

## Chapter 20

# Older Adults as New Learners: A Framework for Marketing Online Education to the Other Adult Learner

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents a marketing model for four-year higher education institutions that may be appropriate for engaging aging Baby Boomers in lifelong learning. Baby Boomers will challenge higher education institutions to rethink their customer base and respond to a different set of needs from that exhibited by traditional students and by adult learners who are currently 65 or older. Higher education institutions have not prepared for the demands that aging Baby Boomers may place on providers of learning. The PRFSM model suggests ways to recruit nontraditional students to traditional providers of higher education.*

### INTRODUCTION

A demographic shift is influencing the population targeted for online educational opportunities. Older adults are going to replace younger traditional-aged college students (18 to 25) as the primary users of higher education services. Yankelovich (2005) projected that by 2015 higher

education will be challenged by adults aged 55 to 75 to provide services that meet the intellectual and career needs of a generation interested in gaining and maintaining additional credentials. Baby Boomers are becoming older adults, and they will challenge how four-year institutions respond to increased demands for services and courses relevant to them. Baby Boomers see higher education as the way to remain engaged in

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the intellectual, social, and occupational spheres of later life.

The American Association of Community Colleges projects that Baby Boomers are the “new potential” community college student of tomorrow (AACC, 2009a, p. 1). Fifty percent of adults over 50 who are pursuing higher education are enrolling in community colleges (AACC, 2009a).

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) projections also indicate that Baby Boomers and those born during the Second World War will remain in or seek social service, managerial, and customer service positions past the traditional age of retirement. Tague (2009) suggests that older adults will need to have alternative income streams as the economy changes. Court, Farrell, and Forsyth (2007) project that by 2015, 60% of Boomers will work to maintain a higher standard of living and that 40 percent will be working by age 65. More important, shortages in the labor force will make Boomers desirable employees since this group represents more than half of the knowledge workers in the U.S. economy. The growing number of older adults expected to remain in the workforce will have difficulty finding employment without updating their knowledge and skills. Participation in formal education programs is a key strategy for increasing the intellectual capital and human capital contributions of these individuals. It is important that they be given the opportunity to continue to contribute valuable knowledge and skills as productive members of the workforce. This chapter suggests that the demand for higher education is related to the maturing of the Baby Boomers coupled with the use of technology as an alternative to physically attending in-person classes.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Maturing Baby Boomers**

A need for credit-based learning throughout the lifespan will become a significant feature of the

higher education landscape. Baby Boomers will require additional education to obtain credentials needed for workplace opportunities and to demonstrate their intellectual skills (Willis, 2006; Stokes, 2006). Yet marketing strategies used by four-year higher educational institutions may be neglecting this older population. Ghosh, Javalgi, and Whipple (2007) suggested that institutions of higher education should develop marketing campaigns directed toward five different groups of students: traditional, non-traditional, international, potential transfers, and graduating college seniors (for graduate education). The non-traditional students comprised 6.4% of the population in their case study of one university.

They were newly admitted as freshmen, married, about 26 years old, working, and had the lowest grade-point average of the population (Ghosh et al., 2007). This background does not match the emerging older Baby Boomer student participating in community college credit programs, who holds one or more degrees, is older than 40 (18% are over 55), still works, has family obligations, desires to begin or build upon a second career, and has a better sense of learning needs than the younger adult learner (Abushakrah, 2007). Even so, both groups of non-traditional learners will grow and require that higher education institutions be able to reach out to a vocal student population that has specific educational aims. As Ghosh et al. contend, “These students... may not be acquainted with university expectations or services that might be helpful to them. Since this is likely to be a growing market segment, it cannot be ignored” (p. 250).

In developing and improving their programming for the older learner, colleges and universities tend to have three focus areas: enrichment, workforce training and career development, and service and volunteering (AACC, 2009b). Yet it is the credit sector that will attract Boomers back to higher education. Older adults have typically participated in lifelong learning institutes, which have segregated older learners from the main activities of the college campus and have not provided credentials or credits for the learn-

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