

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES TARGETING THE SENIORS MARKET REQUIRES PATIENCE, CLEAR COMMUNICATION AND EMPATHY, SOUTH FLORIDA FIRMS DISCOVER.

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Author: Jeffery D. Zbar Special Correspondent

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Ellen Morris has built Elder Law Associates PA on a simple premise: Keep it simple.

From how she advertises and markets, to how she deals with clients, Morris makes sure her message is clear. And for good reason: Most of her clients are seniors who need estate planning, end-of-life legal assistance and guidance with government programs. Poor marketing or confusing language would confuse them and scare them off.

"We don't oversimplify. We just speak with clarity, compassion and respect," said Morris, managing partner with the Boca Raton law practice. "They understand the advertisement or issue better, and feel more comfortable."

Companies marketing to seniors in South Florida have a robust market. Residents 60 years and older account for 27 percent of Palm Beach County's population, 20 percent of Broward's, and 18 percent of Miami-Dade's, according to the Florida Department of Elder Affairs in Tallahassee.

And the numbers are growing. As the first Baby Boomers reach age 60 by 2006, the number of seniors will balloon, according to the U.S. Administration on Aging. By 2030, one in five U.S. residents will be 65 or older, up from one in eight in 2000, according to administration figures.

That makes seniors an alluring demographic. Small businesses have learned to adapt marketing messages to this group. While they use such common tactics as clear pricing and relationship building, they have to remember that seniors aren't a homogeneous group.

"This is not a single market," said Herschell Gordon Lewis, president of Lewis Enterprises, a Fort Lauderdale marketing consultancy, and author of *Silver Linings: Selling to the Expanding Mature Market*. For example, "Those who have retired have different values than those who are still working."

GET TO THE POINT

Lewis divides seniors into several groups, based on their financial situation. The affluent can afford to buy and travel as they please. The comfortable are careful shoppers who like to think they're affluent. Those still working look forward to comfortable golden years. And those in the fixed-income group watch every purchase.

Any retailer or service provider should know how to target each section of this niche market, Lewis said.

In general, ads targeting seniors should be shorter and feature larger type (at least 11 point) than ads for the general market, and should get straight to the point, he said.

"Subtlety doesn't work anymore. State your case, get to the point and get out," Lewis said, adding that identifying the audience as "senior" in the ad can be a bad move. "Danger can lie in use of the word 'senior' and 'retired' until you're working with over-70s. Many resent growing old."

Seniors have become more media savvy and tune in to the television, newspaper and Internet news and information choices available today, said Anita Finley, a gerontologist and publisher of *Senior Life & Boomer Times*, a Boca Raton-

based publication.

"They're not the seniors of the 1940s," she said. "They're very different."

NETWORK CONNECTIONS

Morris' approach to marketing the practice includes networking with others serving the senior market. She is involved with government committees on Alzheimer's and public policy. She also is part of a professional resource network, a group of local providers who specialize in senior issues.

She has made presentations to discharge planners and social workers at hospitals on such topics as assisted-living decisions, Alzheimer's disease, long-term care and preparing documents for seniors. In turn, she establishes herself as an expert among those workers, who then feel more comfortable about steering potential clients her way.

Morris also presents seminars on elder law issues at senior retirement communities and community centers.

Whether she's creating an ad, talking with a client or speaking at a community center, Morris simplifies the presentation, but doesn't talk down to her clients.

"Just because someone is aging doesn't mean they don't have the brain capacity to understand details and issues," she said.

TECH MADE EASY

Teaching seniors about computers, the Internet and electronic mail can be confusing enough for the student. Dale Dion has to make sure his marketing and sales efforts don't scare them off before they start.

Three-quarters of his clients are older, said Dion, 44, the president of Computer Tutor Plus Inc., a Hollywood-based computer training firm. He has learned to slow his presentations; the first two-hour session is on turning on and off the computer, and using the mouse. The classified ads he once ran said: "Computer training especially designed for seniors in plain simple language."

