Older Wiser Wired:
Why This Matters

Mark Carpenter
Director, Web Strategy & Operations
AARP Services, Inc.

AARP *The power to make it better.*

I'm really pleased to welcome you to this seminar. AARP is very pleased to partner with HHS and GSA on this very timely, and important, subject. We hope you'll enjoy your two-day stay with us here, and look forward to hosting you at further events.

But on to today's topic: what's so important about older adults and the Web?

Preaching to the Choir?

Perhaps you've already grasped the importance of the 50+ population!

AARP

Often we find it necessary to break though the misconceptions people have about older adults and the Web. For example, a Harris Interactive poll from earlier this year reports that there are nearly 40 million adults over 50 online. But as you'll hear later, it's not all good news, particularly when you talk about the older segments of the 50+ population, or those who are otherwise disadvantaged.

But that's precisely why this matters. For a variety of reasons, more and more organizations, whether corporations, non-profits, or government entities, are moving important goods and services online. We won't reach everyone…but it is worthwhile to help remove the barriers of what's been referred to as the "gray divide."

So let's start here with one of those barriers: assumptions.

What They Say About Assumptions

AARP

This is not today's "older adult".

Assumptions we hear all the time:

> "Older people aren't online"
>
> One-size-fits-all answers to "what an older audience wants"
>
> Assumptions instead of explorations about disabilities: visual, dexterity, cognitive

What we expect you'll hear about today is that assumptions aren't particularly helpful, and that the practice of user-centered design—or usability—can help you to better meet the needs of your audience, no matter their age.

AARP User Tests

○ 2003:
- Tested older adults in San Francisco, Tampa, and Baltimore
- "Micro-test" in DC focused on current online membership process

○ 2004:
- Tested initial stage of new design in DC
- Tested initial prototype in Chicago, and will do one more test before launch

AARP

Tested a total of 35 older adults in San Francisco, Tampa, and Baltimore.

Hands-on, facilitated usability tests

Exploratory research methods designed to test a combination of issues/preferences

- Overall graphic design
- Navigation (content organization (IA) and word choice on labels)
- Usability of buttons and forms
- Interest in content areas

Amy Lee, who will be speaking tomorrow, has led this research and can answer any specific questions.

Two Sets of Usability Challenges

○ Those related to the physical aspects of aging: cognition, perception, motor skills

○ Those related to older adults' experience with, and exposure to, computers and the Internet

AARP

A number of the speakers will be discussing web usability for older adults, so I won't go into great details about our findings, except to say that it's important to realize that usability is not just about the physical aspects of aging.

Some of what older adults are dealing with are related to their experience with the computer late in life…these have cultural, social, and environmental components.

We've seen issues related to older adults' assumptions that any problems they encounter are their fault or that after they've struggled, they still rate their experience as positive.

And I expect that Tom Tullis will be sharing more of what they've been learning about the importance of a collaborative learning environment in the role of developing web expertise.

Old Is Someone Else

○ Older adults may have conflicting feelings and assumptions about people their age

○ When asked what makes a site good for an "older adult," every single participant in our recent research started talking about parents or older friends

AARP

Another interesting finding that has turned up is that even older adults may be dealing with some negative perceptions of aging.

This is another cultural aspect that can affect both their use of a website and our ability to learn from them in usability testing.

The Bottom Line

○ Good Web site design for older adults follows the standards of good Web design for everyone.

○ Ultimately, everyone benefits.

AARP

Good Web design for older adults pretty much follows standards of good Web design for everyone. Having a flexible, well-organized site that serves the need of your target audience (regardless of age) is just going to make for a more usable site. And what you'll likely hear later today is that making sites easier to use for older adults makes them easier to use for everyone, which is a good thing.

What keeps us going at AARP is that whenever we may get discouraged by the digital divide or the seeming difficulty of reaching all of those over 50, we hear another story—often from our online community area--about someone who took the computer up in their 60s, 70s, or 80s, and who has had their life changed for the better because of it.

So, what's next for us?

Coming Up Next

○ In 2004 and 2005, we'll be doing a comprehensive review of sites geared towards those 50+
- What's being done well
- What's not
- Establish updated benchmarks and best practices

○ Aging by Design, in Boston, 9/27-28/04

AARP

We'll be doing some testing related to a website redesign we're undergoing.

What I'm also very excited about is that Ginny Redish, Dana Chisnell, and Amy Lee will be contributing to new learnings in best practices for sites that serve adults over 50. Look for that later this year and into 2005.

We're holding a two-day event in Boston later this fall that looks at the broader picture of older adults and technology, both online and in the home. The announcements and website should be going out later this week. We hope you'll consider joining us!

www.aarp.org/olderwiserwired

The Older Wiser Wired initiative is a "Community of Practice" around web usability for the older adult. We are trying to bring together professionals around this issue to share ideas that would allow web sites to better serve this group, and this activity is part of this initiative.

On our website, you'll find

•A community of practice around usable Web site design for older adults

•Research results and tools

•Online community of peers (discussion board and email newsletter)

I'm also pleased to announce that the Older Wiser Wired site has recently been recoded to use state of the art CSS. We recently had a chance to visit the National Federation for the Blind, and got a very positive review of our site, in particular the way that consistent structure was used to enhance the experience. If you visit, you can find a detailed description of this effort under our events area, since it was presented at the UPA conference and the IA Summit this year.

Again, thanks for coming. I hope you enjoy your two days with us!