Is Your Internet Strategy Up to Speed?

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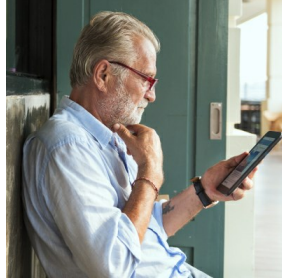
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Today's seniors see online connectivity as a necessity, not a luxury. Therefore, seniors housing operators need to make sure they are prepared to offer these services to residents. (Photo courtesy of GlynnDevins)

Online connectivity is a must for today's seniors. Owners and operators need to adapt or get left behind.

By Eric Taub

My 92-year-old family member loved using her iPad, but once she arrived at her assisted living community in a Los Angeles suburb three years ago, that activity ceased because her residence did not offer Internet access.

Today, the situation has changed. Wi-Fi Internet access has arrived — sort of. Spotty service means that it's not available in all the halls or rooms, or even in the centrally located ground-floor office of the marketing director. "It's not too bad — when it works," the director says, half-heartedly.

Dismissing the need for connectivity in senior living is a mistake that will only grow in significance.

While Internet access was only recently considered a luxury, it is now as imperative as indoor plumbing and electricity.

Whether we're Millennials or members of the Greatest Generation, Internet access and all the other connected technologies made possible by it have become interwoven in our lives, no matter what country we live in or how much money we have.

"Technology can and must play a growing role in the functioning of today's senior care communities," says Ginna Baik, senior care practice leader for CDW Healthcare, a multi-brand technology solutions provider based in Vernon Hills, Illinois.

"The Greatest Generation adopts technology to connect with their family, friends and the world. And the rise of the 'tech-savvy boomer,' who is the new and future resident, means that access to technology and the Internet is now a required amenity, similar to access to a gym or pool," adds Baik.

Convergence is a game changer

As medical costs rise, healthcare providers will increasingly be looking to residences to partner with in order to provide access to electronic health records, and the active electronic monitoring of healthcare vital signs. Data accumulation and analysis will become key and demanded by providers and insurers alike to reduce costs and expedite treatment.

Internet-connected technologies, such as sensors that can monitor an individual's vital signs or their movements around a room, can improve staff efficiencies, potentially enabling fewer unnecessary resident room visits.

And as desktop applications, such as Microsoft's Office suite, increasingly move to the Cloud, Internet access will become a necessity to access files and the tools needed to create them.

Residents will benefit equally. LeadingAge, a Washington, D.C.-based association for nonprofit providers of aging services, has found that older adults watch streaming television 55 percent more than the average American. And those adults will demand the ability to continue to stream music and video services, such as Netflix and Spotify, to their televisions and tablets once they enter senior living.

Adult children and other caregivers will want the ability to monitor the activities of their loved ones and communicate with them via voice, video and imagery. And residents will also look toward digital services to offer social engagement tools to help those who would otherwise be isolated, enabling them to reach out to their neighbors.

"Boomers want confidence that their parents are engaged and that their home is living up to their expectations," says Bob Kramer, founder of the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care, who now serves as a strategic advisor for the 501(c)3 organization based in Annapolis, Maryland.

In a 2014 study reported in The Journals of Gerontology, depression among the retired elderly was cut by 33 percent for those who used the Internet. That's important for both financial and social reasons. Depressed older adults spend 50 percent more on healthcare than non-depressed individuals, according to a 2003 study.

Inquisitive audience

As someone who regularly gives speeches on technology to residents at independent and assisted living communities, I see firsthand the hunger that the elderly have to understand and use the latest tech tools.

Residents come to my talks armed with their smartphones and tablets. They're eager to ask basic but essential operating questions, and learn the best ways to safely access the Internet and apps.

While the questions are often elementary, they illustrate a yearning to be "with it," to be as connected as they see their children and grandchildren.

"Most seniors housing residents were born between 1937 and 1945," notes Kramer of NIC. "They're more like Baby Boomers in their use of technology than they are like the Greatest Generation."

There are four "must haves" for every senior living community, emphasizes Mary Furlong, founder of Mary Furlong & Associates, a San Francisco-based strategy, business development

and marketing firm specializing in the Baby Boomer, senior and caregiver markets.

"Today's communities need to have good food, easy access to transportation, lots of social clubs and easy Internet access," notes Furlong. Ideally, a community should also employ an in-house tech person to help with any problems, she adds.

Still, when it comes to wiring a senior community for Internet access, it's not as simple as calling the cable company and buying a few Wi-Fi routers at Best Buy.

As Internet access becomes a necessity, always-on connectivity with no down time will be key. Wi-Fi access must be ubiquitous, with no dead zones.

Internet data speeds must be high enough to operate with multiple users, many of whom will simultaneously be streaming videos and music. The proper use of the system needs to be understood by staff and residents and be easily upgradable if technology standards improve.

There are also internal challenges. The lack of interoperability among electronic medical records providers means that one's data collection system may not be able to be accessed by another product used by a doctor's office or hospital.

Staff members, many of whom do not have a high educational level, may not want to adapt to new systems. With senior living communities experiencing high staff turnover, executives may be wary about introducing new work systems that could upset employees.

Costs versus benefits

Administrators may not see the point of adding extra costs to operating margins that are already slim. According to one supplier, monthly Internet access can typically cost about $30 per unit. Given its unproven return on investment (ROI), senior living community owners may wish to invest money on more visually obvious benefits, such as a large swimming pool.

