

COMMUNITYMANAGER

JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2019



Aging on Their Own Terms

The housing decisions made by today's baby boomers will likely be felt for years to come.

BY JENNIFER MILLER

Technology and the sharing economy are supporting aging in place in a whole new way, according to Joseph Coughlin, MIT AgeLab leader. While recognizing that the study only addressed a small sample, Coughlin described the findings as “eye-opening,” in a recent *Forbes* article. He notes that using services like homecare, transportation, and meal preparation kits to stay in one’s own home via the sharing economy cost significantly less than the average monthly cost of assisted living.

In the article, Coughlin points out that this represents a huge opportunity for senior-living communities to take on the role of a “systems integrator of trusted

technologies and services” that could cater both to residents and the family members who support them. “The real opportunity is to transform the senior housing industry into a continuum of care services that begins in the homes that older adults live in today,” he writes.

It’s no surprise that baby boomers have been making plans to age in place through their golden years. In fact, according to a recent AARP survey, nearly 90 percent of older adults want to stay in their own home through retirement.

However, homebuying trends suggest that while baby boomers may want to age in place, it’s not necessarily in their current place. According to a 2018

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report from the National Association of Realtors (NAR), the more than 75 million members of the baby boomer generation (currently aged 54–72) made up 32 percent of recent homebuyers. And with the addition of the much smaller silent generation (currently aged 73–93) that number goes up to 38 percent—making up a larger percentage of homebuyers than the country’s largest generational cohort, millennials.

Because boomers represent such a large—and socioeconomically diverse—share of the population and a nearly two-decade age range, there are significant demographic differences even within the boomer cohort.

NAR took this diversity into account in their research, which broke the baby boomer generation into two distinct demographic groups: younger boomers, born 1955–1964, and older boomers, born 1946–1954. Notably, the younger boomers (along with their Gen X successors) fall into the “sandwich generation”—those who are often caring for both their children and their parents. These buyers were the most likely of any group (20 percent) to purchase a multi-generational home, with an expectation to stay in it for 20 years—longer than any other cohort.

The housing decisions made by today’s boomers will potentially impact communities for years to come, so it’s essential for community managers to stay on top of what their current wants and needs are, and to anticipate how they will change in the years ahead.



ACTIVELY LOOKING

Leisure World of Maryland’s Community Manager Kevin Flannery sees the reality of resident turnover on a regular basis, noting that the 55-and-over community in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Silver Spring, Md., has about 425 homes turn over each year—about 7 percent of the community’s 5,660 properties.

For Flannery, these new residents represent both a challenge and an opportunity. “The key is to stay balanced in managing the community. The new people coming in may have expectations that vary significantly from existing and long-term residents,” he says. “But they’re all paying the same fee, so you have to always be cognizant of advancing the community and making it marketable.”

On the flip side, this influx of new residents provides Flannery with a built-in focus group to help him recognize and

anticipate trends of the 55-plus market. Flannery holds a quarterly orientation with new residents, which allows him to quickly understand their priorities.

“Managers need to stay in tune and engage (their) people,” Flannery says. “It’s hard to sit in your office and figure out who’s going to be moving here in five years, so you have to engage those who are moving in now and discover what drove them to your community. Collecting that data is so important.”

Known as an active lifestyle community since it opened in 1966, Leisure World of Maryland’s current and future residents prioritize a high-level of physical and intellectual activity in their community. But the specifics are changing. For instance, in the 1980s, Leisure World’s marketing was all about golf. Now, the emphasis is on the community’s fitness center, exercise classes, and continuing education programs.

This noticeable shift in activity preferences is occurring in communities throughout the country.

“I like to say that the Woodstock generation has arrived,” says Mary Schmit, CMCA, general manager of Venture Out at Mesa in Mesa, Ariz. “I knew it was changing when, instead of Oldsmobiles, I started seeing Mustangs and Harleys.”

In this 55-plus community, tennis is being replaced by pickleball and landlines by Wi-Fi.

More than anything, Schmit has observed that baby boomers demand a more upscale experience. “They’re used to resort-style living, and they expect the



same amenities in their homes and community associations that they're used to in their vacations," Schmit says. "Today's seniors don't want to just put their feet up and watch the world go by. They want to be active and involved and they're seeking a lot of social amenities."

