelike atmosphere incorporating contemporary design with dedicated space for older adults. Ideal space includes functional areas for eating, socialization, recreation, multipurpose use, and kitchens. It is important to allow flexible use inside as well as outside.

## OVERCOMING NEGATIVE COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS: SENIORS AS AN ASSET

A healthy senior who is stimulated and active physically and mentally can be a huge asset to the community in roles such as board member, mentor or project manager. Younger people often do not view healthy older people as seniors at all.

The challenge is encouraging a community to view its senior population as a resource and an asset, not a drain. Seniors often suffer from low self-esteem because some people cannot seem to get beyond the gray hair and the idea that seniors are getting a free ride.

It is difficult for a struggling family with young children to justify discounts for all seniors when they believe that many of those seniors make more money than they do and give nothing back to the community. This issue becomes especially apparent during local debates regarding school funding.

The resulting negative backlash can affect the community's willingness to create state-of-the-art facilities for older people, or to share other community facilities, such as Y's or community centers, with seniors. This issue may become even more problematic as the enormous numbers of baby boomers become eligible for programs and discounts now available to seniors.

## MARKETING THE SENIOR CENTER

(The following is adapted from the National Policy & Resource Center on Nutrition & Aging.)

According to Armstrong Kotler in his 1998 book, *Principles of Marketing*, "Marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others." The goal of marketing is to know and understand your customer so well that your product or service "fits" or sells itself.

Karen D. Goldman, PhD, CHES (Certified Health Education Specialist), a health education and social marketing consultant, presented at the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Program Conference in Nashville in June 2001. Dr. Goldman recommends a four-part marketing strategy that goes beyond the facility fix-ups, center-manager savvy, and program add-ons.

### Step #1: Assessing the Environment

- Analyze the external environment in the community and compare the program to the competition (other programs and services).
- Ensure that the work required or desired has realistic service goals and objectives.
- Evaluate how the work and community environments influence what is done and how it is done prior to any decision about which services will be offered and what their features will be.
- Incorporate questions about desired services or desired attributes of services into an existing community needs-assessment process.
- Self-evaluate or assess your organization's and department's internal environment.
- Find out how user-friendly your services are.
- Assess individual and organizational performance potential, resources and limitations.

#### Step #2: Segmenting the Market

It is up to the agency to identify different market segments, select one or more of these segments as target populations, and develop marketing strategies and positions ("cozy café" position versus "bustling cafeteria" image) tailored to each target population. Market segmentation is classifying customers into groups exhibiting different needs, characteristics or behaviors.

Each market segment should consist of consumers who respond in a similar way to a given set of stimuli. A good market analysis, developed with a thorough knowledge and understanding of a few major target populations, will result in the creation of marketing strategies so well tailored to particular audiences that they are far more likely to succeed than one strategy applied to a variety of very different market segments (i.e., well, able-bodied versus physically challenged, single, male, female, over 70, over 90, etc.).

#### Step #3: Setting Goals and Objectives

Every organization has one basic mission statement that is the fundamental crux of all its activities. In an organization that provides multiple services, a marketing plan is necessary for each individual program or service offered to the market. However, before developing marketing objectives for any product or service, a clear understanding of the organization's overall goals and objectives is necessary. The long-term vision of where the organization is going establishes the boundaries within which objectives, strategies, actions (program and service development) must be developed.

#### Step #4: Developing a Marketing Mix

Once a market segment is chosen, identify all of the services currently available to participants in this marketing segment. Recognize that every service is a bundle of perceived features. Therefore, identify the features of a particular service that are critical to the potential participant when it comes times for them to decide whether or not to use the service. Use the knowledge you have to choose the appropriate features for specific market segments. Make sure that you consider the concepts of Product (including what the service is, who provides it and what it is called); Price (including money, time, emotions and energy); Place (where you offer your program and how that setting looks); and Promotion (advertisements, person-to-person "sales" approaches, incentives and public relations).

Pat Bohse notes, "Marketing has to do with everything a program does from its signage, stationery, how the staff answers the telephone, quality of service, name of the center, location, etc." She says that marketing is the key to success for [senior centers] in the future.

When the agency does marketing, the message must be

- Consistent.
- Out there all the time.
- Noticed on a regular basis (at least four times a year).

