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# Age-Friendly Communication

Facts, Tips and Ideas



Canada

*To promote and protect the health of Canadians through leadership, partnership, innovation and action in public health.*

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## Welcome to *Age-Friendly Communication!*

There's no doubt about it—seniors are a force to be reckoned with. Today, Canadians aged 65 and older make up 13% of our population. Flash forward to 2036 and seniors will account for one quarter of all Canadians!

Whether you run a business, a government program serving seniors, an agency delivering health information, or you work in a social service agency that supports seniors, you want to serve your clients and customers well. How well you communicate with your senior audience contributes to how well you meet their needs. Whether you provide services related to health, financial planning, travel and leisure, housing, or other services, keeping communication approaches and messages current is vital—especially in this era of rapidly changing technology and information overload.

This guide offers practical and easy-to-follow advice, tips and additional sources of information to help you communicate clearly and effectively. Most of the ideas and advice can easily be applied to communicating with audiences of *all* ages. There is no fixed line between a “young” audience and an “old” audience—and no solid boundary between communication “for seniors” and communication for everyone else. Plain language, good design and materials that are easy to use and understand are valued by everyone.

*Age-Friendly Communication*, an update of our popular *Communicating with Seniors*, includes new information and statistics, as well as expanded information on communicating through the Internet and other new media—all aimed at equipping you to know your audience and to communicate effectively. Read on!

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# Introduction

**What makes communication work? Why do some messages have an impact while others never reach their target? This publication seeks to make communicators in business, government and service agencies aware of the need to factor in the aging of the population when planning and implementing communication activities and initiatives—and provide useful information that will help them achieve that goal.**

Communication and information are vitally important to seniors. Growing older is a process of adjustment, and information helps in the transition. Seniors want information about housing, transportation, employment, legal matters and retirement planning. They want to know about health, illness prevention and the effects of medication and nutrition. They're eager for information about programs, services, policies and products, as well as leisure, volunteer and cultural activities.

## **A two-way street**

The way that governments, service agencies and businesses choose to communicate with seniors can have profound implications for all aspects of seniors' lives and well-being. Unless communication about programs, products and opportunities is effective and reflects the needs of seniors, uptake on communication messages will be low. On the other hand, services and programs that are effectively communicated to seniors will be used readily.

Moreover, the number of seniors, their purchasing power and amount of discretionary time can have a significant impact on the success of businesses and programs.

## About this guide

This publication draws together a range of research findings, practical tips and advice from experts on communicating with seniors. It is divided into four main sections:

**The Senior Audience: Large, Growing and Diverse** looks at what we know about Canadian seniors and how the facts might influence your communication choices.

**Choosing the Communication Medium** outlines communication media—both new and traditional—to explore their suitability for communicating with seniors.

**Formulating Your Message** offers tips on the content and design of messages, applying what we know about senior audiences and communication media.

**Advice from the Experts** is a resource list and bibliography of sources for further information about communicating effectively, especially with older persons.

### Effective communication—more than a good message

In short, this guide is about making your communication “age-friendly.” While

## Serving Seniors Well

- Do you have a policy or guidelines for serving older clients?
- Do your frontline and customer service staff have specific training in how to serve older customers?
- Do staff allow extra time and care in dealing with senior clients, without rushing to complete the sale, transaction, interview or medical visit?
- Does your business or office offer comfortable seating?
- Do your Web site, stationery and forms (including online forms) use easily understood terms and large type?
- Are your automated services (bank machines, information kiosks), adjustable for people of varying heights? Are buttons and lettering large and easy to read for people with less than perfect vision?

this includes presenting messages in ways that senior audiences will understand and appreciate, it goes well beyond careful shaping of intentional messages.

Think about it: if your public address announcements are long and complex (think of a crowded airport), if your directional signs are visible only to basketball players, if your services are not accessible to people with reduced agility or mobility—what *unintentional* messages are you communicating to those you serve? Failure to adapt communication

to the needs of older audiences or to consider whether your business or service is age-friendly has negative effects for you as well as for seniors.

## It only makes sense

As the Alberta Council on Aging points out in its *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit*, communicating effectively with seniors is based on common sense and courtesy—on considering seniors' needs and respecting seniors' contributions to the community. It's a wise move for business, governments and others communicating with the public—within the next 25 to 30 years, one Canadian in four will be a senior. So, now is the time to start designing communication media (newspapers, road signs, telephone directories) and environments (housing, public buildings, shopping areas) that take this fact into account.

**For government**, communicating and serving seniors well means recognizing their contributions and adapting, where necessary, the services and communication about those services to meet the needs of an aging society.

**For business**, communicating well with seniors means being sensitive to a major consumer market—a large and growing segment with more disposable income, fewer of the financial demands facing younger families, and plenty of leisure time. Services and products that are age-friendly should

be publicized and marketed strongly as they are likely to be more user-friendly for a great many other Canadians as well.

**For communities** that want to be age-friendly, the challenge is to support involvement of citizens throughout the lifespan. Participation and engagement contributes to the quality of life and health of all members of the community, including seniors. Not only will seniors' well-being be served, but the entire community will benefit from their life experience, skills and free time. Seniors are already major contributors to volunteer social action and need community support to continue that role.

In the end, communication that is age-friendly is likely to be universally friendly by being more inclusive.

When information is easy to see, easy to hear and easy to understand, everyone benefits. When services and facilities are accessible, safe and well designed, everyone can use them in comfort and security. And when staff are trained to deal sensitively and respectfully with clients and customers, service improves for everyone.

## Check Your Attitude!

- Avoid stereotyping or reinforcing incorrect perceptions about seniors—show older people as you know them to be—active participants, using a full range of abilities in a full range of roles and activities.
- Shun ageism, racism and sexism in conversation, text, illustrations and photographs. They are prohibited by law.
- Avoid ageist language (that categorizes seniors negatively), such as “the aged,” “the elderly,” “oldsters,” “senile,” “feeble,” etc.
- Use “seniors,” “older persons” or “older adults” if you need to indicate the age group.
- Beware of patronizing, condescending or childish expressions and tone when talking with or about seniors. Their lifelong experience comes in handy in detecting flattery and insincere deference.
- Remember that the way you use language reflects your attitudes and your respect for the audience.





# The Senior Audience: Large, Growing and Diverse

Canada's population of people aged 65 and older (generally the age group we call "seniors" in this publication) has grown more than twice as fast as the overall population since the early 1980s, a trend that will continue for decades to come. Knowing demographic information about seniors and understanding the effects of the aging process is critical to communicating effectively with that sector of Canadians.

## Canada's seniors at a glance

Who are Canada's seniors? Are your perceptions about older Canadians valid and up to date, or have you fallen for some of the myths about seniors and aging? Knowing the facts about seniors is an essential starting point for planning to communicate with this large and growing audience. Here are some facts worth knowing:

### A growing proportion of the population . . .

- Seniors currently (2005) make up 13% of Canada's population—projections show that by 2036, they will account for close to 25% of the population.<sup>1</sup>
- Women account for 52% of seniors aged 65 to 69 and for 75% of those 90 years or older. Differences in life expectancy between men and women have begun to narrow, a trend that is projected to continue.<sup>2</sup>

### Urban dwellers . . .

- As is the case with all Canadians, fewer seniors are living in rural areas than in the past. In 2001, close to 61% of seniors lived in one of Canada's 27 Census metropolitan areas, while another 9% resided in smaller urban areas (with a population of 50,000 or more). A much smaller proportion (23%) lives in rural areas, with only 8% of rural dwellers living in more remote rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

### More immigrants, visible minorities . . .

- A relatively large proportion of seniors in Canada are immigrants. For example, in 2001, 29% of people in Canada aged 65 to 74 and 28% of those aged 75 to 84 were immigrants—compared to 21% of younger adults (between the ages of 25 and 54).<sup>4</sup>
- While almost all seniors speak either English or French (or both), the proportion of seniors unable to speak one of the country's official languages is on the rise—in 2001, 5% of men aged 85 and older could not speak English or French, compared to 3% in 1981. Women across all age groups are more likely than men to speak neither official language.<sup>5</sup>
- Members of visible minority groups account for a growing share of Canada's population—visible minorities (non-white,

but excluding Aboriginal peoples) accounted for 2% of Canada's seniors population in 1981 and for 7% in 2001.<sup>6</sup>