SECURITY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

While activities and amenities rank at the top of baby boomers' list, security is still the biggest feature that residents are seeking. "It doesn't matter if you're 55 or 85, it's a universal thing that everyone wants," says Flannery. His 610-acre community is fully-fenced and has secure gatehouses for entry, both key differentiators, according to Flannery. He and his team are also looking into new technologies that will help residents feel more secure within their homes, throughout the property, and beyond. Leisure World's provider for

their cable bulk contract is beginning to incorporate technology features like networked sensors throughout the home that would monitor both property and resident alike. Flannery is also increasingly interested in opportunities to implement telemedicine for his residents, in partnership with Leisure World's on-site MedStar Health facility.

"That's a new frontier that's coming up and we need to be making plans for (it now)," he says, noting that readily available services like telemedicine are likely to extend the time that residents can live unassisted in their homes.

CREATING COMMUNITY

Perhaps one of the most notable shifts being seen in senior living is the way that baby boomers are defining their own idea of community and their chosen family units. Venture Out's Schmit says that she

is beginning to see more seniors moving in with their friends.

"There's a huge percentage of unmarried people who are retiring now," says Schmit, attributing much of this shift to changing social norms dating back to the 1970s that changed how people viewed traditional roles and social structures like marriage and gender equality. "For these boomers, whether it's same-sex couples or just friends, their community is the family that they've created among their friends."

In fact, Schmit predicts that co-housing is going to be the way of the future and points out that community associations may need to take another look at existing covenants that require residents to be familial, as that could potentially exclude a significant group of homeowners. She also notes that these more loosely-knit family structures could impact housing inventory down the road, as single residents or friend groups are less likely to be seeking the larger homes that have been in demand in recent years.

On a recent episode of Washington, D.C., radio station WAMU's *The Kojo Nnamdi Show*, guest Steve Gurney put a name to the trend that Schmit is seeing. The founder of 'Retirement Living Sourcebook' describes it as another facet of the concept of aging in place: aging in community. "These are people who like their community and feel connected to it but may not be able to stay in their current home. So, they want to find a new retirement community within their current neighborhood and social structure."

An increasingly popular example of this model is the Village Movement, which started in 2001 as a grassroots, consumer-driven concept where neighbors organically come together to enable each other to stay in their community and age in place. Gurney also points out that for many retirees who need to keep expenses down, the concept of friends and family helping each other in a communal way is truly one of the best ways to save money. He likens it to the "it-takes-a-village" concept of community members joining together to address childcare and sees it as a highly successful model for elder care as well.

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Tech Savvy Seniors

According to Mary Schmit, CMCA, general manager of Venture Out at Mesa in Mesa Ariz., nearly 98 percent of her community members consider themselves computer literate, from their smartphones to their video streaming services.

So what technology is likely to make the most difference as today's seniors—and the family members who care for them—contemplate aging in place?

Amazon Echo and similar smart assistants from Apple and Google integrate well with a full suite of smart home products and can be invaluable when it comes to daily tasks like reading books, making phone calls, and setting reminders, all by voice command.

The Ring video doorbell and others like it allow a homeowner to see, hear, and speak to someone at their door via a smartphone, tablet or PC without having to physically walk to or open the door.

Smart thermostats like Google's Nest or the Sensi Smart Thermostat easily regulate their home's temperature and can be controlled remotely through an app or integration with smart assistants like the Amazon Echo.

Smart appliances, from refrigerators that know when food staples are running out and can even order a replenishment, to robotic vacuums like Roomba and the new Worx Landroid lawnmower, can help seniors maintain their homes.

Wearable devices like Fitbit and Apple Watch allow baby boomers to conveniently monitor their own health data and encourage a healthier and more active lifestyle.

App-based car services like Uber and Lyft offer an easy and seamless transportation option for seniors who no longer can, or want to, drive. Go Go Grandparent is a concierge service that dispatches and monitors rides for seniors who may not be savvy enough to coordinate their own use of app-based services and their family members.

Sharing economy service providers can make daily errands and household chores a thing of the past. Instacart and other grocery order and delivery services can be easily set up by seniors or their long-distance family members. Services like TaskRabbit can do everything from moving and assembling furniture to packing and handyman jobs around the house at a straightforward hourly rate.