Ms. Bohse goes on to more specific tactics for getting the message out:

- Develop media relationships with television, radio and print personnel. Provide them with press releases, develop public service announcements and get television and radio coverage of special events.
- Develop a speaker's bureau and have subject matter experts.
- Work with participants to be program ambassadors.

- Meet with developers to discuss being part of their planning process to make new developments senior friendly.
- Offer to train law enforcement personnel, EMTs and fire fighters in dealing with frightened older people, especially those with hearing, visual or memory impairments.
- Meet with local corporations and offer to hold brown bag lunches for pre-retirees to talk about housing options, travel, legal issues (durable powers of attorney, advance directives, etc.), volunteer opportunities, and programs the senior center offers.

#### COMPLIMENTARY PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

The following examples highlight some of the approaches used by successful senior centers around the country.

*Partnership with utility companies.* “Partners for Hope,” a program of Southern California Electric (SCE), is a 2004 American Society on Aging Business Partners Award winner. The program seeks to assist seniors facing medical emergencies. Partners for Hope provides training and materials to hospital staff (social workers, home-health staff and case administrators) about SCE programs and services. The program provides assistance to at-risk seniors with paying their bills, and information to help them with their electric accounts in the future.

The heart of the SCE program is its *Power Talk for Seniors* brochure, developed using recommendations from the University of Southern California’s Davis School of Gerontology on color preference and font size. To acknowledge how seniors put “energy” back in their communities, SCE purposefully selected graphics showing “active” seniors. The brochure contains safety tips, information on programs and services, and helpful phone numbers for its senior customers.

*Property taxes and volunteering.* Seniors facing large increases in their property taxes were a subject of particular interest to participants in the BoomerANG Project’s Visioning Conference and community-input process. One program idea to address the issue offers affected seniors the opportunity to work off the increase by volunteering in schools, townships, boroughs and county offices. The volunteers could work for those on vacation or medical leave. Such programs are limited in number, although Dedham, Massachusetts, has had a program in place since 1999. The program allows seniors (those over age 60) to volunteer their services in exchange for a reduction in their property tax bill. A senior volunteer may earn a maximum reduction of \$500 per fiscal year, based on a rate per hour of service that cannot exceed the Commonwealth’s minimum wage.

*Converting senior discounts to volunteer coupons or scholarships.* Highland Valley Elder Services, the Area Agency on Aging for the Northampton/Amherst area of western Massachusetts, has instituted an alternative currency accepted at local pharmacies, the local transportation system, local supermarkets and other venues. The currency may be exchanged for goods and services. Known as “Citizen Chips,” the currency acts as a citizen-service credit system that links citizens and nonprofit groups with businesses to reward acts of community service and to help build caring communities.

*Program fees.* Charging for programs, even if the fee is nominal, is a necessity. The pressure on resources simply requires that senior centers attempt to collect contributions from their participants. This can take the form of membership fees, as in Upper Arlington, Ohio, which charges an annual fee of \$15 to residents or \$20 to nonresidents; or fees for particular

services, as at the Lexington Senior Citizens Center. The White Crane Senior Wellness Center in Chicago uses a punch-card device for services. To address concerns about the ability of low- and moderate-income seniors to pay the fees, a waiver program could be instituted; members could be asked to contribute to a fund to ensure the participation of less affluent seniors, as is the case at North Shore Senior Center in Winnetka, Illinois, where annual membership fees are \$55 per year for individuals and \$95 per year for couples.

### ***Becoming entrepreneurial.***

*“Nonprofit agencies that provide services to older adults are increasingly challenged by unprecedented increases in demands for service at the same time that resources are shrinking. Contributing to this difficult climate are rising operating costs, staff shortages, government regulations, changing technology and increased competition.*

*To meet these challenges, creative nonprofits have diversified their funding bases by generating new income streams that allow flexibility and innovation. They use earned income to make a profit and fold that profit back into their nonprofit mission. Some of these programs also reflect a trend to make programs more consumer-directed, where older people and their caregivers have a larger say in how, when and where services are delivered as well as who provides them.”*

**From the publication, “Consumer Directions”**

For example, Evergreen Commons, a senior center in Holland, Michigan, has entered into a variety of resource development activities beyond its market, by operating a family fitness center. Other centers have raised revenue by renting their tables and chairs to community service groups or offering their space for weddings and other celebrations, as is the case with the Indian Valley SAAC.