### Aboriginal seniors, a smaller proportion . . .

- Canada's Aboriginal populations are generally younger than other Canadians. In 2001, 4% of those who reported being Aboriginal persons were aged 65 or older, compared to 13% of the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>7</sup>

### Most live in a private household, many with a partner . . .

- As of 2001, almost all seniors (93%) were living in private households—45% with a spouse or partner, 27% alone, and 18% with a child or grandchild. Only 7% were living in an institutional setting (for example, a long-term care facility).<sup>8</sup>
- Among seniors, more than three quarters (77%) of men and just over half of women (52%) were married or in common-law living arrangements, as of 2001.<sup>9</sup>

### Better educated, but lower levels of literacy . . .

- Older Canadians are a better educated sector of the population than was the case 15 years ago. In 1990, 63% of senior men had less than a high school education; in 2004, that had dropped to 47%. The trend

is similar for women. Over the same period, the proportion of senior men and women with a postsecondary certificate or diploma or a university degree increased.<sup>10</sup>

- At the same time, many seniors have some difficulty with reading. Over 80% of seniors have low literacy skills that do not enable them to cope well in today's complex knowledge society, or to make effective use of such documents as transportation schedules, maps and charts. This is also the case with numeracy skills—with 88% of seniors lacking skills needed to manage effectively the mathematical requirements of a range of situations.<sup>11</sup>
- Looking to the future, it is projected that by 2031, seniors with low literacy skills will number over 6 million people—double the number in 2008.<sup>12</sup>

### **Spending on personal consumption . . .**

- Senior households spent a total of \$69 billion in 1996.<sup>13</sup> Most of their expenditures are on personal consumption. In 2003, for example, among couples aged 65 to 74 years, 74 cents of every dollar was spent on personal consumption, with the remainder going to taxes (16 cents), savings (4 cents), security (3 cents) and gifts/contributions (3 cents).<sup>14</sup> Two thirds of personal consumption expenditures were on accommodation, transportation and food.<sup>15</sup>

### **More disposable income and time to volunteer . . .**

- Seniors have more leisure time and disposable income than members of other age groups.<sup>16</sup> Between 1980 and 2003, the average total before-tax income of senior couples increased by 24%, from \$39,800 to \$49,300. Unattached seniors also experienced increases in income—43% for unattached men (\$14,100 to \$20,200) and 42% for unattached women (\$12,800 to \$18,200).<sup>17</sup>
- Seniors give generously of their time—39% of those aged 65 to 74 volunteered in 2004.<sup>18</sup>

### **Healthy, active and independent . . .**

- In 2006, more than four in ten Canadians aged 65 and older (43%) reported having a disability (condition or health problem) that limits their everyday activities, compared to about 17% of the population aged 15 and older. The disability rate rises with age—more than half (56%) of seniors aged 75 and older reported having an activity limitation.<sup>19</sup>
- At the same time, many seniors consider themselves to be in good health—40% of those between 65 and 74 years described their health as very good or excellent in 2003 (down slightly from 42% in 1994–1995), while among their older counterparts (75 and

older), 32% reported excellent or very good health (down from 36% in 1994–1995).<sup>20</sup>

- While older Canadians are less likely to be physically active than younger adults, the differences are not as great as might be expected. In 2003, 27% of men aged 65 to 74 were considered to be physically active in their leisure time, almost the same proportion (26%) as younger men (aged 25 to 54). A slightly smaller proportion of women aged 65 to 74 were active (17%) compared to their younger counterparts aged 25 to 54 years (22%).<sup>21</sup>
- Less than one quarter (23%) of seniors aged 75 and older reported receiving help with domestic work, home maintenance or outdoor work over a one-month period in 2003—about the same proportion as younger adults aged 25 to 54. At the same time, 11% in the 75 and older age group provided such help to others—while 40% of younger adults (25 to 54 years) did so.<sup>22</sup>

### More seniors are online . . .

- In 2003, 23% of families headed by a person aged 65 or older had access to the Internet from home—up from less than 5% in 1997.<sup>23</sup> More recent findings (2004) show that almost one third (31%) of Canadian seniors are online.<sup>24</sup>
- Seniors spent more time online from home than all but the youngest adults in 2004, clocking in at over eight hours a week.<sup>25</sup>

While these facts suggest exciting opportunities for many businesses and services, they also point to the need for careful consideration of the needs of seniors in order to reach them in a responsible and effective manner. Not only do communicators need to keep their attitudes, communication approaches and materials current, they must also keep abreast of changes in technology, trends and preferences of a diverse and ever-changing segment of the population.

## Seniors—a diverse group

People’s choices about where they obtain services or prefer to shop are influenced by their level of education, their age, their living arrangements and their cultural background, as well as their capacities and interests. Older Canadians are no different. A diverse group, seniors want to be able to choose from a range of information sources about businesses, services and government programs. As is the case with any audience, paying attention to the preferences, spending patterns and activities of seniors will help you know your audience, and serve them well.

The varying life experiences and personal characteristics of seniors means that they also hold a range of values, beliefs and opinions. The world view of someone who grew up or started raising a family during the Depression is bound to be different from that of a “baby boomer.” Education, place of residence (urban

or rural), socioeconomic status, national origin or ethnicity, and gender all contribute to the diversity of the senior population.

Tailoring messages for a senior audience therefore means recognizing that seniors may hold different views—different from each other’s and from yours—about these and other issues:

- what constitutes “the good life,” “quality” and “service”
- value of voting in federal, provincial/territorial and local elections
- attitudes toward authority or bureaucracy
- degree of comfort in asking someone else for help
- perceptions of health and illness
- attitudes toward disability
- ideas about food and nutrition
- concepts of age and aging
- male/female roles
- family and intergenerational relationships
- what government is and what it does or should do
- what health and social services are and how they work

## Changes come with aging

Although diversity is a hallmark of the senior population, some changes do accompany aging, and even healthy seniors experience losses that can affect their access, level of interest and/or capacity to receive

and understand information. Do your communications with and for seniors take these changes into account?

- **Sensory changes are a normal part of aging.** Changes in visual and hearing acuity can affect an older person’s capacity to absorb information. Changes are seldom abrupt and may be barely noticeable at first. A person may begin to have difficulty hearing clearly if a sound is above or below a certain pitch or if there is background noise. The capacity to see clearly in low light or shadows may decline, or susceptibility to glare may increase.
- **Physical changes** include declines in flexibility, strength, speed of execution, fine motor control and hand-eye coordination, which can translate into difficulty manipulating controls and small objects (automated banking machines and debit machine keypads, coin-operated devices, household appliances). Diseases such as arthritis, rheumatism and osteoporosis can also affect agility and mobility.
- **Changes in cognitive function**, including memory, reasoning and abstract thinking, affect a very small percentage of younger seniors, although the percentage does rise with age. In general, sharp brains tend to stay sharp; cognitive processing may take a little longer, but this is normal aging, not a sign of “senility.” Skillful communication

## Aging and Communication

| Sensory change                  | Types of communication affected   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <b>Visual acuity</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ product labelling</li> <li>■ online services and Web sites</li> <li>■ signage on public buildings, street signs</li> <li>■ banking machines (glare on screens)</li> <li>■ information available only in print</li> <li>■ televised information</li> <li>■ glossy paper and colour brochures</li> </ul> |
| <b>Hearing acuity</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ interpersonal communication</li> <li>■ public address systems</li> <li>■ telephone</li> <li>■ television and radio</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Agility and mobility</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ banking machines and online banking</li> <li>■ kits requiring assembly</li> <li>■ product packages</li> <li>■ access to billboards, public transit ads, etc.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Social/emotional changes</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ more emphasis on personal contact and other information dissemination methods to overcome isolation (e.g., through clubs, churches, seniors' centres)</li> </ul>   |

(repeating key points in various ways, checking for understanding) can help address this aspect of aging.

