

Marketing

Becoming a Wellness Sherpa: the tools you need to guide age 50-plus adults on the path to health



A mountain of information can confuse Boomers and other older adults who want to adopt a healthy lifestyle, creating opportunities for knowledgeable professionals who can guide them

by Tom Mann

The term *Sherpa* is used to refer to local people, native to the Himalayas, who are employed by climbers as guides for adventures high in the mountains. These guides are elite mountaineers and experts in navigating their local terrain. Climbing Mount Everest without a Sherpa is a dangerous venture. Without the Sherpa's knowledge and experience, most travelers would be lost at these high altitudes.

How is this possible? After all, climbing is as simple as putting one foot in front of the other and heading straight up, right?

Today's healthcare consumer faces a similar challenge. To reach the summit of good health, the average person must now scale a mountain of information before arriving at the facts. Because of the overwhelming amount of information available through television, newspapers, websites, magazines, newsletters and more, I believe Boomers and the mature market will increasingly look for "Wellness Sherpas" to guide them on the path of good health. Fitness/wellness professionals and active-aging organizations that recognize this opportunity can capitalize and grow their business.

So how do you position yourself as a Wellness Sherpa?

Tools needed for reaching the summit

As a guide, you will need the following tools for helping your clients reach new heights:

1. *Know the terrain*

The first tool is the most obvious: knowledge. Unfortunately, it's also one of the most difficult tools to obtain. You must read, read, read—and then study. Your clients don't have the time to read and study the latest developments in health and wellness. But if you do, you will become a trusted resource.

According to an annual research study of Boomers conducted by The Natural Marketing Institute (NMI) in 2007,¹ less than one in five people are very satisfied with their ability to maintain a proper weight, and only 10% feel they are in good shape. In addition, just 18% are very satisfied with their ability to eat a healthy and nutritious diet. Why are today's Boomers having so much difficulty with wellness? One reason for their inability to make good choices is that they are simply overwhelmed with information. One-third of Boomers rate themselves as confused about what to eat for good health, and two-thirds feel a healthy lifestyle is more difficult to maintain as they get older.

As Boomers become flooded with more and more information regarding health and well-being, it becomes difficult to sort the good information from the bad. Is coffee good for you or bad? What about one glass of wine? Should an exercise session last 10, 30 or 60 minutes? And is that one set of exercises, or three, when strength training? No wonder Boomers are confused! Call it "paralysis induced by information overload."

Your job is to show people the path and keep them moving. One of the best ways to do that is to show them that you've done the research.

2. *Wear a light*

To be a good Sherpa, you need to be recognized as a leader. If you keep your knowledge to yourself, you'll be leaving others in the dark, and they won't know

who to follow. Shine your light. Then others will recognize you as a leader.

Writing blogs or electronic newsletters is a great way to establish yourself as an expert. (If you are an entrepreneur, this is a must.) Of course, getting published in traditional media also works. Although it is best if you can write something and get it published, it also helps if someone writes about you or quotes you in a story. Still, it is not as hard to get published as you might think. Most organizations with publications, newsletters and websites are starving for relevant content.

Many moons ago, when I was heading up Erickson Retirement Communities' advertising efforts, I created a publication called *The Erickson Tribune*. The *Tribune* was a monthly direct mail piece, mailed to 3.5 million people, disguised as a 10-page newspaper. Why? Because I recognized that to be invited into a person's house each and every month, I needed to create something of real value for the reader. Here are the simple instructions I gave to my talented staff: Involve, Inform and Inspire.

Think about those three words carefully. I promise you, if you use them to guide your marketing efforts, you will be seen as an expert—a true Wellness Sherpa—and people will respect you and trust your decisions. Do it well and you will become a Wellness Sirdar (Sherpa leader). Even better, forget about marketing; use these words to guide all of your actions and you'll start to experience major success.

Let's tackle these words one by one:

Inform. Before the real estate market crashed, the *Tribune* published a detailed story on why that moment in time was the ideal time for readers to sell their houses. Loaded with research, we were doing them a real service by providing

them with real information. The *Tribune* was written in a newsy, editorial manner with very little traditional advertising. We benefited immensely from the goodwill created from providing dozens of valuable fact-filled articles, offering real information each and every month (in fact, roughly 50% of Erickson's leads came in through *The Erickson Tribune*).

Do you have this opportunity? Absolutely! How about a monthly electronic newsletter brimming with valuable health tips that can easily be passed on to friends and family? These actions will go a long way towards establishing you or one of your staff members as an expert, and engaging reciprocity. Make sure you always include photos of your experts and your salespeople. You want your prospective customers to feel like they know you when they come in for their appointments.

