

The elderly: a market resource

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The audience that came to hear the talk was distinctive. All of them were over 65, and nine out of 10 in the group of approximately 90 were women.

The audience gathers daily at the Cranston Leisure Learning Center held at the Woodbridge Congregational Church to hear talks, have vicarious travel experiences, do handcrafts, knitting, painting, line dancing, and play bridge. This group is representative of a growing number of the population which is living longer (women nine years longer than men) and comprising a greater segment of the population. In 10 years, the Cranston Center has grown from an original membership of 50 to nearly 350. And this center is only one of several throughout the state which helps serve the needs of the elderly.

Increased numbers of the elderly will affect human services profoundly

Constituting one of nine people nationwide, and 1 in 8 in Rhode Island, the elderly are discovering that they are a growing political force for making their needs known. The Governor's White House Conference on Aging to be held in East Providence this weekend probably will draw more than 1,000 persons to conduct workshops, hear speakers, and address issues concerned with "the quality of life for all, and especially for the elderly."

The increasing numbers of the elderly, now the second fastest growing segment of the nation's population, after the 25-34 age group, will have a profound effect on human services — health care, transportation, housing or whatever. Equally important are business aspects of this demographic change. To a retail market directed toward a young population, it will be necessary and profitable for retailers to look more to the elderly as an additional source of revenue. Not as wealthy as others in terms of income, the elderly, with their increasing numbers, represent a major potential for this retailing market.

To get some idea of the type of shopping done by the elderly, a short questionnaire was given to the 79 women in the Cranston audience. The approximately 10 men in attendance were not queried because their answers would duplicate that of their wives, and women are better versed on shopping because they do most of it.

The survey was focused on Providence to determine how well the capital city is able to draw the suburban elderly. And it is important to note that 60 percent of the women lived in Providence at some time in the past.

It comes as no surprise to find that more than seven of 10 said they did not shop in Providence. When asked why, more than one-half of the respondents felt that parking was inadequate. This is interesting because the elderly are able to use the buses at no charge during selected times and, in fact, 56 percent of the respondents said they use the bus to get to Providence. Also, the fear of crime deters the elderly (about a third of the respondents) from shopping in Providence.

Again, it is no surprise to find that these women prefer the suburban malls because they are more convenient. These elderly women, most of whom live in Cranston, speak of the available parking and the accessibility of the nearby malls.

Do these answers mean the end of the retailing function in Providence for this segment of the population? Certainly not. When asked what attracts you to Providence, the respondents listed churches, banks, restaurants, and elderly centers. Most important in the list of choices was entertainment, with over one-third indicating this function, and 16 listing stores.

This entertainment attraction is important because it means that certain types of retailing, such as restaurants, could target this population by having similar opening hours as entertainment activities. Also, vans for the elderly could bring them to entertainment functions and then drop them off for a portion of time at retail outlets in the downtown.

The respondents, when asked which of the four major activity generators in the downtown they had visited in the past year, indicated visits to the following in these percents: Trinity Square Theater — 35; Civic Center — 38; Ocean State Theater — 64; and in the one month it has opened, The Arcade — 26. More important, 96 percent of the women said they plan to visit the Arcade.

It is this last figure which is most encouraging. The word is out on the Arcade and the suburban elderly want to participate in this new shopping experience. It is this type of retailing that can draw the elderly and offer them something not available at the malls. The spillover into shops surrounding the Arcade, as has already been demonstrated, can also boost retailing activity.

The Arcade and Ocean State Theater appear to offer the elderly reasons to come to Providence (Trinity Square Theater also has potential here) and retailers should be cognizant of the spillover from the entertainment function of the downtown to increase their own sales. The elderly are a potentially good market group and, if this spot survey in Cranston is indicative of other suburban elderly, the downtown can be a more viable operation once retailers capitalize on this market.

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