- The **social changes** surrounding aging include changes in income and earning capacity, loss of social networks through retirement and the death of a spouse and/or friends, society's "isolating" attitude toward seniors, the potential for reduced access to transportation and hence to

recreational and social activities, and changes in living arrangements.

- Finally, aging can bring **emotional changes**, many of them arising from sensory, physical and social changes. They include loneliness, isolation, tension or worry, anxiety about becoming dependent on others, and fears about safety, security, and loss of access to activities or services enjoyed when younger.

## Literacy and language

Literacy, the ability to absorb and understand written information and to act on this knowledge, is an inescapable consideration when you're planning to communicate with seniors. As noted earlier, while seniors have achieved higher levels of education than previous generations, as a group their literacy skills are low compared to those of younger Canadians.

Low literacy skills have obvious implications for seniors' health, safety, consumer choices, social connections, and awareness of programs and services. It also limits the effectiveness

of all communication media relying on the written word.

As noted earlier, the majority of seniors have reading problems significant enough to interfere with tasks such as filling out forms or reading instructions on medicine containers, understanding information provided by government and other institutions, or doing basic arithmetic—balancing a chequebook, calculating a tip or completing an order form.<sup>26</sup>

Research suggests that baby boomers, with their higher levels of education, have higher literacy levels than did previous generations.<sup>27</sup>

### Communication Barriers and Solutions

| Potential barriers to communication  | Possible solutions   |
|--|--|
| <b>Outdated assumptions about seniors' lifestyles, interests, capacities</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ stay in touch through research, focus groups, talking to your clients and customers</li> <li>■ establish partnerships with seniors' groups</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Physical changes of aging</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ explore alternative formats and communication methods (large print, audio and video versions [CD or DVD], personal contact, assistive listening devices)</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Communication materials and media not suited to audience</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ use advisory committees to guide development of materials</li> <li>■ test materials before use</li> <li>■ link with specialized agencies such as Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, and ABC Canada and Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (national literacy organizations)</li> </ul> |

Nevertheless, aging may eventually undermine their ability to rely on these strategies, making it more and more important for those providing vital information about health, safety and financial security—as well as a wide range of other information—to take into account the physical, cognitive and other changes that are a normal part of aging.

Communicators should never equate limited literacy with a limited capacity to understand. Plain language and culturally sensitive choices of medium and message can help to overcome these barriers to effective communication and help you reach a much larger audience. Keeping this in mind will help in reaching audiences who have a mother tongue other than English or French. While they may be educated and have high literacy skills, their past experiences with environments, outlooks, traditions and religious beliefs may mean that they are less able to navigate complex information about Canadian institutions, services and programs.

The challenges of communicating with people who have lower literacy skills are not going to disappear soon. A 2008 study conducted by the Canadian Council on Learning found that close to half (48%) of Canadian adults are estimated to be below the internationally accepted literacy standard for coping in a modern society—a proportion that will remain virtually unchanged over

the next two decades. This translates into an alarming forecast—that the number of senior citizens with low literacy skills will double to 6.2 million between 2008 and 2031. The Council has developed a tool to help a variety of users forecast literacy levels for specific populations (see *Advice from the Experts*, page 39).

## How to find out about your audience

Keeping a current profile of your senior audience calls for tapping into many sources of information. Here are some places to start.

The **federal government and each provincial/territorial government** has at least one agency devoted to seniors' issues and concerns. Many of them publish reports, newsletters and other material to help you keep your knowledge current. Online research will reveal these information sources and many more. Statistics Canada is an excellent source of information about the number and proportion of seniors in your community and their personal characteristics, including cultural background and mother tongue, education and income levels.

**Seniors' organizations and groups serving seniors** (at the local, provincial/territorial and national levels) are another valuable source of information by and about seniors. Who



better to tell you about the audience you want to reach than seniors themselves? Check with your local government and browse the Web.

Many **professional organizations** (doctors, nurses, social workers, long-term care workers, pharmacists, opticians, dietitians, lawyers) and **specialized agencies** (CNIB, Canadian Council on Learning, Canadian Public Health Association, etc.) publish information to help their members serve an older clientele.

You can also conduct research yourself. Consider these ideas—adapt them to suit the needs and capacity of your organization:

- Appoint an advisory committee of clients, customers or members of your target audience before beginning to develop a new communication approach or information product. This technique can work equally well for health and social service providers and for associations of merchants, restaurants or shopping mall tenants.
- Test a communication approach or information product with a focus group of seniors. A local seniors' centre or advocacy group could help.
- The same seniors' centre or advocacy group might agree to conduct a “senior friendliness” assessment of your facilities, business or service. Or conduct your own,

using the *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* from the Alberta Council on Aging (see *Advice from the Experts*, page 39).

- Survey current customers or clients to see how successful you've been in communicating. Ask them for suggestions about their preferred method of receiving information, how you could improve your materials, and what changes would help make your facilities or services more responsive to seniors' needs.

### The bottom line

The cost of these audience research and testing techniques could save you from costly mistakes in the design of your message or the choice of medium—with implications for your bottom line, whether you're striving for commercial success or running a public sector agency trying to do more with less.

## 2

# Choosing the Communication Medium

**Reaching a wider audience, including seniors, means thinking broadly about what constitutes communication and how best to communicate. A first step is to define the means or “medium” you should use to reach senior clients and customers—choosing those that will best reach your audience.**

## Communication “medium” defined

When developing communications to include a senior audience, think broadly about all the potential vehicles and means of communication. Businesses, financial institutions and governments may think they communicate largely through advertising and written information. But they also communicate each time they answer the telephone, greet clients in an office, branch or store, or broadcast over a public address system. The design, organization and content

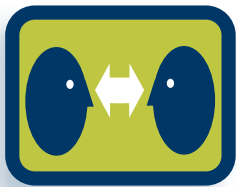
of their Web sites also give strong messages to potential users, letting them know whether the site was set up with them in mind.

**Example: In a medical clinic, pay attention not only to written or illustrative material handed out during a visit, but also to the telephone answering system, the directional signage, the comfort of the seating, the acoustics of the waiting room, and the interpersonal listening and communication skills of doctors, nurses and reception staff.<sup>28</sup>**

**Example: Providing current information about a product or service on your Web site will mean that many members of your audience will have access to it. But, has your Web site been designed to meet the needs of older users—who might not be as experienced with navigation, and who might have visual impairment? Plan to design for all users, test the results and be prepared to make adjustments.**

## What are your choices? An overview of key media

The medium should suit not only the audience but also the nature of the message. All media are not created equal, and research shows that success in reaching target audiences and getting the message across effectively varies widely.



### Personal communication

Face-to-face or telephone contact is often the first, and sometimes the only, communication between seniors and health and social services professionals. This contact can have far-reaching consequences on health, and is especially critical for people with low literacy. Some research has suggested that personal contact is seniors' preferred source of health information, even for skilled readers,<sup>29</sup> and this finding could well extend to any type of information with the potential to affect seniors'

well-being and quality of life, such as information about pensions and other entitlements, investment options, and travel and recreation opportunities.

Personal communication is also important for customer relations and client service staff in large corporations, retail stores and service businesses. For these organizations, that first contact may mean the difference between a sale or a lost customer. The bibliography at the end of this publication offers valuable sources for providing quality verbal contact and information (see Advice from the Experts, page 39). Several of the sidebars also offer tips and checklists for anyone serving a senior clientele.

