



Partnering With Senior Connects Or Senior Net

How to increase senior housing Internet by up to 20 percent.

By Don Kent ■ *eCablevision Consulting*

Senior citizens represent a significant opportunity for Internet service providers because they enjoy accessing the Net as most Netizens do. They especially value receiving the latest pictures of their grandchildren, researching health topics, and sending and receiving emails to and from their friends and family members. Mobility-impaired senior citizens are especially loyal customers and use the Internet “to expand their world.” And yet Internet penetration remains abysmally low in many senior housing facilities, and the usual marketing campaigns and “call to action” tactics often prove to be ineffective.

Marketing to seniors requires a value approach, and operators that invest a little creativity can be richly rewarded by significant increases in Internet penetration from both loyal and happy customers.

Obtaining a computer is usually not an impediment for a senior citizen since their adult children



a computer for them. However, the most significant barrier that operators

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often encourage parents to begin using the Internet by offering to purchase

must overcome is identifying a “kinder and gentler” program that is geared to-

ward seniors and will teach them how to use a computer and access the Internet. Until many seniors are comfortable that they will be able to understand how to use the Internet, they will not purchase the service no matter how compelling an offer may be. Senior-oriented training programs are not core competencies of ISPs, and some seniors are uncomfortable receiving training directly from a company attempting to sell them a product.

One particularly effective solution is to partner with a local service organization comprised of volunteers and not associated with the ISP that focuses on teaching senior citizen computer and Internet skills. Two of the organizations that promote senior citizen computer and Internet literacy are Senior Net and Senior Connects. These companies apply very different tactics to assist seniors.

Senior Net (www.seniornet.org) is a national organization staffed by senior citizens that offer various educational programs that include computer and Internet training. They have facilities in 240 localities within the United States and other countries. Some states are very well represented and have more than a dozen Senior Net offices, while other states are less well represented and have only one or two offices, sometimes in relatively small and isolated communities. A first step is for ISPs to visit Senior Net’s website

to check their learning center listing to determine if these locations matches your ISP's footprint.

Over 4,500 individuals work at Senior Net as instructors, coaches, administrators, website discussion leaders, and volunteers. Sometimes, seniors feel especially comfortable interacting with and learning from other seniors, and Senior Net uses this to promote senior literacy. Training is consistent and follows a standardized lesson plan. Senior Net's is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization of computer-using adults, aged 50 and older. Senior Net's portal offers information that ranges from citizenship to philosophy and includes discussion groups.

Senior Net's computer training labs are well-equipped with the most modern equipment.

Seniors interested in attending a class first pay an annual \$40 dollar fee to join Senior Net and then pay additional modest fees to attend each class. While Senior Net is an outstanding program for individuals that have already purchased Internet connectivity, even modest annual dues and class fees will reduce participation by seniors that have not yet made a decision to subscribe with an online service. Also, some seniors will not subscribe to an online service until they've completed the classes and are comfortable that the monthly Internet fee would be of good value to them. Classes are conducted in training facilities maintained by Senior Net which ensures seniors use modern equipment in a consistent environment. However, some seniors occasionally find it difficult to attend meetings outside their facility, and this may reduce the number of participants that sign up for a course.

Each Senior Net facility is managed by volunteers that will likely be very interested in working with ISPs seeking to promote senior citizen literacy. However, the most effective approach of partnering with Senior Net might be to pay for a new customers' first year of membership and computer training class so the senior citizens

have comfort that they will be able to use the Internet service that they are purchasing. Senior Net gratefully accepts donations that are made to the corporation itself and uses these funds to enhance and expand the services they offer.

SeniorConnects(www.seniorconnects.org) shares the same objective of promoting senior citizen literacy, but uses a very

different approach. Senior Connects is a national not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation that is youth-managed and conducts training directly inside the senior housing facilities. There are no charges to either residents or facilities using this program. Its instructors are high school and college students interested in performing community outreach service projects. Sometimes,

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senior citizens are somewhat technophobic and are fearful that they will be unable to understand how to use a computer which is a significant cause of low penetration in senior housing. When a student “adopts” a senior housing facility, many seniors view them as “surrogate grandkids” and feel comfortable receiving computer and Internet lessons from them. Training for residents without any computer

others programs since volunteers typically spend several months helping at each “adopted” senior housing facility and become known to many of the residents. Often, the facilities invite the volunteers to have lunch with the residents to promote the relationships.

When Senior Connects does not have volunteers in a specific community, they will contact the public

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experience includes lessons on basic computer skills, an introduction to the Internet, a class on search, and lessons on email use. The Senior Connects methodology ensures a consistent level of training and collateral handout materials.

Senior Connects volunteers adopt a facility and teach from within the senior housing itself.

Senior Connects is a more intimate experience when compared to many

library and community outreach organizations and establish a group of volunteers to “adopt” senior housing facilities. Senior Connects is a program that is especially effective in helping seniors overcome fear of computers and the Internet, and feel more comfortable about making a purchase decision. While the volunteers are not adults and are high school and college students, all individuals under the age of 18 choose an adult “mentor” to help guide them with their com-

munity service. Volunteers are approved by each senior housing management’s staff.

Senior Connects emphasizes a one-on-one training approach to facilitate senior learning.

ISPs can partner with Senior Connects by donating a computer for use in the senior housing’s public area or by making a donation to the corporation itself so they can procure computers. However, Senior Connects emphasized that it will establish programs wherever requested at no cost to anyone and merely as a community service project.

Improving Internet penetration in senior housing has been problematic to ISPs because seniors often require a compelling value proposition to justify making a monthly financial commitment of this nature. Some seniors choose not to subscribe to an ISP’s service because they are not confident that they will be able to master the computer despite the fact that many of their families are encouraging them to become connected and offer to purchase them computers.

Senior Net and Senior Connects are two excellent not-for-profit organizations that promote senior citizen Net literacy and increase the demand for online service. Partnering with one, or both of these organizations, can increase public awareness for the ISPs, enhance their public image, and increase the number of Internet customers. Additional information and contact information can be obtained by visiting both companies’ websites. ■

About the Author

Don Kent has spent over 25 years working with video operators, broadband service providers, and with early phase companies specializing in the delivery of broadband and digital content services. Please address questions or topics that you’d like to see discussed in subsequent columns to Dkent@HTINC.com.