"They knew that I understood that teaching seniors was different, and that I knew why it was different," he said. "They know I market directly to them. Seniors isn't a sidelight for my business."

Dion, who now has 1,500 clients in his database, stopped advertising in 2000. The majority of his 20 to 40 Boynton Beach-to- Miami appointments each week come via referral, he said. But he still reaches out to his target market, speaking occasionally at area retirement communities. In fact, that's how his business started: One early client stopped in the middle of a lesson, picked up the phone and told two friends, who soon booked Dion.

LISTENING WITH CARE

For retailers dealing with the senior market, clarity in pricing and product messaging can go a long way. For 20 years, Phyllis Casler has run The Deerfield Hearing Center, a hearing-testing service and hearing aid retailer on Hillsborough Boulevard near Century Village.

Though new customers -- four-fifths of whom are seniors -- come mostly from patient referrals, rising competition from chain-store hearing aid centers has increased Casler's need to advertise. She mails her newsletter three times a year to 2,000 current and past clients. It discusses routine maintenance and care and how to recognize or handle hearing problems in family members.

Where Morris doesn't discuss price in her marketing, Casler cannot wholly escape it. The Deerfield Beach shop will meet or beat other advertised offers, she boasts, and features "High Quality at Discount Prices." Her ads featuring discounts on replacement batteries are surrounded with perforation marks to resemble a coupon. Where chains run pricey full-page ads, she emphasizes compassion, she said.

"We stress we're caring, we're not a chain, and we're not a clinic," she said.

Her ads and newsletters also avoid talk of newer technology such as digital hearing aids, Casler said. Digital means technology, and "technology" can mean "complicated" to the elderly. Casler has a simple way to find out of her

customers are technologically savvy. She asks for their e-mail address.

"If they look at me like I'm from another planet, we know `don't go there,'" she said. "To me, digital means rechargeable, no buttons or wires. They want new and modern, but they don't want to be bogged down in details."

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP

Casler and Morris also both spend time talking to and listening to their clients. Unlike younger clients, who may want to hurry along, seniors often want someone to talk to. Holocaust survivors, proud grandparents, former CEOs of American industry -- they have stories to tell.

During initial interviews with new customers, Casler writes notes about the person. What's her spouse's name? Is he a widower? Jot that note about the grandkids' graduation. It all goes on an index card that's kept on file. Casler does this with all patients, but with seniors it especially strengthens the relationship.

"Writing these things down really helps," she said. "This helps us remember them, and helps them know they're more than just a number."

Jeffery D. Zbar is a freelance writer. He can be reached at jeff@goinsoho.com.

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 4; Caption: LEGAL ADVICE: Betty Sorrin confers with her lawyer, Ellen Morris, of Elder Law Associates in Boca Raton, whose firm specializes in legal cases that involve seniors. Staff photo/Scott Fisher TESTING: Ned Lipshutz of Deerfield Beach has his hearing checked by Phyllis Casler, owner of The Deerfield Hearing Center, a hearing- testing service and hearing aid retailer. Staff photo/ Lou Toman COVER PHOTO: Phyllis Casler, owner, The Deerfield Hearing Center. Staff photo/ Lou Toman Ellen Morris TIPS ON COURTING SENIORS Keep it simple. Make ads and fliers friendly and inviting. Print is larger than normal. Also, put pictures in the ads to make them more personal. Stick to 800 toll-free numbers. Numbers beginning with 877, 866 or 855 are unfamiliar as toll-free numbers and could cause confusion. Keep it simple, Part II. When explaining complex issues or products, talk in easy-to-understand language, without appearing condescending. Cut the cost. Mention discounts and boast FREE offers in large type. When appropriate, use a coupon. Include expiration dates or deadlines for offers. Make seniors feel special. Create "Senior Tuesday" or other offers. Then, when they show up, card them. Use humor and endear your company to them, says Herschell Gordon Lewis, president of marketing consultancy Lewis Enterprises.

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