In some circumstances, communicating through people that seniors trust and pay attention to (they are sometimes referred to as “key informants”) may be more effective than formal communication techniques. Research has found that when older people need help with a problem, they often turn to informal information networks such as family members and trusted friends and neighbours. Researchers speculate that reluctance to use formal sources to find needed information or services may relate to communication barriers like these:

- frustration using an automated telephone system
- difficulty hearing over the telephone
- the impersonal nature of dealing with someone over the telephone, particularly if required to give personal information

## Communicating with Aboriginal Seniors

| The principle                     | Best practices  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Multi-level communications</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ identify preferred methods of approach to sharing information</li> <li>■ consider word of mouth, radio, newsletters, audio- or videotape or CD/DVD</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Personal contact</b>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ find ways to establish and maintain personal contact with seniors and/or family members to share and discuss information</li> <li>■ community information dinners</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Community support</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ seek help of seniors and community helpers (possibly an advisory committee) to determine best local techniques for reaching seniors</li> <li>■ design and pilot test new methods if necessary</li> <li>■ maintain contact with community groups to stay current and follow up</li> </ul> |
| <b>Language accessibility</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ local languages as appropriate for oral and written communication</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Minimize print use</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ video presentations</li> <li>■ announcements on Aboriginal radio</li> <li>■ plain language where print is used</li> <li>■ flyers and posters for simplicity</li> <li>■ graphics to explain/expand on print message</li> </ul>  |

- difficulties interpreting printed material that might be offered through formal sources<sup>30</sup>

Web sites can cause frustration and other difficulties for seniors as well. Sites that use small type, drop-down menus and unforgiving forms that require information to be entered in one way only can prove to be unusable by seniors who are not experienced Internet

users or whose vision and fine motor skills are reduced as the result of normal aging.

Many Aboriginal cultures (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) are based on an oral tradition. Aboriginal seniors have told researchers that their preferred information source is word of mouth. In many Aboriginal communities, therefore, print is the least effective means

of reaching a senior (or any other) audience. Instead, methods that emphasize personal contact, social connections and oral transmission of information are preferred.

The best way to communicate varies from one community to another—because trusted information sources and channels of communication vary from one to the next—but

the experience of various communities across the country has demonstrated the value of some methods.<sup>31</sup>

The message from Aboriginal communities is clear, and it applies equally well to many other groups of seniors (for example, those with limited vision or hearing): no single medium or information distribution strategy works

### Checklist for Professionals

| Verbal communication   | Non-verbal communication  |
|--|---|
| ✓ Ask the person to list questions or concerns before an office visit  | ✓ Avoid establishing physical barriers (across desk) between you and the client     |
| ✓ Ask the person how they prefer you to address them (Mrs., first name, ...)                                   | ✓ Remain seated during the conversation   |
| ✓ Use open-ended questions to elicit information   | ✓ Show courteous attention; demonstrate interest in what they're saying             |
| ✓ Summarize information provided by the client to check your comprehension or the facts                        | ✓ Show (don't just tell) the client how to do something                             |
| ✓ Avoid formality and professional jargon; speak to the person's level of vocabulary and understanding         | ✓ Maintain eye contact; communicate occasionally through touch if appropriate       |
| ✓ Offer checklists or other plain-language material to back up oral instructions                               | ✓ Avoid doodling or fiddling  |
| ✓ Make sure your client has understood you by asking that he/she summarize what was said                       | ✓ Stay alert to non-verbal clues that contradict or supplement verbal communication |
| ✓ If the client doesn't understand, rephrase the sentence; don't just repeat the same words or say them louder | ✓ Stay focused on the client; don't consult your schedule or watch                  |

in every situation. Communicators must be prepared to consider a range of methods if they want to reach all members of a senior audience.

Interpersonal communication should also be a two-way street—not just a way to distribute information but also a means of checking for comprehension and letting clients clarify or enhance their understanding. Medical, legal, counselling and other professionals in particular need to be skilled in responsive listening.

Communicating with seniors is not simply a matter of conveying your own messages. It should involve an exchange of information, allowing clients or customers to express thoughts and feelings as well as to convey objective information about their situation. The listener must be skilled in interpreting gestures, words and behaviour, observing verbal and non-verbal messages, allowing enough time for communication to occur, and providing the appropriate responses.<sup>32</sup>



## Telephone

Use of the telephone to find and convey information is a highly personal choice.

Many seniors find the telephone essential for staying in touch with family and friends and maintaining social networks. But many also find it less satisfactory as a means of obtaining information if they can't speak to a real person or can do so only after negotiating an automated answering system. In addition,

## Telephone System Checklist

- ✓ Does your phone system invite callers to talk to a real person without waiting for endless messages and menu choices?
- ✓ Does the system accommodate rotary phones?
- ✓ Are the instructions on your automated answering system spoken clearly and slowly, with options to repeat a menu?
- ✓ Does your message start by advising callers to have a pen and paper handy?
- ✓ Does your system provide for TTY/teletypewriter users, to accommodate callers who are deaf or hard of hearing?
- ✓ Does the system give callers the option of leaving a message and having someone return the call?

some seniors have problems using the telephone because of hearing loss.

This raises serious considerations about whether the telephone is an appropriate choice for communicating with a senior audience and, once chosen, about the design of a system intended to serve senior users. A toll-free number as a source of information about government programs or services may not be effective, for example, if it connects to a pushbutton-activated voice message system that does not accommodate callers with rotary phones or those who prefer to speak to a real person.



## Meetings

If arranged with thought and care, meetings and similar gatherings can be a practical

way to convey information to groups of seniors—for example, at a seniors' centre or in an apartment building with a large senior population. This may be the most appropriate

### Checklist for Planning a Meeting

- ✓ The invitation to the meeting should give a contact name for notifying of any particular needs or aids.
- ✓ The meeting location should be accessible—close to public transportation, offering a place where seniors can be dropped off safely by car, and plenty of parking, preferably free.
- ✓ The meeting room should be accessible to people with varying degrees of mobility; the meeting room chairs should be comfortable.
- ✓ Arrange the room to ensure that everyone can see and/or hear and understand your message. The requirements will vary with the audience and could include public address systems that accommodate assistive listening devices and hearing aids, sign language interpretation, large posters or projected images to convey key points. But beware of projection methods that require a darkened room (difficult for low vision).
- ✓ Always start the meeting at the appointed time.
- ✓ Make sure the first speaker announces who is at the head table and asks speakers or persons asking questions to identify themselves. This is particularly useful to people who are blind or otherwise not able to read name tags/plates.
- ✓ It is also helpful to announce the location of washrooms and other amenities like coffee shops. If there are refreshments available, announce the location and the choices.
- ✓ Messages should be simple and concise: narrow them down to three or four points—no one can retain more than that, senior or not so senior. Handouts can reinforce and supplement the information.
- ✓ Allow time for questions and clarification.
- ✓ Schedule a few minutes of wrap-up at the end of the gathering to repeat and reinforce key messages.
- ✓ Offer plain-language handouts and a telephone number (answered by a real person) for questions that remain unanswered.
- ✓ Finally, plan to end the gathering on time, so that people using public transit or arranged rides can get home safely and conveniently.

medium for reaching some groups of seniors, because of its emphasis on exchanging information orally and in a social setting. A meeting also offers the opportunity for seniors to compare notes later with others who were present to confirm or clarify the information they took in.



## Print

Print has the advantages of allowing skilled readers to absorb information at their

own pace and to retain the item for future reference. Print can also be tailored for an audience with more limited literacy skills through plain language, design and message development. Keep in mind that any attempt at simplifying the task (large letters, simple words, etc.) will make your message available to a wider audience.

Your print material must invite readers to begin reading, and your writing must make it easy for them to get your message.<sup>33</sup> The sidebar offers basic advice in the use of plain language to reach the largest possible audience with printed materials; the next section contains detailed information on writing techniques.

As we have seen, however, written material, even plain-language material designed for maximum readability, is not always seniors' preferred information source. Moreover, written material may be of limited use to reach people with low literacy skills or limited vision, or

## Plain Language Checklist

- ✓ Use familiar words and a conversational, personal tone.
- ✓ Proceed logically, with the most important ideas first, with good links from one paragraph to the next.
- ✓ Use action verbs and active construction, not passive.
- ✓ Favour short words and short sentences.
- ✓ Use short paragraphs.
- ✓ Use concrete examples to illustrate ideas or concepts.
- ✓ Present ideas with illustrations or diagrams if it makes them easier to understand.
- ✓ Highlight main ideas and important information with headings, point form and bold face type.

to communicate with members of cultural communities who are literate in their mother tongue but not in English or French. Before printing leaflets, placing notices or advertising in newspapers and magazines, consider your audience and whether this method is likely to reach it.

