

The 7 Common Mistakes Professionals Make Communicating with Seniors

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The aging of America has created unprecedented opportunities for professionals who work in the senior market. However, many professionals find themselves unprepared to successfully communicate with older adults and wind up frustrated and confused about “what went wrong” with their best opportunities. Part of the problem stems from the loss of the communal society of our grandparents and great grandparents where old adults were part of the matrix of life. We learned about them because we lived with them. Today we live in a fragmented society where more often than not older parents “live somewhere else.” All of this has left us unfamiliar and unschooled in how older adults think and communicate. The good news is that we can remedy our cultural blind spot about aging by rethinking our most basic assumptions about who older adults are and what they really want. Below are the seven common mistakes professionals make in working with seniors based on outdated assumptions and, not surprisingly, that lead to predictable communication breakdowns. Simply updating these misunderstood areas of communication can dramatically improve a professional’s ability to “connect” with older adults, opening the door to productive relationships.

1. Lack of speed equals a loss of capacity. Older adults do not process information at the same rate they did when they were younger. We assume this means that they have slowed down in all areas of mental functioning. The assumption is wrong. Modern research has shown that while processing time is slowed while we age, information management skills, reasoning skills, IQ, verbal ability, and vocabulary are all preserved. **Bottom Line: Seniors may not be able to multitask like they once did, but they are as smart, as insightful, and as prepared to make intelligent decisions as we are.**

2. Logic is the best approach While being logical and well reasoned is crucial once you have established a good rapport with older clients, it is a poor choice in the initial stages of the working with seniors. This is because as we age the right brain takes on a dominant role as gatekeeper for new information. The implication of this finding means that we need to craft initiate conversations using elements that resonate with the right brain such as stories and metaphors. These are also the very elements that leave a lasting impression. **Bottom Line: Become versed in stories and metaphors that represent your expertise and your services and then use them at the beginning of your conversations. You will discover that old adults have similar stories and anecdotes to share with you. More important, you will be amazed at how quickly and effectively you “connect” with your senior client.**

3. Lack of urgency equals lack of interest We assume our ideas will provoke an immediate response from senior clients only to be disappointed by their lack of urgency and follow through. What we fail to understand that older adults have moved on to a new psychological agenda, a new growth phase, one that values reflection over rushing and conquering. This doesn’t mean the idea, the solution, or the need are not important; it means that seniors do not have the same need for urgency that younger adults do. **Bottom Line: Go with the their time flow and become fluent in the art of “plant and wait.” Professionals who try to drive older clients with artificial deadlines and high pressure closing techniques usually find out they don’t work. Focus on the quality of your connection (i.e. stories and metaphors) and benefits of your products and services. They will signal when they are ready to move forward.**

4. Wandering conversations are a problem to be tolerated We are quickly annoyed with seniors who do not stay on task, who wander from topic to topic as we try to get them to focus on our products or services. This communication style is called non-linear and makes younger adults uncomfortable. It actually turns out to be an efficient way for older adults to make important connections for a much bigger job they are facing at the end of their lives: life review. Life review is part of a larger task in which seniors must sift through a lifetime of experiences, weigh their importance, extract the most important ones, and then come to some conclusion about meaning of their lives and how they want to be remembered. It is the process of discovering and crafting a legacy and life review is the starting point. It is a humbling task at any age. Non-linear conversations are an ideal tool to search and connect a lifetime of memories, lead to the discovery of issues and preferences that professionals need to know about their client. **Bottom Line: Track non-linear conversations for values and themes. Look for important clues about what matters most to older adults and what they value and why. Then spend some time figuring out how your products and services complement these findings.**

5. Repetition is a sign of diminished capacity Repetition, like non-linear conversations, is another tool used by older adults to draw emphasis to persons or an events of personal significance. These "highlighted" moments play a critical role in the life review process and offer additional clues about whom and what is valued the most. **Bottom Line: Don't be too quick to dismiss stories you have heard before. Look at them based on the values and themes they represent. What is being admired? How are these values represented in your products and services?**

6. Assuming the best solution is obvious If given a choice between a better use of money and saving on present or future taxes as opposed to doing nothing, the choice seems obvious. But in many cases the choice seniors make is the opposite of what younger adults anticipate. Why? In the final growth stage of life, older adults are grappling with control issues, how it is slipping away on all sides, how they can hold on to what's left. The need to maintain control far exceeds the need to choose the best money management plan or product, especially if that choice appears to relinquish some element of control. **Bottom Line: Present your products and services within the context of how they help seniors retain control of choices, use of money, where they live, and who benefits from their legacy.**

7. Assuming that language is the same for all age groups Understanding the importance of language in working with seniors is essential. Language is not the same for all age groups. Words and phrases that resonate with a person's growth phase have a profound impact on the quality and depth of communication and it varies from age group to age group. For older adults, the choice of language needs to resonate with their need for control and their need to finalize their legacy. Using verbs and phrasing that signal seniors are in control is essential. "How do you want to manage this situation?" "This is your decision; we will work with whatever you feel is the right choice." "I think we can help you with ways to preserve your independence when your health changes" "I think the most important issue is what choices are the most important to you?" In the same manner, well constructed life review questions open doors to a new level of communication and understanding. "What do you remember about your grand parents?" "What was the biggest obstacle your family had to overcome?" "Who was your favorite teacher?" "Who was the most influential person in your life?" **Bottom Line: Understanding how to emphasize control in your conversation with older adults can open important doors in situations that appeared to be stalled or impossible to resolve. In the same manner, using life review questions can help seniors gather up the stories and events that are crucial to the formation of their legacy. These conversations will provide a roadmap for how your products and services can help them honor and preserve their legacy.**

The final growth stage in life is complex and demanding. Seniors not only need our products and services, but they need our willingness to understand and work with their developmental needs. We, in turn, need more meaningful contact with older adults, to benefit from their perspective, their lessons, and their example.