### **CENTERS WITHOUT WALLS**

The phrase “senior center without walls” means different things to different people. For some, it may refer to the extension of existing senior center programs to homebound seniors. An example is the Mastick Senior Center in Oakland, California, which describes its Center Without Walls as offering group activities, friendly conversation, and an assortment of classes to homebound elders who find it difficult to go to a site away from home. Individuals can participate from their own home through telephone conference calls.

Satellite centers are another way that senior centers extend their reach. Broward County, Florida, operates four satellite centers that provide programs and services in areas such as nutrition, transportation, education, health promotion, recreation, and arts and crafts. The Chicago Department on Aging has five multi-service senior centers located in different parts of the city, which in turn have satellites scattered throughout their catchment areas.

The nonprofit Mather LifeWays organization, based in Evanston, Illinois, operates four senior centers in the Chicago area. The centers (called Mather’s – More Than a Café) are located in old storefronts and look and feel like coffee shops. Most seniors who visit a Mather Café live within a two-mile radius, according to Carla Windhorst, director of community initiatives at Mather LifeWays. “We want to be in neighborhoods with a high concentration of adults age 55 and over,” she says. Mather is also trying to reach middle-income seniors, based on the assumption that they don’t have

the resources of rich seniors or access to as many government programs as low-income seniors.

Still other satellite programs are confederations of activities available to seniors through networks that are increasingly operated on the Internet. In Cleveland, Chicago, Phoenix, and Winter Park, Florida, these networks have sprung out of the Life Options movement initiated by the Civic Ventures Foundation. The programs offer a variety of activities, including fitness sessions, drama, computer training, and book clubs. Program sites include libraries, senior housing recreation rooms, park field houses, YMCAs, university or college campuses, even in the offices of for-profit companies, and for-profit health clubs. Additionally, the Internet provides opportunities to keep individuals involved when they cannot or choose not to travel to a program site.

#### PROGRAMMING

The BoomerANG Project revealed the wide variety of attractive programming offered by Montgomery County's senior centers. Almost all centers had offerings in areas such as quilting and other crafts; travel; music appreciation or participation; and computer instruction and use. But the centers differed in how they delivered their programs. For example, many senior centers had quilting groups, but the Ambler Senior Center made a leap into intergenerational programming by offering quilting instruction to local teenagers when it became apparent that the number of quilters was dwindling.

The White Crane Senior Wellness Center in Chicago encourages active, involved, and healthy lifestyles for older adults through its programming. The center describes itself as agreeing with the idea expressed by Maggie Kuhn of the Gray Panthers: "Aging is not a disease; it is strength and survivorship." It serves a very diverse community, with 600 members speaking 23 different languages. White Crane's programming is divided into five categories: Wellness; Special Interests; Wellness Services and Alternative Treatments; and Special Events. The following are some of the activities and programs offered by White Crane:

- Tai Chi for Elders – This ancient Chinese form of exercise promotes relaxation and flexibility. Beginner and advanced levels are taught.
- International Folk Dance – This class features a variety of ethnic and cultural dance movements.
- Yoga and Gentle Yoga – Gentle stretching exercises are taught once a week. Students may choose a conventional class with work on mats or a special class where postures are done while seated.
- Healthy Eating – Classes teach healthy food preparation and promotion of healthy eating habits.
- Diabetes Discussion Group.
- Weights.
- Aerobics.
- The White Crane Players – A group of seniors perform their original musical review and commentary, "Food Glorious Food," for hundreds of seniors and others throughout the city and state.
- Massage – Students of the Chicago School of Massage Therapy offer services for a modest fee.
- Health fairs, holiday luncheons and bake sales.

In addition, under a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, White Crane provides community-based health and wellness services, health education workshops, screenings and assessments, referrals for follow-up treatment, fitness classes, and transportation at 20 low-income senior buildings and at senior health fairs.