Finally, if print documents are the chosen medium for your message, consider also conveying the information in large print or in braille, audio- or videotape or CD/DVD format. Providing information in print alone means you may miss large segments of your target audience.





## Internet

The Internet can be a very effective and efficient way to reach seniors. Internet use by those aged 65 and over is on the rise (31% in 2004), with the next generations of seniors using the Internet at much higher rates (63% of those aged 55 to 64 and 76% of those aged 45 to 54 years).<sup>34</sup> Given the growing importance of seniors as a proportion of the population and their current and expected Internet use, seniors are an Internet audience well worth considering.

### *Design for use*

Web site design and online documentation present many of the same challenges as print and other media, such as telephone answering systems. The design guidelines that apply to print—using large type sizes, ensuring contrast between type and background—also apply to Web sites and online documentation. Other design features make just as much sense for Internet products as for print, telephone and other communication vehicles—in particular, the notion of “keeping it simple.” For Web sites, this means designing with easy-to-use navigation systems, providing site maps and using such techniques as “bread crumbs” (a list at the top of the page of what page(s) were followed to get to the current page). In fact,

senior-friendly design makes using online information sources more enjoyable and informative for all users, not just seniors.

A number of organizations have studied how seniors use the Internet and how sites and online forms and other resources can be designed to make them more useable. One such study, conducted in the U.S. and Japan compared how tasks on a Web site were completed by seniors and by younger adults.<sup>35</sup> Results show that poor design was a major contributor to seniors’ difficulties with the tested sites. Small font size, the use of drop-down menus and other design features that call for heavy reliance on fine motor skills, memory and superior vision were some of the unfriendly features noted. Similarly, forms that were unforgiving (for example, one that would not accept a hyphen in a telephone number) and error messages that were difficult to notice rendered sites difficult to use.

Tips and advice on design of Web sites to include as many users as possible are now numerous.

*Common Look and Feel Standards for the Internet* have been developed by Treasury Board and were updated in 2006. While mandatory for most federal government departments and agencies, the guidelines have much to offer non-government organizations (see Advice from the Experts, page 39).

## Web Site Checklist\*

### Typeface

- Use a sans serif typeface for body text, such as Helvetica, that is not condensed. Double space body text.
- Use 12- or 14-point type for body text, medium or bold weight.
- Present body text in upper and lower case—save all capitals and italics for headings. Reserve underlining for links only.
- Left-justify body text to make it easier to read.
- Use dark type or graphics against a light background to ensure contrast between text and background. Avoid patterned backgrounds.
- Ensure that text and graphics are understandable when viewed on a black-and-white monitor. Avoid using yellow and green in close proximity—some older adults have difficulty telling these colours apart.

### Writing style

- Present information in a clear, simple and familiar way. Use positive statements wherever possible. Provide an online glossary of technical terms.
- Use the active voice.
- Organize text in a standard and familiar format. Break long documents into shorter sections/pages.

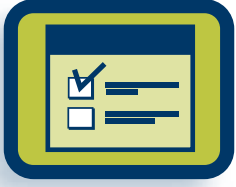
### Other media

- Use illustrations and photographs that relate to or support the text.
- Audio, animation and video clips should be short to reduce download time on older computers.
- Provide text alternatives to all animation, audio or video segments.

### Navigation

- Keep the organization of the site simple and straightforward. Use explicit step-by-step navigation procedures whenever possible to ensure that people understand what follows next. Carefully label links.
- Use single mouse clicks (instead of double) to access information.
- Be consistent—use a standard page design and the same symbols and icons throughout the site. Use the same set of navigation buttons in the same place on each page. Label each page in the same location with the name of the Web site.
- If you use icons, support them with descriptive text if possible. Make navigation buttons large enough that they do not require precise mouse movements for activation.
- Use pull-down menus sparingly—opt for static menus whenever possible.

\*Adapted from *Making Your Web Site Senior Friendly—A Checklist*. National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine.



## Forms

Forms are another type of written communication widely used in our society.

Many large organizations—governments, health care facilities, financial institutions, insurance companies—use forms to communicate and exchange information with clients and customers. Forms filled out incorrectly or incompletely can significantly affect a senior’s health care, entitlement to social benefits or financial security. Correction of these errors is also a source of huge human resource costs for business and government—extra time spent answering phone calls from confused customers, postage and effort returning incomplete forms for more information, wasted forms discarded because of mistakes, and additional time and cost to process long, complex forms. Forms therefore require careful design to ensure that they capture the necessary data and convey vital information to intended users.



## Signage

“Public” print—direction, street and warning signs, video displays giving

schedules and other information, transit ads and similar signage—also requires careful attention to design. The size and location of signs, the colour and size of type used, the colour of the background and the contrast

between print and background, and the potential for glare from nearby light sources can affect their ability to communicate clearly with seniors and others with low or declining vision.<sup>36</sup> Also, some colour combinations (for example, the commonly used red on black) do not provide enough contrast to be legible by people with low vision.



## Radio

Surveys on seniors’ preferred methods of receiving information

show that radio is not high on the list for most. Radio is a fast-paced medium, where listeners generally have to acquire information at the pace set by the broadcast. But radio could be effective in reaching parts of the older population, some of whom are devoted radio listeners. This is especially true if declining visual acuity has reduced the appeal of print and television as means of staying abreast of current and community affairs.

A radio message must be designed carefully, bearing in mind that the older person’s ability to hear and understand the message is affected by the pitch of an announcer’s voice, the speed at which the message is delivered, and the presence of background sound, which can interfere with receipt of the main message.

Seniors’ radio listening (and television watching) habits are charted by the Bureau

of Broadcast Measurement, among other organizations. Their published surveys can help you determine whether the audience you're trying to reach is likely to be listening or watching at any given time.



### Television and video

Some seniors watch a lot of television, but messages may not always be effective because this medium doesn't allow viewers to set the pace at which they acquire information. This is important in terms of the capacity to absorb information and retain it for future reference, which a fast-moving 30- or 60-second television announcement cannot promote very effectively. Special care must be taken in designing television messages for seniors.

Television in the form of community-run cable stations or community access programs may be useful in reaching specific audience segments, such as members of ethnocultural communities or Aboriginal people. Some specialty channels (those with travel and nature themes, for example) have also been shown to be of particular interest to seniors. Wise use of community programming could help overcome some of the language and literacy barriers to communication.

Videotape or DVD can also be used as an alternative form of communication. Of course, it must be as carefully designed as

a radio or television broadcast or a public address announcement, with deliberate attention to the types of voices used, the speed of message delivery, repetition of key points, avoidance of background noise, and use of graphics and action sequences to “show” viewers instead of “telling” them what you want them to know.

If you choose television or DVD/videotape to convey your message, use captioning (open or closed) to reach an additional audience that might otherwise be excluded.



### Public address systems

Airports, bus and train stations, hospitals and shopping malls all use public address (PA) systems to inform visitors, and some have audio-visual displays or information kiosks as well. They do not always communicate effectively with seniors if background noise interferes with the ability to hear or understand the message, or if announcers speak too fast or don't speak clearly. The softer consonants, “s” and “f,” can be particularly confusing for someone with reduced hearing if words are not pronounced distinctly. Even the use of a hearing aid may not help people to hear PA announcements.

Public audio-visual displays should also be designed carefully to ensure that messages

are clear, are repeated often enough, do not scroll by too quickly, and follow the other standards that enhance comprehension.

**Example: The Vancouver International Airport has a specially tailored PA system and flight information displays equipped with telephone access for those who can't read the displays. PA speakers are installed at 15-foot intervals, so that announcements can be broadcast at lower volume—more speakers at lower volume makes the message more intelligible. In some areas, announcements are presented visually on a board or video display. Check-in counters are also equipped with telephone handsets to amplify conversations between passengers and counter staff.**

Designing universally friendly PA systems also means supplementing them with clear signs and other visual cues to help visitors navigate through the facility and find an information kiosk quickly and easily. The issue is not only conveying information, but also assuring safety and security.<sup>37</sup>



## Publicity and packaging

Applying effective communication principles to

the way products and services are advertised and packaged is a vast field of its own.

