

# More older users heading for their keyboards

February 27 2009, By Nancy M. Laughlin

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Loretta Velliky of Dearborn, Mich., started learning to use a computer after her husband died in September 2005. "My husband had a computer, and after he passed, my daughter said, 'Mom, get on it!'" Velliky said. "She showed me a few basics and said, 'Don't be afraid of it! Learn it!'"

Today, 80-year-old Velliky e-mails her five children, shops and exchanges funny or interesting stories with family and friends.

"My kids encourage me," she said. "When I send them something, they say: 'Oh, look: Mom found this.'"

Velliky is part of a growing number of senior Americans online. As recently as 2000, fewer than 20 percent of Americans older than 64 were wired - meaning they could access the Internet.

But that's changing as Americans live longer, healthier lives and adapt to electronic devices. Today, 37 percent of U.S. adults older than 64 are online - up 85 percent in just eight years.

Tech experts expect the numbers to keep rising, and they see seniors as a largely untapped market - for equipment sales, new sites tapered to their interests and technology customized to their needs.

January's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas offered a full day of Silvers Summit seminars on topics from online dating to sites for caregivers. And companies - from Microsoft to start-up Myine

Electronics in Ferndale, Mich. - are developing simpler, faster devices to bring seniors (and baby boomers) into the computer age.

"We don't say 'easy.' We say 'fast,' with fewer steps," Myine Chief Executive Officer Jake Sigal said of the products his firm creates.

More senior centers, schools and colleges are offering courses for wired-wannabes.

"Our courses are pretty popular," Dearborn, Mich.'s senior services coordinator Marsha Koet said. "Many students know the basics, but we get beginners, too."

Surveys show the top reason seniors want to get online is to connect with family and friends. They also are fans of sites offering news, games, shopping and information on health, investments, hobbies, travel and caregiving.

"Our seniors are interested in everything," Koet said. "A lot like e-mail so they can stay in touch with grandchildren. Another big thing is exchanging photos with family."

If you're a senior who wants to get wired, or a child or friend helping someone learn, experts offer these tips:

## TIPS FOR SENIORS

- If you're buying a computer, keep it simple! A decent one with essential software costs a few hundred dollars. As your skills improve, add options.
- Many experts recommend older users learn on PCs; they're most often used in classrooms and libraries.

- For inexpensive training, call your senior center or check with continuing education programs. (Or have someone go online and Google your town and "computer training.")

## TIPS FOR TRAINERS

- Again, keep it simple. Teach them how to do things; don't give them complex details.
- Many seniors, especially women, don't speak up when you've lost them. Be patient. Let them ask questions.
- Let them sit at the keyboard. It lets them learn at their own pace, not yours.
- Online games like solitaire are a great way for seniors to learn mousing skills.

## CUSTOMIZING FOR SENIORS

Robin Raskin, Silvers Summit founder, recommends customizing a senior's computer.

- Accessibility settings on Windows' control panel lets you adjust font and cursor sizes, enable audio and change screen colors for seniors with sight or hearing impairments.
- Remove unneeded icons. "For seniors, less is more," she said.
- Enter their registration information and tell the site to "remember me" the next time they log on. (She advises keeping a list of passwords for them.)

- Make sure virus protection, pop-up blockers, firewall and other safe computing features are installed and up to date.
- Larger-letter keyboard stick-ons make it easier to hunt and peck.
- Enter the e-mail names of favorite contacts, so they can just pick from the list.
- Consider hiring a tech support service.

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## INTO THE FUTURE

With more seniors expected to be on computers, high-tech companies, including Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard, have developed or are working on a variety of products for them, including:

- Easier programs with commonsense icons.
- Soft-touch keyboards for arthritic hands.
- Larger labels on keys for people with failing eyesight.
- Screen magnifiers that enlarge not just type, but also videos and photos.
- Programs aimed specifically at elderly people, such as daily prescription trackers, medical record trackers and memory-skill games.
- Bluetooth headsets for people with hearing aids.
- And, one of the most incredible, an edible computer chip made of

vegetable matter that could be swallowed and allow a computer to monitor a variety of health conditions, like heart rate and blood pressure.

Sources: AARP; Myine Electronics; Microsoft

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## OLDER AMERICANS ONLINE

37: Percentage of Americans 65 or older who are online. In 2000, it was less than 20 percent. (By comparison, 75 percent of those age 50-64 are online.)

43: Percentage of seniors who expect to purchase electronic products this year (compared with 66 percent among those age 18-34).

42: Percentage of seniors using online news sites who say they check the Internet several times a day for breaking news. (Compared with just 18 percent for people younger than 20.)

46: Percentage of wired seniors who say the Web is crucial for maintaining social relationships. (The number held true even for people older than 70!)

58: Percentage of users older than 50 who say they sign on to an online community site at least once daily. (Compared with 47 percent for people younger than 20.)

Sources: Pew Internet & American Life Project; SeniorJournal.com; WiredSeniors.com

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