In addition to the activities themselves, an important aspect of programming is related to who delivers it. Accordingly, senior centers should seek to develop partnerships with professionals in the community who might be willing to contribute their expertise. This can become a win-win opportunity. Professionals may be willing to hold seminars, develop programs or offer discounts if they are given free advertising for their practice or service. For example a "cooking for one" class offered by a local restaurant or caterer may generate business for the chef; a plastic surgeon may find new patients by offering information seminars; or a financial expert may attract new clients through sharing information in a low-key, non-sales environment.

Project consultant Nancy Luttrupp says timing, notice and variety may be critical to developing programming that draws new constituencies to senior centers. She makes the following recommendations:

- Offer some programs twice – once for retired people and once for pre-retirees.
- Run programs from 8:30 to 3:30 for older seniors and from 5:30 to 9:30 for working seniors and younger, working participants.
- Diversify revenue sources by introducing various client fee structures.
- Advertise programs in newspapers, company newsletters and church bulletins, or post fliers in banks, grocery stores, commuter train stations and other locations.
- Offer unique programming.

#### ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use value-neutral words when changing the name of a senior center. For example, the "café" concept has been successful in attracting younger participants in some areas.
2. Consider using a culturally relevant name, as exemplified by the "Centro de Oro" in Rochester, New York.
3. Avoid casting the senior center in terms that suggest "charity" or "welfare." For example, do not appeal on behalf of "those poor seniors."
4. Charge for all programs, even if the fee is only nominal and may be waived.
5. In all public presentations about the senior center and seniors in general, portray seniors as a net asset to the larger community.
6. Seek a diverse economic base among center participants.
7. Seek opportunities to make the senior center's physical plant more appealing by updating with a fresh paint job, murals, wallpapering, curtains, and landscaping. Involve the participants, as much as possible, in planning and making these changes.
8. Offer donors opportunities to contribute to physical plant changes with specific requests for paint, wallpaper, tables, chairs, light fixtures, and other supplies.



9. Offer tours of the senior center to potential donors and have improvement plans readily available.
10. Make an effort to provide a noninstitutional, homelike, and healthy atmosphere.
11. If possible, provide dedicated spaces for eating, food preparation, socialization, recreation, exercise and multipurpose use.
12. If possible, make physical changes that "open up" the facility, for example, installing a skylight in the eating area.
13. If the senior center is heavily populated by a specific cultural group, offer linguistically and culturally appropriate activities, language and food.
14. When marketing the senior center, apply a comprehensive, well-thought-out strategy that may include the following steps:
  - Assessing the environment
  - Segmenting the market
  - Setting goals and objectives
  - Developing a marketing mix
15. Apply the "6 Ps" of marketing:
  - Public
  - Product
  - Production
  - Place
  - Promotion
  - Price
16. Develop media relationships.
17. Develop a speaker's bureau.
18. Do not segregate the senior center from the larger community. Find ways that senior center participants can contribute to the larger community as tutors, mentors or volunteers, perhaps offering specialized expertise.
19. Establish strong relationships with local schools, colleges and universities, and with their students.
20. Offer a variety of opportunities that will appeal to younger seniors, for example, a lighter-fare menu or a "grab and go" option.
21. Provide a variety of health and wellness programs such as chair exercises and dance aerobics.
22. Meet with local mall merchants to discuss marketing opportunities and the potential benefits to them and to the senior center.
23. Meet with developers regarding the role of the senior center and seniors in the planning process for new developments, and initiate cooperative programming and services.
24. Offer to train public safety personnel on how to interact with older people.

25. Meet with local businesses to organize brown bag lunches and other activities for pre-retirees, adult caregivers and other groups of baby boomers.
26. Seek partnerships with a variety of organizations, businesses and agencies.
27. Be creative in finding ways to meet constituent needs. For example, find ways for seniors to provide volunteer labor as partial payment for property taxes, or create alternative "barter" currencies.
28. Encourage entrepreneurial activities that will lead to expanded programs and potential markets.
29. Explore the possibility of establishing a "senior center without walls," while recognizing that a portion of the senior center's constituency may prefer to have most programs at a single site.
30. Consider the possibility that the best senior center site may not be a dedicated building.
31. Examine the program in light of the constituency the senior center seeks to attract. Be aware that such an examination may result in a radical change in programming.



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