The advertiser's knowledge of the audience and care in meeting the needs of older customers can make the difference between a marketing triumph and a flop.

### Packaging and Labelling Checklist

- ✓ Does your company have a clear policy of designing and using packaging that takes into account the needs and characteristics of older consumers?
- ✓ Are there clear instructions to explain the product's use, including large print and illustrations?
- ✓ Do the instructions include safety and hazard warnings?
- ✓ Are labels, instructions and warnings written in non-technical language?
- ✓ Have you focus-tested the labelling and instructions with senior consumers?
- ✓ Is packaging easy to open, not demanding extra strength or dexterity?
- ✓ Are packaging, labelling and instructions printed in at least 12-point type with sharp contrast between background and foreground (i.e., at least a 70% difference)?

Consideration should be given to offering products in non-child-proof packaging (clearly labelled as such and with a warning to keep out of the reach of children). A 1993 survey demonstrated that a good number of seniors (26% of those over 75) ceased to purchase a product whose packaging was difficult to open. As the senior population grows and businesses become increasingly aware of its needs and its tremendous consumer purchasing power, custom-crafted packaging and advertising strategies will be essential for commercial survival.<sup>38</sup>



### Automated communication

In 2004, Canadians were the highest per capita users of automated banking machines (ABMs) and debit card services in the world, according to the Bank for International Settlements.<sup>39</sup> The design of ABMs and other automated services (such as museum displays and government kiosks dispensing information and licence renewals) should take into account the sensory, mobility and agility changes associated with aging.

Design considerations include not only physical specifications (height, glare reduction on screens, size of buttons and screen messages), but also the communication or interaction between the customer/client and the machine, such as the vocabulary used in visual or oral messages and the length of time needed to grasp the message and to react by pushing the appropriate button.

**Example: One bank has introduced audio banking at some locations—banking machines equipped with headphones for use by clients with low vision, and standards are being developed for more accessible machines to accommodate all types of disabilities (lower height, adjustable screens, larger buttons, etc.).**

## 3

# Formulating Your Message

**When you communicate with the particular group of seniors you want to reach you have two approaches to choose from.**

**You can:**

- Single out the specific clients or customers and give them information designed specifically to meet their needs and expectations.
- Adopt a new approach in dealing with all your customers and clients, making sure that your communication is always clear and universally accessible—checking regularly to make sure your messages have been received and understood.

The second approach may well be more effective, because adapting a message or medium for a senior audience helps *everyone* get more from it. What's more, in thinking

about whether to single out older people with “special” information products and communication approaches, consider the risks of alienating clients or customers by creating stigma, embarrassment or shame.

You've done your research to find out about your audience and their preferred information sources. You've thought about the potential of the various media to reach your audience. Now you have to think about formulating a message to suit both the audience and the communication medium. Formulating the message means making decisions about concept, content and design.

## Communication concept

Choosing a concept means selecting the appropriate medium for communicating with your audience, fashioning a message that is well suited to that medium, and structuring the message to ensure that it can be communicated effectively. It means asking yourself (and possibly your senior advisory panel) questions like these:

- Is this the most suitable way of communicating this particular message to this particular audience?
- Does the structure of our message and the medium we use support our audience in understanding and responding to the message?
- What are the characteristics of this medium that we can take advantage of to make sure our message comes across effectively?

Thinking about concept also means thinking about the accessibility of your message. Does the concept you've chosen accommodate large print? Will it also work well in alternative formats, such as braille, or as audio or video versions on CD/DVD? Will the design accommodate a print-reading machine? Tables, boxes and the dots between text and page number in a table of contents can be barriers to information for people using such machines.

## Effective does not necessarily mean fancy

- a bookmark with library hours printed in large type
- a fridge magnet with emergency numbers
- a pre-printed grocery list designed to emphasize nutrition guidelines
- peel-off stickers to be placed on a calendar as memory joggers
- simple clock and calendar outlines as reminders for appointments and medication schedules

Also bear in mind that if communicating in “plain language” is one of your goals (and in most cases it should be), you also need a plain concept supported by a plain structure.<sup>40</sup> Plain language is hard to impose retroactively. If you start with a complex message, it may be difficult if not impossible to convert or translate it into plain language after the fact.

Finally, remember that your concept can convey just as much as your actual words. As the checklists throughout this publication show, inattention to the details of how your message is presented can send the wrong messages about your knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about older Canadians.



## Message content

Deciding on the content of your message is sometimes the most difficult part of communicating. Assuming that you know the members of your audience well, the next step may be to put yourself in their shoes:

- What does the audience want to know?
- What does the audience already know, and how much more does it need to know?
- Should we try to meet all these information needs with this particular vehicle, or should we be selective about the information and messages we choose to convey?

The journalistic technique is to ask the questions that your audience is most likely to want answered and then to gather the information needed to formulate answers to those questions—the message practically writes itself!

In choosing message content, the most common advice is to keep it simple. Don't try to force too much information into a single communication vehicle or opportunity. You end up confusing readers or producing something that does only half a job. Too much information is sometimes worse than too little. Seniors with low literacy skills can be intimidated by a “wall of words.” Always provide a phone number or address so that the audience can get more information or ask questions.

Remember that “writing” applies to all forms of communication, not just print. Whether communication takes the form of a pamphlet, a Web site, a radio spot, a public address announcement, a bookmark, or an automated voice answering system, content always has to be written—and the first step in writing is thinking about your audience and what the message should convey.

## Communicating effectively in print

Other aspects of content also have an impact on advertising and marketing campaigns, among them the image you project of your business and of the senior clients who are the intended consumers of your product or service. The following checklist provides basic questions that a promotion or marketing campaign should address.

Other content issues include:

- **Style**—Formal or informal? Conversational or more reserved? Is humour appropriate? Humour can be a stress reducer, helping people relax and register important information. But don't be patronizing or assume familiarity. The style you adopt should suit the message, the audience, your organization and the medium.
- **Vocabulary**—Again, vocabulary should match the message and the audience. For almost all situations, short, simple, familiar

## Make Written Information Easier for Older Readers to Use and Retain\*

- ✓ Be direct and specific.
- ✓ Limit the number of key points.
- ✓ Offer a manageable number of action steps.
- ✓ Use active voice.
- ✓ Support information with real examples and relatable stories.
- ✓ Use pictures to help illustrate information.
- ✓ Put your key points up front.
- ✓ Break lengthy documents into short sections or paragraphs.
- ✓ Repeat main points multiple times.
- ✓ Reinforce main points with questions.
- ✓ Avoid complex diagrams.
- ✓ Avoid jargon.

\*Adapted from *Making Your Printed Health Materials Senior Friendly: Tips from the National Institute on Aging*. National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services.

words are best—see checklists for tips. Avoid professional, technical, academic and other jargon, as well as unfamiliar acronyms and abbreviations.

- **Language level**—Remember that 48% of Canadians experience significant difficulties with reading and that the percentage is much higher among seniors and those whose mother tongue is neither

English nor French. Readability tests have been developed to determine the grade level of a text, but testing the message with your audience is always the best indicator of reader friendliness. Contact literacy groups in your area (check the Yellow Pages under Literacy or Learners) to obtain feedback about the readability of your material.

- **Presentation**—The way you organize and present information says you've given some thought to the best way to convey a message to your audience. Page after page of densely packed type—even if it is written plainly and clearly—may not be as effective as a pamphlet with big bold headings and checklists highlighting or recapping key information (more on this in the next section).
- **Structure**—A simple structure supports a simple message. This makes for good writing in print, but also good communication in other media. If you've ever tried to navigate a multi-layered Web site or an automated answering system where the menu choices go on and on, you'll know that simple structure usually makes for more effective communication.
- **Testing**—This is the best way to see whether you've hit the mark in terms of language, style, presentation and overall

## Promotion and Marketing Checklist

- ✓ Have you researched and produced guidelines about tailoring messages for older consumers?
- ✓ Do you focus-test your materials with senior customers or clients?
- ✓ Does your marketing plan recognize that you are not trying to communicate with a single homogeneous group of clients or customers?
- ✓ Have you tested a marketing plan and materials with several groups of older consumers that include a range of ages and literacy levels?
- ✓ Do you use older persons or models in your promotional materials?
- ✓ Do you present positive images of people who are healthy, happy and representative of seniors' diversity of culture, language, health status, geographic location, income level, etc.?

effectiveness. Real users—ideally members of your intended audience—are the best judges, and materials should be tested in real-life situations that replicate when, where, and the conditions under which your message will be communicated or used (at home? in a noisy and crowded bus station? in a doctor's office? in a commercial establishment where other customers are waiting for service?).

