

CONNECTING THE GENERATIONS THROUGH VIDEO CALLS

HOW CAN FAMILIES AND SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES HELP?

JULY, 2010

INTEREST IN VIDEO CALLS GROWS AT SENIOR CENTERS AND SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES

During the past six months I met over 400 seniors (ranging in age between 60 and 96) at senior living communities and senior centers in the Greater Boston area. They came to hear me talk about Skype, video calls, and technology. The highlight of my presentations was live video calls over Skype to family members throughout the US, and as far away as the UK, Brazil, Australia and China.

Approximately 80% of the seniors had computers, most had broadband or DSL (some were still on dial-up), some had webcams (not necessarily installed).

This demographic segment of the population showed exceptionally high interest in learning about video calling. At the Wayland Senior Center, 75% of the attendees signed up within days of the talk being announced in the local news¹. At the Stow Senior Center, the talk attracted a new group of visitors that had not been to the Center before. The Newton Senior Center just had a repeat of its March “Learn to Skype” presentation. Senior living communities such as Orchard Cove², Fox Hill Village, North Hill, Newbridge have included “Learn about Video Calling with Skype” presentations in their activities’ schedules. Briarwood – a 200+ resident Continuing Care Retirement Community in Worcester embarked on a 4-week pilot to bring residents and families closer to one another through the use of video calling technology³.



By Serge Kogan
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Through these engagements, I met and talked to a wide range of individuals interested in seeing video calling at work, such as: seniors living on their own, older adults living in independent and assisted living communities, patients in nursing homes, executive directors, residence services directors, activities directors, communities’ marketing professionals, the seniors’ children and grandchildren.

VIDEO CALLS CAN REDUCE SOCIAL ISOLATION OF AGING POPULATION

Helping seniors stay in closer, visual contact, with their remote living children, grandchildren, siblings, other relatives and friends has been the subject of recent studies. As the overall population ages, social isolation is emerging as a major issue because of the adverse impact it can have on health and well being⁴. Participants in a study of videophone technology at long-term care facilities were enthusiastic about the benefits, as visual contact emphasized a sense of closeness, more family interaction, and reduced feelings of guilt and isolation.⁵ Web postings on reducing seniors’ loneliness encourage seniors to stay connected on-line via email, picture sharing, and video chats.⁶

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CHALLENGE: MANY SENIORS STILL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH COMPUTERS

While the purpose of the presentations and discussions were mainly to learn about video calling, the seniors and community staffs shared their experience as it relates to using computers:

1. Seniors' comfort level with computers is very low. While some who own their own computers are active users at 70+, using computers for email, web browsing, and games, those without their own computers depend on facilitators to help them with mouse clicks and general navigation through a Windows or Apple screen.
2. At senior living communities, the communal computers are often underutilized, because most residents don't want to learn how to operate them. Residents with their own computers often complain about the difficulty of getting help when the computer does not function correctly. Support is hard to come by, and usually this is done by volunteers - if they are available. More often the communal computers are used by family members when they come to visit their loved ones.
3. In spite of all the difficulty and aversion dealing with computers, seniors have a high level of interest in visually connecting with family members living far away, for instance: a daughter in Australia, a son in London, nieces in Seattle, son in China, older sister in South Africa, younger sister in Cape Cod, grandchildren in New York, cousin in California.
4. Other activities involving visual sharing of special moments also attracted the attention and interest of the seniors, for instance photos of a family gathering the older adult could not attend, seeing faces of friends and family the senior has not seen in a long time, pictures of a wedding, a baby, a family picnic or vacation were also highly desired.
5. The questions the seniors most often asked were: What equipment do I need to do video calls? Where do I get it? Where do I get support? Can I use the computers in the common area to do video calls? How do I coordinate with my family? How do I tell my family what they need to have so we can connect visually?



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WHAT CAN YOUNGER GENERATIONS DO TO HELP?

1. There is a lot of interest on the part of seniors and their professional caregivers in carrying out video calls that bring the younger and older generations closer to one another.
2. Younger generations, familiar with technologies such as video chat, photo sharing and social networks, who desire to visually engage with their aging parents and grandparents living remotely, play a key role in getting their aging relatives set-up for video-calling and picture sharing. A senior's son or daughter can create and administer the senior's account names under Skype, Facebook, or Google. For seniors with their own computer, the younger family member may also have to do remote support via "Log Me In" or similar remote support programs. Not the most efficient way – but a start.
3. Video calling using computers will not work with the majority of seniors who run away as soon as you mention the "C" word. The "computer" aspect must be played down or eliminated. Videocalling and picture sharing as a facilitated activity provides an alternative – especially at organized senior centers and senior living communities. The younger family members will need to communicate with the centers and communities' activity directors to let them know they would like to carry out videocalls with their loved ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Serge Kogan is pioneering the use of visual communications as a catalyst in bringing the aging, boomer and younger populations closer to one another. Serge is an experienced market development executive with over 25 years of high-value solution sales to global companies in the electronics, telecommunications, semiconductors and financial services industries, as well as to government institutions in the US and Latin America. He regularly participates in conferences and affinity groups looking to create new business opportunities in telehealth, aging-in-place and living-independently markets. Serge held sales management, marketing and product development roles at iSuppli, Interleaf, Digital Equipment and Eastman Kodak. He graduated from Cornell University with Bachelor and Master degrees in Electrical Engineering, and received his MBA from the University of Rochester. He is a co-founder and advisor to g2gConnect, a start-up firm focusing on helping the younger and aging generations connect with each other through visual communications.

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To receive future articles and comments on ways to help the aging generations through intergenerational visual communications, please send your name, email address, generational status (e.g. parent, grandparent, great-grandparent) to info@g2gconnect.com