

Why Older Americans are Heading for the Internet

Over the last decade, older Americans have been making up an increasingly large portion of new Internet users. This is a most interesting trend, since many Americans currently think of the Internet as a younger-generation stronghold. Indeed, the most active Internet users are between 18 and 34 years old. Yet, seniors aged 55 and older spend more time online than any other age group. There must be something beneficial about the Internet that keeps seniors' interests peaked, and that draws so many older Americans every year to go online for the first time. In this paper, I will discuss four main reasons for why this trend is occurring. Two of these reasons have to do with greater convenience: *long-distance communication between friends/family*, and *shopping online*. The last two reasons are to *find information on personal topics*, and to *improve one's competence in today's rapidly changing job world*. By exploring these reasons, we may have a better understanding of what has driven many seniors to head for the Internet.

Background

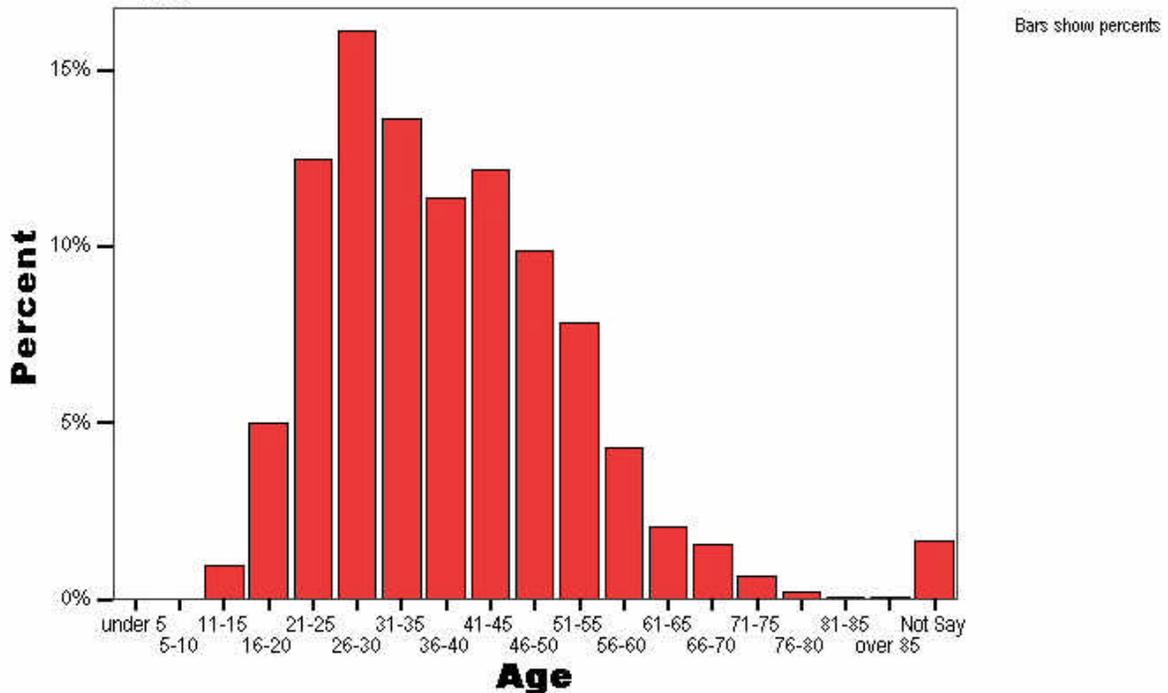
According to the most recent data from Georgia Institute of Technology's GVU Center, in October 1998, Americans aged 40 and over comprised 39% of the total online population.¹ This number has been gradually increasing over the years, up from 10% in GVU's January 1994 survey.² To highlight the recent growth of the older online population, a few statistics are given. First is a graph of the most recent age distribution study for Internet usage, done by the GVU Center. Although the percentage of users over 55 is small compared to younger users, this number is rapidly increasing.

¹ GVU's Tenth WWW User Surveys. http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/ 12/13/00. Survey was of 5022 respondents, 1.7% of which did not give their age in this survey.

² WWW User Survey – General Results Graphs. http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/survey-01-1994/graphs/results-general.html

Source: GVU's 10th WWW User Survey (October 1998)

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A series of recent Internet studies by Georgia Tech show that the number of Internet users 50 and older increased to 16 percent in 1997, up from 13 percent in 1994.³ Another survey, by Media Metrix, cites that in 1999, the number of online seniors grew by 18.4 percent, making users 55 and older the most rapidly-growing age group.⁴ The International Data Corp. (IDC) supports the findings of Media Metrix, that adults over 55 comprise the fastest-growing group of US Internet users; the number of seniors is predicted to more than triple from 11.1 million in 1999 to 34.1 million in 2004, accounting for 20 percent of all new users.⁵ An eMarketer report predicts that by 2003, 27 percent of all Americans over age 55 will be active Internet users.⁶

³ Older users attracted to the Internet for news, business data.
<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PUBS/OCTNEWS/oc980404.html> 4/18/98.