### Effective design

Once you've decided on content, you'll want to present the information in a way that helps promote the message and does not detract from readability and comprehension.<sup>41</sup> The “look” of your communication is a design issue that includes organizing the content effectively.

To some extent, content and design are interrelated and should proceed in parallel. There is no point writing 2,000 words, for instance, if you've decided that the best medium for your message is a four-panel brochure. Some preliminary design work will help you determine how many words you can fit on each panel, whether that is enough to convey everything you want to say, whether another vehicle might be better suited to your message, or whether your message is the right one for a given situation.

These rules and guidelines for effective print design are the result of research and experience. The suggested ideal size, style of fonts, spacing, simplicity, colour contrast, length of line and use of white spaces improve the readability and interest of a text. Many of

these guidelines also apply to the design of Web sites and online documentation, where they are especially appropriate for communication aimed at seniors. Fine print is no easier to read on a computer screen than it is in the telephone directory or at the bottom of an insurance claim form.

Guidelines have also evolved for communicating messages by television and

radio—for example, the ideal speed and pitch of the announcer’s voice, the length of time an information telephone number is left on the TV screen, and the number of times a crucial fact or bit of information is repeated. As discussed in the previous section, similar considerations apply to messages broadcast on public address systems and video displays.

### Print Design Checklist

- ✓ Understand how type, headline placement and use of colour can enhance or inhibit communication.
- ✓ 12-point type is the minimum size for eyes that are middle-aged and older, although 13- or 14-point is even better.
- ✓ Choose a plain, clear typeface with a reputation for readability.
- ✓ Dark print on a light background is the easiest to read; avoid “dropped out” or “reverse” lettering—where text is white on a dark background.
- ✓ Avoid using all italics, all capital letters and underlined type.
- ✓ Set text flush left and ragged right.
- ✓ Leave wide margins and space between paragraphs to avoid crowding text or cramming too much information on a page.
- ✓ Choose a comfortable line length for the size of type—on 8½” x 11” paper, two columns are preferable.
- ✓ Matte, non-glossy paper and ink improve legibility by reducing glare.
- ✓ Use high-definition photographs or illustrations.
- ✓ Avoid using wavy lines or dots, which can be hard on the eyes because they “swim” on the page.

## Messages are everywhere

Finally, we must constantly remind ourselves that “communication” takes place at all levels, and that the question of senior-friendly “design” extends not only to traditional communication media but also to other elements in our environment. Consider, for example, what a municipality communicates to its older residents when the length of the light at a crosswalk requires pedestrians to sprint to the other side. Or what a shopping mall says to its senior customers when benches are few and far between and restrooms are almost not accessible.

Businesses, services and other organizations that want to be known as senior-friendly should take a comprehensive look at everything they do from the perspective of their older clients and customers.

Are administrative style, staffing policies and programming goals compatible with senior-friendly service? Do training plans and incentive systems demonstrate the value attached to communicating effectively and serving a senior clientele well?

Are facilities conveniently located (close to public transportation) and designed for the safety and comfort of older users? Do entrances, floors, lighting, surfaces, acoustics, seating, signage and restroom location take into account the sensory and physical changes of aging and the needs of seniors? Readily

available documentation on barrier-free design provides useful tips on building or retrofitting spaces and amenities.<sup>42</sup>

The answers to these questions reflect the general attitude of our society toward seniors and reveal whether or not it is adapting to the new demographics of the Canadian population.

# Summing It Up

**Communicating with seniors presents the same opportunities and challenges as communicating with any other large and evolving audience. If the advice in this publication can be summed up in a few sentences, it is:**

- Think broadly when you think about communicating—almost everything you do as a service provider or business owner communicates your attitude toward your older customers and clients. Unintentional messages can be just as powerful as deliberately planned communication. As the Alberta Council on Aging says, senior friendliness is an attitude based on considering seniors' needs and respecting seniors' contributions. It's a matter of common sense and good manners.
- Don't try to persuade seniors you're doing them a favour. Embrace senior-friendly communication because it is logical and makes sense for your program objectives or your bottom line: seniors bring their business to senior-friendly stores and businesses, and they're loyal customers when they're well served.
- Know your audience, keep your knowledge up to date, and look to the members of your audience to tell you about their information needs and preferences. Design communication with your clients and customers—not for them.
- Think about the advantages and drawbacks of each communication medium as a means of reaching a senior audience and design communications that seize the advantages while avoiding the pitfalls.

- Find out about the communication concepts and design approaches that work best with senior audiences.
- Ensure a good match between your audience, your message and the medium you use to convey it.
- Explore other formats (braille, large print, audio or video versions on CD/DVD, and others) and innovative strategies for reaching senior audiences (social networks, community contacts, trusted advisers, key informants).
- Demand action from governments and other administrations and social institutions. Communicating effectively with seniors makes sense from society's perspective: well-informed seniors are healthier, more active and involved, and can live in their own homes longer—so their quality of life is better.
- Seniors have time, energy and insight born of life experience—they're a valuable asset to a society that respects them and takes the time to think about effective ways of reaching out to them.

# Advice from the Experts

**There is a wealth of information available about how to communicate effectively—with all audiences, including seniors. The following provides a starting point for where to go for additional information. Many of these resources have been used to prepare this publication.**

## **Know your audience**

The first rule of communication is worth paying attention to. Knowing demographic trends and characteristics of various senior age groups can be invaluable when planning and implementing communication materials aimed at seniors. A few resources are listed below—many more can be found online. Check often, as new materials and resources are added to the Web sites every day.

***A Portrait of Seniors in Canada—2006***  
Turcotte, Martin, and Grant Schellenberg.  
Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007. Cat. No. 89-519-XIE. Available online: [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-519-x/89-519-x2006001-eng.pdf](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-519-x/89-519-x2006001-eng.pdf)

***A Vision for a Health Literate Canada: Report of the Expert Panel on Health***  
Canadian Public Health Association. Ottawa: 2008.  
Available online: [www.cpha.ca/en/portals/h-l/panel.aspx](http://www.cpha.ca/en/portals/h-l/panel.aspx)

***Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide***  
Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors. Ottawa: 2007. Available online: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/public/healthy-sante/age\\_friendly\\_rural/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/public/healthy-sante/age_friendly_rural/index-eng.php)

***At Risk: A Socio-economic Analysis of Health and Literacy Among Seniors***  
Roberts, Paul, and Gail Fawcett. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1998. Cat. No. 89-552-MPE, No. 5. A summary of this paper is available online: [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89f0104x/4151175-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89f0104x/4151175-eng.htm)



Further reports in the International Adult Literacy Survey series are also available online: [www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-552-M&CHROPG=1&lang=eng](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-552-M&CHROPG=1&lang=eng)

***Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide***

World Health Organization. Geneva, Switzerland: 2007. Available online: [www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global\\_age\\_friendly\\_cities\\_Guide\\_English.pdf](http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global_age_friendly_cities_Guide_English.pdf)

***Principles of the National Framework on Aging: A Policy Guide***

Health Canada. Division of Aging and Seniors. Ottawa: 1998. Available online: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/pro/healthy-sante/nfa-cnv/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/pro/healthy-sante/nfa-cnv/index-eng.php)

***Reaching Out: A Guide to Communicating with Aboriginal Seniors***

Health Canada. Division of Aging and Seniors. Ottawa: 1998. Available online: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/public/various-varies/communicating\\_aboriginal/index-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/publications/public/various-varies/communicating_aboriginal/index-eng.php)

***Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada.***

Statistics Canada. Ottawa: 1996. Cat. No. 89-551-XPE. Available online: [www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-551-X&lang=eng](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-551-X&lang=eng)

***Senior Friendly™ Resources***

Alberta Council on Aging offers a wide variety of tools to help organizations and businesses to serve seniors. The resources include grocery store guidelines, ideas for healthy eating, pharmacy tips for seniors, a Toolkit as well as merchandise promoting the Senior Friendly™ movement. More information is available online: [www.acaging.ca/senior\\_friendly\\_program.htm](http://www.acaging.ca/senior_friendly_program.htm)

***Statistical Snapshots of Canada's Seniors***

Lindsay, Colin, produced for the Division of Aging and Seniors, Health Canada.

