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ACTIVE AGING MARKET VS. ANTIAGING APPROACH

By COLIN MILNER

As the boomers make their way through midlife, many of the products and services that have helped shape societies' perceptions of aging to date are changing radically. One example of such change is the senior living industry: Retirement or active-adult communities used to be located on the outskirts of a city. How times have changed.

"About three-quarters of the active-adult communities that are built are in close-in suburbs or outer suburbs, although downtown areas are steadily gaining popularity," Bonnie Solomon, who chairs the National Association of Home Builders Seniors Housing Council, has noted. An example of this shift is the Clare at Water Tower, a Franciscan Communities project that will situate a high-rise retirement community in downtown Chicago.

THE 'S' WORD

Clearly, boomers want to be near the action. This trend is also evident in the emergence of a new form of campus life in which boomers and their parents explore retirement community living at such universities as Penn State and the University of Miami. In search of new experiences and knowledge, this group is shifting the meaning of going old school. However, what has yet to change in many instances is the use of the "s" word—*senior*.

Research by the Boomer Project, a market survey firm based in Richmond, Va., found that 98% of boomers are turned off by this term. Marketers and program developers promoting senior centers, senior living communities, senior fitness and senior travel programs are increasingly questioning whether the word is alienating the very market they're trying to attract.

As noted recently in *The New York Times* ("Its Appeal Slipping, the Senior Center Steps Livelier," by Jane Gross, March 25, 2008), the more innovative centers are being redesigned as cafes and offering yoga classes and other features that might attract neighborhood boomers. What do boomers want? Visit an active-adult community, Club Med, a hotel spa—and a Starbuck's, of course—for a good start on your market research.

Despite the fact that so many marketers are struggling to redefine their services to midlife and older adults, these are exciting times with ample opportunities. For example, Focalyst, which researches markets for AARP, found that 65% of executives have no plan in place for attracting the business of boomers or their parents (see www.agewaveimplications.com/uploads/File/Focalyst_Boomer_Brand_Loyalty.pdf). This oversight leaves many potential business and career opportunities untapped. Certainly, some organizations have embraced this opportunity or will do so and emerge as leaders in their industries. But, like 50% of the original Fortune 500, many will go quietly into the night.

NIFTY AFTER FIFTY

Sheldon Zinberg is not one to go quietly—instead, he is shouting from the top of his growing fitness franchise business. As owner of five Nifty After Fifty locations, Zinberg has turned his passion for active aging into a vibrant enterprise. His secret: Zinberg listened to his potential clients. The result was the cre-

ation of fitness centers that offer people ages 50-plus fitness and physical therapy services, cognitive training and nutritional advice, driver simulation training and volunteering opportunities. How many fitness centers do you know that have a driving simulation center or a brain fitness area?

Nifty After Fifty is only one of many groups that have launched fitness centers for the 50-plus crowd—but even this effort is falling short of meeting the demand. Research at my organization, the International Council on Active Aging, found that a projected 78% growth in available programs is required to meet the needs of the aging population (see *Active Aging in America: Volume 1. Residential and Commercial Fitness*, available at www.icaa.cc/News/industryfacts.htm). The need is there, but who is going to meet it?

This volcanic eruption in consumer demand has resulted in a new breed of entrepreneurs who are searching for products and services to help slow the aging process. This group aims to tap into the more than \$72 billion in spending on these types of products and services that BCC Research Inc. projected will occur by 2009.

Leading the way in this effort are the antiaging and active-aging industries. But what are these industries all about? In many cases, the antiaging segment is associated with cosmetics, supplements and such medical procedures as Botox and face-lifts. Potions and lotions, of course, are also a dominant part of the antiaging market. However, those considering using the term *antiaging* to describe their products or services, beware. Only 4% of the U.S. population believes the claims made on television in this category, according to a 2002 survey by Harris Interactive (see http://harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters/health%20news/HI_HealthCareNews2002Vol2_Iss23.pdf).

Active aging is about finding ways to help older adults remain engaged in life. Whether that engagement encompasses the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual or vocational dimensions of wellness, active aging supports groups, such as active-adult communities, as well as fitness products and services, cognitive training and other products and services that enable older Americans to remain active and engaged. ❖

Colin Milner, chief executive officer of the International Council on Active Aging, has authored more than 200 articles on aging-related issues.