⁴ Demographics: Demographics of the Net Getting Older.
http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_448131.00.html 8/29/00.

⁵ Demographics: Demographics of the Net Getting Older.
http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_448131.00.html 8/29/00.

⁶ Nua Internet Surveys. Senior citizens to embrace the Web.
http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356057&rel=true 9/21/00.

This increase in the number of online seniors is an important trend, since seniors are currently more enthusiastic about the Internet than any other age group. Every year, seniors spend increasingly longer amounts of time on the Internet. According to a Nua Internet Survey,

“The 15 percent of [online] US seniors...spend on average 8.3 hours per week online, which is more than any other demographic group. College students use the Internet for 7.8 hours per week, adults for 7.7 hours, and teens only spend 5.9 hours per week online.”⁷

What exactly are seniors using all this time for? A Nua Internet Survey found that 72 percent go online to use e-mail, 59 percent to research an issue of interest, 53 percent to access news and current affairs information, 47 percent to conduct travel research and 43 percent to get weather updates. In addition, 40 percent of those surveyed said that using the Internet helped them to make better investment decisions.⁸ These activities coincide largely with the four main reasons outlined in my Introduction to explain why more older Americans are going online. We will now give a brief overview of these reasons, then proceed to elaborate on each.

1. **Convenience of long-distance communication between friends/family.** With the increased distance between individuals due to work or travel requirements, people want to find a cost-effective means to stay in contact with friends and family. E-mail has become the primary application for this purpose.
2. **Convenience of shopping.** Since many seniors are retired or not as active as they formerly were, it is easier to shop on line where products can be bought more quickly and efficiently.
3. **To find information on personal topics.** Many older Americans do not feel comfortable asking friends, family, or even their doctors about certain types of health questions.
4. **To feel more competent in today’s rapidly changing job world.** This is perhaps one of the most influential reasons why an older American would suddenly want to go online. With the younger generations being hired for their greater Internet/technology experience, older Americans may feel the need to adapt, or else face the risk of being replaced by a younger worker.

Convenience of Staying In Touch

According to Georgia Tech’s 8th WWW Study, 41% of people over 50 say the Internet makes them feel more connected to family members.⁹ Keeping in touch with family and friends is important to older Americans, since many people who have turned 50 are parents whose kids have left home for college or

⁷ Nua Internet Surveys. Senior citizens to embrace the Web.
http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356057&rel=true 9/21/00.

⁸ Nua Internet Surveys. Rising Number of Over 50s Online.
http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905354444&rel=true 10/22/98.

⁹ Older users attracted to the Internet for news, business data.
<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PUBS/OCTNEWS/oc980404.html> 4/18/98.

work, and may already be starting families of their own. Also, starting at 50, a person can experience more deaths of friends and family than in previous years, especially of parents. Thus, seniors find it necessary to stay in touch with their friends and relatives.

The primary Internet application currently attracting an increasing number of middle-age and older Americans is e-mail. Older users say they like e-mail because it “allows them to keep in touch with family members and friends who live in other parts of the country.”¹⁰ But is e-mail an adequate medium for maintaining these important relationships? In Smith and Kollock, two authors question whether people can find community online. They ask whether “relationships between people who never see, smell, touch, or hear each other [can] be supportive and intimate.”¹¹ The answer is most certainly yes, considering that millions of online seniors currently use e-mail as a means of maintaining relationships. Smith and Kollock also mention how Internet users often provide “information, support, companionship, and a sense of belonging to persons they hardly know offline or who are total strangers.”¹² If this is so, one can imagine the sense of community that can flourish between family members and close friends.

E-mail also has an added convenience factor that makes it appealing to seniors. It is quick and easy to use, and is mostly free, unlike postal mail or long-distance telephone calls. There is no need for two people to be at certain locations at a certain time, as there is when one person wants to place a phone call to another. When e-mail is sent, it sits on a server until the recipient has the time to retrieve it.¹³

Convenience of Shopping

The Internet has made shopping much easier for older Americans by providing one-stop websites where a variety of items can be ordered and delivered to the home. E-businesses such as Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, or L.L. Bean are good examples of such sites. Shopping online eliminates the hassle of driving to stores, and for less healthy persons, browsing through store items for long periods can be

¹⁰ Older users attracted to the Internet for news, business data.