***Projected Adult Literacy: Measuring Movement (PALMM)***

New in 2008 from the Canadian Council on Learning, this tool offers a creative and easy-to-use way to calculate adult literacy rates into the future. Users of PALMM can generate graphs according to province or territory, and such variables as age and education. The aim is to make literacy planning more effective. Available online: [www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/ReadingFuture?Language=EN](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Reports/ReadingFuture?Language=EN)

## Language and design

A number of resources about the use of language and design in developing print and Web materials for seniors are available online. The following provide a good starting point. Web searches are bound to uncover many more. Increasingly, organizations offer services that may help you prepare information tailored to the needs of seniors, such as senior-friendly audits of your sites and products—search for them on the Web.

***A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the Portrayal of People with Disabilities***

Government of Canada. Ottawa: 2006. Available online: [www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/disability\\_issues/reports/way\\_with\\_words/2007/index.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/disability_issues/reports/way_with_words/2007/index.shtml)

***Clear Writing and Literacy, Revised Second Edition***

Baldwin, Ruth. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2000. Available online: <http://library.nald.ca/research/item/5248>

***Common Look and Feel Standards for the Internet 2.0***

Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.  
Ottawa: 2006. Available online:  
[www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/clf2-nsi2/index-eng.asp](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/clf2-nsi2/index-eng.asp)

***Communication Barriers—A Look at Barriers to Communication Facing Persons with Disabilities Who Travel by Air***

Canadian Transportation Agency. Ottawa: 1997.  
Available online: [www.cta-otc.gc.ca/doc.php?sid=1040&lang=eng](http://www.cta-otc.gc.ca/doc.php?sid=1040&lang=eng)

***Good Medicine for Seniors: Guidelines for Plain Language and Good Design in Prescription Medication***

Canadian Public Health Association.  
Ottawa: 2002. For information on price and how to order, visit: [www.cpha.ca/en/publications/pubs.aspx](http://www.cpha.ca/en/publications/pubs.aspx)

***Making Your Printed Health Materials Senior Friendly: Tips from the National Institute on Aging***

U.S. National Institute on Aging and National Institutes of Health, 2007. Available online: [www.nia.nih.gov/healthinformation/publications/srfriendly.htm](http://www.nia.nih.gov/healthinformation/publications/srfriendly.htm)

***Making Your Web Site Senior Friendly: A Checklist***

U.S. National Institute on Aging and National Library of Medicine, 2001. Available online: [www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/wag/documents/checklist.pdf](http://www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/wag/documents/checklist.pdf)

***Type and Layout: Are You Communicating, or Just Making Pretty Shapes?***

Wheildon, Colin, and Jeffrey Heard. Mentone, Victoria, Australia: The Worsley Press, 2005.  
For information on price and how to order, visit: [www.worsleypress.com](http://www.worsleypress.com)

## Alternative formats

Many national organizations with branches across the country provide information on alternative formats. Check your local library or the phone book for these headings or organizations in your area: Canadian National Institute for the Blind; Canadian Association of the Deaf; Canadian Hearing Society; Deaf Services; Transcription Services; Disabled Services; Reading Services; Braille printers; Captioning; Access.

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat also provides online information on accessibility and alternative formats. Visit: [www.tbs-sct.gc.ca](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca)

## Organizations

Many national organizations provide information about aging, seniors and accessibility. A few well-known organizations are listed below, and many more can be identified through Web searches.

**ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation**

4211 Yonge Street, Suite 235  
Toronto, Ontario M2P 2A9  
Tel: 416-218-0010  
Toll-free: 1-800-303-1004  
Fax: 416-218-0457  
E-mail: [info@abc-canada.org](mailto:info@abc-canada.org)  
Web site: [www.abc-canada.org](http://www.abc-canada.org)

**Alberta Council on Aging**

14964–121A Avenue NW, Suite 210  
Edmonton, Alberta T5V 1A3  
Tel: 780-423-7781  
Web site: [www.acaging.ca](http://www.acaging.ca)

**Canadian Association of the Deaf**

251 Bank Street, Suite 203  
 Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1X3  
 Voice: 613-565-2882  
 TTY: 613-565-8882  
 E-mail: [info@cad.ca](mailto:info@cad.ca)  
 Web site: [www.cad.ca](http://www.cad.ca)

**Canadian Council on Learning**

50 O'Connor Street, Suite 215  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6L2  
 Tel: 613-782-2959  
 Fax: 613-782-2956  
 E-mail: [info@ccl-cca.ca](mailto:info@ccl-cca.ca)  
 Web site: [www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl)

**Canadian Hard of Hearing Association**

2415 Holly Lane, Suite 205  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1V 7P2  
 Voice: 613-526-1584  
 Toll-Free: 1-800-263-8068 (in Canada only)  
 TTY: 613-526-2692  
 Fax: 613-526-4718  
 E-mail: [chhanational@chha.ca](mailto:chhanational@chha.ca)  
 Web site: [www.chha.ca](http://www.chha.ca)

**Canadian National Institute for the Blind**

1929 Bayview Avenue  
 Toronto, Ontario M4G 3E8  
 Tel: 1-800-563-2642  
 E-mail: [info@cnib.ca](mailto:info@cnib.ca)  
 Web site: [www.cnib.ca](http://www.cnib.ca)

**Canadian Public Health Association  
National Literacy and Health Program**

1565 Carling Avenue, Suite 400  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1Z 8R1  
 Tel: 613-725-3769  
 E-mail: [info@cpha.ca](mailto:info@cpha.ca)  
 Web site: [www.cpha.ca](http://www.cpha.ca)

**Canadian Transportation Agency**

Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N9  
 E-mail: [info@cta-otc.gc.ca](mailto:info@cta-otc.gc.ca)  
 Web site: [www.cta-otc.gc.ca](http://www.cta-otc.gc.ca)

**Fédération canadienne pour  
l'alphabétisation en français**

235 Montréal Road  
 2nd Floor, Suite 205  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1L 6C7  
 Tel: 613-749-5333  
 Toll-free: 1-888-906-5666 (in Canada only)  
 Fax: 613-749-2252  
 E-mail: [info@fcac.net](mailto:info@fcac.net)  
 Web site: [www.fcac.net](http://www.fcac.net)

**Human Resources and Skills****Development Canada****Office of Literacy and Essential Skills**

Web site: [www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/oles/olesindex\\_en.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/oles/olesindex_en.shtml)

**Human Resources and Skills****Development Canada****National Seniors Council**

355 North River Road, Place Vanier  
 Tower B, 14th Floor  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0L1  
 Tel: 613-946-1736  
 Fax: 613-946-8871  
 Web site: [www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca](http://www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca)

**Public Health Agency of Canada****Division of Aging and Seniors**

Jeanne Mance Building  
 Address Locator 1908A1  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0K9  
 Tel: 613-952-7606  
 Fax: 613-957-9938  
 TDD/TTY: 1-800-267-1245  
 E-mail: [seniors-aines@phac-aspc.gc.ca](mailto:seniors-aines@phac-aspc.gc.ca)  
 Web site: [www.publichealth.gc.ca/seniors](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/seniors)

**Statistics Canada**

100 Tunney's Pasture Driveway  
 Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T6  
 Web site: [www.statcan.gc.ca/start-debut-eng.html](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/start-debut-eng.html)

## Notes

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
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42. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation offers many publications on the subject. Visit: [www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca](http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca)