There's no doubt that providing ubiquitous Internet access to senior living residents remains a challenge. Brookdale Senior Living, the nation's largest seniors housing operator, has not found a profitable way to do so, says Andrew Smith, the company's senior director of innovation and growth strategies. (As of March 31, Brookdale operated 1,010 communities in 46 states with the ability to serve 99,000 residents.)

Instead, it is up to Brookdale residents to individually subscribe to the local cable provider if they want Internet access. While there is a guest Wi-Fi network in all common areas of its residences, thick concrete walls and older construction make the availability of robust, ubiquitous Wi-Fi throughout a community cost prohibitive, says Smith.

Still, the company understands that the Internet is already a major factor in residents' lives. Every Brookdale community offers iPads and iPad classes. "We see people's eyes light up when they realize that they can access every song ever written," says Smith.

Total immersion required

Incorporating technology into a residence requires a multi-step approach, advises Majd Alwan, senior vice president of technology and executive director of the LeadingAge Center for Aging Services Technologies.

Technology must be integrated into a seniors housing community's strategic thinking, notes Alwan. The C-suite needs to buy into the strategy rather than make it an afterthought or treat it as a pilot project.

"Having a chief technology officer at the community will elevate the conversation to a more strategic one," says Alwan. These steps will guarantee that technology implementation will move beyond a "nice-to-have" strategy that is the first one to get eliminated when budget issues arise, he explains.

Without that strategy, the staff may thwart any changes. "The staff will undercut the most terrific investment," cautions Kramer. "You must show the staff the benefit to them of this new technology. If they can feel better in the way they deliver care, they'll support it. Don't plan on a four-year ROI because you may never get to that point."

Caregivers can be one of the biggest champions of new technology if the product is rolled out properly. With Millennials now making up a large portion of the workforce, adopting a "bring your own device" strategy can boost employees' enthusiasm by allowing them to use the smartphones and tablets they own and love rather than similar bare-bones products purchased in bulk by the corporation.

With many applications today being web-based and stored in the Cloud, compatibility between operating systems is no longer an issue.

In addition to cutting costs, those tablets and phones can be used to survey staff as to their job satisfaction, anonymously ask them to rate their managers, and engage them in training other staff about new processes and technologies, thereby creating technology ambassadors rather than technology foes.

Digital gateway opens up

In addition to web access, Internet connectivity gives seniors housing residents the ability to use other tools that depend on a digital platform. That includes such Internet of Things (IoT) products as "smart" toothbrushes that monitor one's brushing and recommend how to improve it.

In addition, today's patient monitoring devices automatically report physical vital signs — such as weight and blood pressure — to healthcare providers; when indices rise above a dangerous level, warnings are triggered.

Whole-house sensors are also gaining in popularity; they track an individual's movements and automatically alert caregivers when activity is outside the norm.

Automated lighting can lower the risk of falls, especially for residents who wake up in the middle of the night. Connected thermostats can reduce dehydration by keeping room temperature at the proper level, and automatic stove shutoffs can stop deadly gas explosions.

Voice-activated products are gaining traction in senior care, according to Baik of CDW Healthcare, because they are ideal for persons unfamiliar with or afraid of technology, or who have physical limitations, such as arthritis, vision or memory impairment.

Products that enable connectivity give residents the ability to communicate with neighbors, friends and family through social engagement platforms. Applications designed for computers, tablets and smartphones allow residents to find others with similar interests, schedule their day, check e-mail, engage in video chats, sign up for classes, learn today's food choices, and even automatically turn the lights and heating on and off.

In addition to helping combat depression, social engagement products enable residents to report issues in their apartments and automatically schedule a repair time, which reduces unnecessary staff visits to determine a problem.

Adult caregivers can access the same information, allowing them to track not only their loved one's activities, but also to be assured that issues within the residence are being addressed.

In a recent LeadingAge white paper and primer on the importance of social connectedness, the organization identified over 100 such products that depend on Internet access. They include

offerings from such companies as Breezie, Caremerge, Cubigo, K4Connect, Telikin, TouchTown and others.

"Residents are moving into senior living with multiple devices," says Hoyle Koontz, vice president for Kansas City, Missouri-based GlynnDevins, a senior living marketing firm. "That includes smartphones, tablets and computers. They're expecting not just Wi-Fi, but access to the community so they can request services to be performed."

Consult an expert

To get started, community owners should work with providers that specialize in senior living. LeadingAge's Alwan suggests contacting companies such as the Asbury Technology Group and Provinets.

Internet consultants can help plan the technology backbone, provide the necessary switching and routing gear, and determine where Wi-Fi coverage needs to be strengthened, ensuring that there is adequate bandwidth for both residents and staff.

"You don't want to create an infrastructure only to find that the network is choking in a year or two," says Koontz of GlynnDevins.

Inviacom, a company specializing in providing Internet access to senior homes in 42 states, has installed the technology in 170 communities at a cost it says is 35 to 50 percent less than a cable provider would charge.

"We've seen a proliferation in the need for Wi-Fi in senior living," says Kevin Merrill, business development director for Inviacom based in Indian Trail, North Carolina. "Residents have moved from using a desktop computer and a Kindle to up to seven different devices."

The company also provides 24-hour phone support seven days a week and on-site training for residents when the system is first installed.

"Wi-Fi is the number one request from residents, even more than good food," says Merrill.

While there's no question that good food is a much easier amenity to provide, offering 24-hour, ubiquitous Internet coverage is the first step to opening a community up to new operating efficiencies and increased resident satisfaction.

"When people move into senior living, they're leaving a larger residence for a small space," says Furlong, the business development and marketing specialist. "The Internet is a whole new window on the world. You must give them that window."

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