

Growing old with gadgets

For technology-savvy Boomers, retirement will be filled with bits and bytes, not bridge

Baby Boomers want technology, not knitting in their golden years, according to Susan Ayers Walker, head of SmartSilvers Alliance in Menlo Park, a consulting firm focusing on new products for aging-in-place Boomers.

"We are the first generation that grew up with technology," Walker, a self-described card-carrying AARP member and technologist. "As a leading-edge Boomer, I realized that we age every day. Some day I'm going to need assistance as I decline and we're lacking in nurses and caregivers. We're the 'pig in a python.'"

New technologies won't be approached with apprehension by the Boomer generation, who number 77 million in the United States and 450 million worldwide, according to Forbes magazine. This is the generation who grew up watching The Jetsons and have lived to see its futuristic renderings become commonplace reality: flat-screen televisions, robotic room cleaners and face-to-face video phones, she said.

"Those things stimulated my mind and showed me the potential of technology," she said.

Walker, a former electrical engineer and one of the first women to design semiconductors, said she wants to get Silicon Valley engaged in product development that goes beyond the 12-to-26-year-olds market.

As the effects of aging begin to take root in the population, aging Boomers will clamor for technologies such as Starry Night Sleep Technology to alleviate insomnia; ambient-noise-reduction devices for the hearing impaired; and stress-reduction devices, which Walker called in an article "Today's New Mood Ring."

"We're a big group, and we have a lot of money. ... We have \$2 trillion in annual income and 70 percent of U.S. financial assets and half of all discretionary spending ... and we're not technologically handicapped.

"There is no way, no where, no how that I will ever give up my cell phone and e-mail to sit on a porch and knit. It's not in our vocabulary. I'm going to take my technology to the grave," she said.

Brain-fitness products and programs such as Wii Fitness are having ancillary uses beyond entertainment. Boomers, who killed their knees running, can get fit on the carpet, Walker said.

"It's the first time I've seen anything on the market that I can use myself, and it's fun to use," Walker, who has osteoporosis and uses Wii to improve balance to avoid falling, said. Yoga exercises feature a circle on the screen that shows Walker when she is in balance, and she can ski jump in front of the television or return to her childhood love of Hula Hoops, she said.

Approximately one-third of Palo Alto's population are Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, according to the City of Palo Alto.

Woe to any senior-retirement community or senior center that does not have the new technologies available, Walker said. Boomers will demand them, and they won't go anywhere where the technologies aren't provided, she said.

Avenidas Senior Center in Palo Alto has purchased PositScience products to install on the center's computers and hosted a Wii demonstration for its Parkinson's disease group, according to Judith Webb, manager of Lifelong Learning and Leisure.

Avenidas will host two workshops entitled "Maintain Your Brain," to discuss the latest scientific research in February. And the Palo Alto Library will host a series of brain-fitness lunchtime lectures in May, entitled "Feed Your Head: Nourish Your Boomer Brain at the Library." The series is funded by a \$14,000 federal Library Services and Technology Act grant.

But it isn't only Boomers who are getting hooked on the new technology once they've tried it.

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System uses cognitive brain-fitness tools such as Big Brain Academy to help polytrauma and brain-injury patients improve reflexes and cognitive skills, according to Miriam Valle, a recreational therapist at the Livermore campus. Residents can throw virtual darts, or bowl, golf or play tennis using Wii, improving upper-body flexibility and strength and improving eye-hand coordination, she said.

At the Menlo Park VA nursing home facility, senior vets in wheelchairs lined up for a chance to bowl using Wii.

"My turn," Don Bagnall, a Navy veteran said, maneuvering his chair in front of the big-screen television. He pushed down on the button of the Wii wand, which directs the virtual ball. Swinging his arm back, a cartoon person representing him positioned its arm simultaneously. Bagnall swung up rapidly and released the button, and the ball dropped onto the lane, rolling toward the pins. The men watched the screen intensely.

"Strike! Strike! Strike! Strike! Strike!" Bagnall yelled, raising his arms in victory as the pins clattered.

Ed Gorski, an Air Force veteran and former semi-professional bowler, looked on appreciatively. He was the top point-getter in the Wii bowling alley.

"It's almost exactly like bowling in a bowling alley. ... I'd like to have one of these in my room," he said.

— *Sue Dremann*