<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PUBS/OCTNEWS/oc980404.html> 4/18/98.

¹¹ Smith and Kollock. “Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don’t ride alone.” *Communities in Cyberspace*. p. 167.

¹² Smith and Kollock. “Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don’t ride alone.” *Communities in Cyberspace*. p. 175

¹³ Cisco Publications. IPJ Issues. http://www.ieng.com/warp/public/759/ipj_3-2/ipj_3-2_mail.html 12/08/00.

avoided. Many seniors also would like to eliminate time spent on unnecessary conversation and sales pressure, such as when buying a new car, or making investment decisions. All of these activities can be done through the Internet. After studying some data from Andersen Consulting, we can see how convenient the Internet has become to online shoppers. The Internet outperformed catalogs and stores on all key features that mattered most to online shoppers: competitive price, obtaining everything from one source, convenience, and saving time.¹⁴

How Internet Compares to Other Shopping Channels			
	Internet	Catalog	Stores
Offers most competitive price	21%	10%	13%
Everything from one source	12%	7%	13%
Convenience	59%	41%	12%
Saves time	62%	33%	3%
Source: Andersen Consulting			

Because older Americans enjoy the greater convenience of Internet shopping, they have become one of the most desired Internet markets today, according to the Media Metrix Fall 1999 Q-Metrix findings. Internet users between ages 45 to 64 are more likely than other age groups to own fax and copy machines, large-screen TVs, and satellite dishes. But the strong consumptive tendency of this age group is not limited to tech-related gadgets.¹⁵ Of all age groups, 45- to 64-year-olds have the most credit cards and the highest usage, as well as the highest percentage of frequent-flier members. They are also more likely to buy a new car rather than lease or buy a used one.¹⁶

However, there are some limits to what an older American will buy online, likely due to a greater concern for financial security/privacy over the Internet. According to a Nua Internet Survey, many Internet users over the age of 45 can be reluctant to purchase online, preferring instead to comparison

¹⁴ Retailing: Experienced Internet Shoppers Satisfied with Online Shopping. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/markets/retailing/article/0,1323,6061_278991,00.html#table1 1/13/00.

¹⁵ Demographics: Demographics of the Net Getting Older. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_448131,00.html 8/29/00.

¹⁶ Nua Internet Surveys: Older Users Take to the Internet in Drove. http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905355710&rel=true 4/11/00.

shop on the Internet and complete purchases in a store or over the telephone.¹⁷ Also from the survey, half of Internet users in this age group “comparison shop” online, but only 39 percent of those shoppers actually pay for their goods online. So, although Internet sales are not considerably high for online seniors, the willingness to browse shopping websites still remains high. It is this willingness that Internet advertisers have been trying to capitalize on.

Personal Information Sources

The Internet is a vast information resource that has been taken advantage of by older Americans. Studies at Georgia Tech indicate that older Internet users (those 35 to 54 years old) tend to put a priority on practical information such as news and business data. “[T]he older generation of Internet users tends to use the Web as an applied tool for such things as searching for information and getting news,” Georgia Tech’s 8th WWW Study indicates.¹⁸ Although seniors use the Internet at home to update themselves on current events or stock information, there is another section of online information that seniors are increasingly accessing.

Americans aged 40 and older are more likely to search the Internet for health-related information than younger Americans. In a survey by Pew Internet and American Life, 63% of health information seekers under 40 are frequently online for health information, whereas only 54% of those over 40 frequently go online for health information.¹⁹ As Americans grow older, they are faced with new questions about their health or the health of other family members.

Many seniors are often shy or hesitant about discussing certain health issues with friends or even doctors, such as declining health, sexual dysfunction, signs of cancer, or the impending death of a parent.²⁰ The Internet can be a convenient and nonintrusive way for seniors to get access to answers. For

¹⁷ Nua Internet Surveys: Older Users Still Wary of E-Commerce.

http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905355694&rel=true 4/4/00.

¹⁸ Older users attracted to the Internet for news, business data.

<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PUBS/OCTNEWS/oc980404.html> 4/18/98.

¹⁹ The online health care revolution: How the Web helps Americans take better care of themselves.

http://63.210.24.35/reports/pdfs/PIP_Health_Report.pdf 11/26/00.