Remember, you don't really need to convince people to be healthy; they already know that. Instead, focus on making it easy for them. Give them information and services that make staying healthy easier.

Also, think about how you position your message. Half of Boomers are driven to a healthier lifestyle to look better. Playing on this vanity issue may be one way to increase compliance to a healthier mindset, as evidenced by the astronomical growth of the cosmeceuticals and plastic surgery industries.¹

I should point out one final tidbit while we're talking about winning followers through a newsletter. Several years ago, AARP did a study that included terminology.² For the record, the mature market reacted very negatively towards the term *exercise* while the term *active* tested very positively.

Continued on page 72

Becoming a Wellness Sherpa: the tools you need to guide age 50-plus adults on the path to health

Continued from page 71

Inspire. Do you have inspirational members or residents in your wellness/fitness center? Do you retell their stories as often as possible? If not, you should. In addition, you should capitalize on these stories as PR opportunities. Many individuals search for new meaning in their lives around “retirement”—after all, society tends to devalue you after you retire. Tell your customers how valuable they are to you and your team. The best way to tell stories about inspirational individuals is through the press and your newsletters. The effect? Other people look at those stories and think, “I want to be involved.” Very often their next thought is, “Man, I want to live or work out at a place where people are doing cool stuff.”

PR is even more powerful than advertising, because it comes across as an unsolicited recommendation. I guarantee you that the stories you don't yet know about your members or residents will amaze you. Time spent getting to know these individuals deeply—so that you can discover these stories—will be even more important in the end than the PR itself. Your members/residents will feel a real connection with you. They'll know they belong and are cared for. Plus, most people love being stars!

Involve. One of my clients is *GRAND Magazine*, a national online magazine for today's active grandparents. *GRAND*, along with one of our advertisers, Humana, created a contest for the GRANDparent of the Year award. This is an example of involving *GRAND*'s readers and Humana's customers and potential customers.

How can you involve your customers? How about a fundraiser where your members or residents run/walk to raise money? Even individuals who don't contribute monetarily to the fundraiser can contribute by running or organizing. The opportunities to involve your customers are endless.

Don't want to do a fundraiser? How about a contest? Have fun with this idea. You can do memorable things such as a takeoff on the TV show “The Biggest Loser”; for example, the most miles or most days at the center. At the *Tribune*, we had a contest for almost everything—cutest pet, best photo, best recipe—any excuse for people to share themselves with us.

Again, your goal is to get people involved. Invite people to participate in your walking club, or organize good nutrition classes at a great restaurant (you don't think everything you do has to happen *in* your center, do you?). Building relationships extends beyond your customers. And there are plenty of opportunities to bring the outside world in.

Of primary importance is a strong website. Our experience with clients is that roughly 70% of people use the Internet when shopping for a health/fitness facility. Think of it this way: The Internet has replaced the yellow pages. Your site should provide people with the opportunity to connect in many of the ways we have already talked about.

3. Have the proper attire

You wouldn't climb Mount Everest without the proper attire, and you shouldn't try to run a business without the proper attire. Part of being an expert is acting the part. How can you apply this principle? Have uniforms, badges, clipboards, as well as other things needed to become the expert.

Add to your credentials by using press releases, videos, association memberships, public speaking, framed licenses, honors—you get the point. I'm always impressed when I go into the office of my colleague, Dr. Gary Applebaum. He must have 600 framed advanced education degrees. Instantly, I know he's a smart person.

4. Enjoy the journey

We are blessed to be in a profession where we can truly improve people's lives. It's a journey we should enjoy. People want to follow people who are having fun. Even on days when you are not feeling motivated, it's important to act the part. Your ability to motivate your customers is the key to more of them reaching the summit. ☺

An International Council on Active Aging Visioning Board Member, Tom Mann is the cofounder of TR Mann Consulting (www.TRMann.com), a marketing and advertising firm that specializes in marketing to Baby Boomers and beyond. Mann is also the cofounder of Mature Market Experts (www.mature-market-experts.com), a free networking group for people serving the mature market.

References

1. The Natural Marketing Institute (NMI). (2007, September). 2007 Healthy Aging/Boomer Trends Report. Available at www.nmisolutions.com.
2. Speaking their language. *Journal on Active Aging*, 1(1), 12–15, 42; January/February 2002.

Mark your calendar

Want to know more about becoming a Wellness Sherpa? Tom Mann will present a session on this topic at the Seventh Annual International Council on Active Aging Conference in Orlando, Florida. You'll learn about building trust through relational marketing, marketing secrets for the 50-plus market, and more. This session will take place on Saturday, December 5, 2009, from 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. For details, visit the “Conference” section at www.icaa.cc, or call ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.