²⁰ The online health care revolution: How the Web helps Americans take better care of themselves.

http://63.210.24.35/reports/pdfs/PIP_Health_Report.pdf 11/26/00.

example, Smith and Kollock explain how women experiencing physical and emotional strains associated with menopause have found online support “in knowing that others are going through the same symptoms, feelings, and concerns.”²¹

Places like Seniors Online (<http://www.refdesk.com/seniors.html>) and www.thirdage.com are heavily visited by older Americans. These websites are one-stop repositories for many different types of information pertinent to older life, such as health, relationships, retirement, and family. With more websites beginning to take this increasing trend of new senior Internet users into account, websites are becoming more senior-friendly, and as a result, there are more websites of interest to older Americans. This, in turn, helps to peak the interest of seniors even more, and ensure that they keep coming back for new materials.

Workforce Competition and Competence

Despite the increase in older Americans using the Internet, the US population that falls into the 18 to 34 age group remains the most active online users. By 2004, almost 91 percent of this group will be online.²² This is compared with an eMarketer prediction that by 2003, 27 percent of all Americans over 55 will be active Internet users.²³ Even with the rapid increase in senior representation on the Internet, younger Americans will still hold rank as the most active age group online.

This creates an important problem to older Americans, considering the rapid growth of the IT industry and the Internet that we have discussed throughout this semester. There is an increasing need for talented, Net-savvy workers; even at a place like JCPenney’s, which is also an e-business, an employee might need to know how the Internet can be used to target customers through advertising. Since younger Americans have traditionally had more Internet experience than older Americans, members of the younger generation are grabbing valuable jobs at increasing rates. This can have a profound influence on seniors, especially

²¹ Smith and Kollock. “Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don’t ride alone.” Communities in Cyberspace. p. 172.

²² Demographics: Demographics of the Net Getting Older. http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_448131,00.html 8/29/00.

²³ Nua Internet Surveys. Senior citizens to embrace the Web. http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356057&rel=true 9/21/00.

if one of those jobs happens to be one's own, and especially when one needs a stable source of income in preparation for retirement.

Therefore, one reason why more older Americans are going online is because they want to improve their level of Internet competence, which will then provide more stability in the workplace. Many of the Internet's older users lack confidence in their computer skills, according to the AARP, which may keep them from becoming as Internet savvy as younger generations. Older computer users (56 and older), those less highly educated (high school or less), and those earning \$50,000 or less expressed doubts about their proficiency significantly more often than younger users, the AARP study said.²⁴ As a result, seniors are setting aside time and effort to increase their Internet proficiency.

Many seniors now have the option of taking online correspondence courses that will teach basic computing/Internet skills, thereby helping them to become more Internet-competent. Some sample computing courses, taken from the Albright Life Learning Institute website, include:²⁵

- Keyboarding for the Beginner
- Navigating the Internet
- Computers Don't Byte!
- Windows File Management
- Microsoft Outlook Express
- Creating Greeting Cards, Flyers, and Announcements

The idea is that once seniors gain experience with the Internet, they will continue to stay involved with the Internet since experience will be crucial to maintaining job stability in preparation for retirement.

Current findings from a Nua Internet Survey indicate that the 15 percent of online US seniors spend on average 8.3 hours per week online, which is more than any other age group.²⁶

²⁴ Demographics: Demographics of the Net Getting Older.

http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,,5901_448131,00.html 8/29/00.

²⁵ Albright Life Learning Institute Calendar of Events. <http://alli.albrightcare.org/calendar.html> 12/04/00.

²⁶ Nua Internet Surveys. Senior citizens to embrace the Web.

http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905356057&rel=true 9/21/00.

Conclusion

We have seen four reasons why older Americans are going online for the first time, and how these reasons stem from ways the Internet has peaked seniors' interests. These interests are varied, and range from shopping, to communicating with friends and family, to finding personal information, and to improving one's job security in preparation for retirement. In response to the increased senior presence on the Web, information websites and e-businesses are beginning to take note of older visitors. Businesses and universities are offering correspondence courses to improve seniors' Internet experience, and e-mail services have been getting easier to use.²⁷

The Internet world is gradually adjusting to the presence of an increased senior population, and soon, it may no longer be a domain associated mainly with younger people. This may be yet another example of the Internet's tendency to bring people together, regardless of their background or age as we have discussed throughout this semester in class. The Internet has become the ultimate land of equal opportunity, and older Americans are certainly staking their claim on this new frontier.

Helpful link for teachers:

Source for all the statistics websites I consulted during my research:
<http://www.teleport.com/~tbchad/stats1.html>

²⁷ Cisco Publications. IPJ Issues. http://www.ieng.com/warp/public/759/ipj_3-2/ipj_3-2_mail.html 12/08/00.