



[Comments](#) | Recommended

Seniors finding social networking exhilarating

11:32 AM CDT on Monday, October 12, 2009

By **BOB MOOS** / The Dallas Morning News
bmoos@dallasnews.com

Eighty-three-year-old Virgil Heidbrink has found what he thinks is the perfect place to retire. He's met many interesting people there. Every day, they share their life stories and favorite jokes. And he's convinced that the new social connections are keeping him young in spirit.



Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor to the DMN
Computer coach Gina Tanner helps Virgil Heidbrink with his blog at Edgemere retirement community in Dallas.

[View larger Photography Photo store](#)

Heidbrink spends three to four hours a day in the blogosphere – that virtual neighborhood of the Internet where he writes his blog and answers readers' e-mail. A computer coach has helped the resident at the Edgemere retirement community in Dallas build and maintain his Web site, virgilviews.com.

"I may cuss at the keyboard every now and then, but I've learned you're never too old to blog," he said. "In fact, it keeps you on your toes."

The former sales manager's new interest in blogging has surprised him more than anyone else.

During his career, he resisted going online. He could never see the point.

Now, he's routinely at his computer, composing wry comments about the foibles of old age.

Though younger Internet users continue to dominate online social networks, older generations have started to play catch-up. They're creating their own blogs and, more often, connecting with family and friends by joining Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

The largest percentage increase in Internet use since 2005 has been in the 70-to-75 age group, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The survey found that 45 percent of that age bracket is online, compared with 26 percent in 2005.

The trend has caught the attention of senior-living communities that have begun to introduce social media to residents. People who grew up with vacuum-tube radio sets are now learning how to befriend grandchildren and old classmates on Facebook.

"Social media are giving seniors a voice, and for a generation that has sometimes felt isolated and overlooked, that's no small feat," said Sarah Hoit, chief executive of My Way Village, which designs online social networks for older adults.

Menu and more

A year before the Querencia at Barton Creek opened in Austin, Senior Quality Lifestyles Corp. launched a senior-friendly version of Facebook where prospective residents could create profiles, exchange messages and get to know future neighbors.

"We created a virtual community as we were building the real one," said Nadia Sharp, Querencia's lifestyles coordinator.

By the time the doors opened in 2007, Interactive Querencia had already become a community fixture. About 70 percent of the residents depend on it to check the daily calendar, offer suggestions to management, chat online with neighbors down the hall and share photos of recent parties, she said.

Gene and Peggy Uselton are retired college professors in their late 70s who relied on computers throughout their careers and quickly became users of "IQ" when they moved into Querencia last year.

"When I want to know what's cooking, I go to IQ and click on the day's menu," Gene said. "It's a great way to work up an appetite."

Dallas-based Senior Quality Lifestyles plans similar social networks for its other two operating communities – Edgemere in Dallas and the Buckingham in Houston – and for two others yet to open – the Stayton in Fort Worth and Mirador in Corpus Christi.

Hoit's My Way Village has been working with Brookdale, a major national senior-living company, and expects to introduce its Connected Living social networks at retirement communities throughout the Dallas area soon.

"We've found that at least half of a community's residents typically participate within six months," she said. "People who had never heard of social networking are attending our classes and hunting and pecking at their keyboards. They have stories to tell."

Facebook class

At the Buckingham in Houston, residents' response to the new biweekly Facebook classes in the community's computer room has been so overwhelming that there's now a waiting list, said executive director Julie Fenske.

"The overriding reason for the interest can be explained in one word – grandchildren," she said.

Pat Deckert, who's 75 and lives at the Buckingham, said she joined Facebook after realizing that younger people rarely answer phone calls and only occasionally respond to e-mails. She figured she needed to speak their language.

"At first, I was afraid they'd just think some old person was trying to invade their turf," she said. "But when I got on Facebook and asked to be their friend, they immediately said yes and told me how cool they thought it was. I felt honored."

She's so encouraged that she's now tempted to try Twitter.

Another Buckingham resident, Sandy Humphrey, 76, has had her own Facebook page for only a month but has become an avid follower of her four grandchildren's Facebook postings, particularly those of her granddaughter who's in musical theater at college.

"She puts up videos of her singing," she said. "I can't get to North Carolina to hear her live, but this is the next-best thing."

Humphrey has also reconnected with a girlfriend from her own college days in the early 1950s. Before Facebook came into their lives, the two former classmates had only exchanged cards and notes at Christmastime.

"I have friends who say they don't want to go on Facebook and expose themselves to the world, but I'm not afraid," she said. "It's exciting."

Some research suggests that the old friendships rekindled by social networking may help older adults keep their positive outlook on life even when they may be losing spouses, siblings and lifelong friends to death and illness.

Staying current

Retirement communities are also launching their own Facebook pages and posting videos on YouTube to appeal to the boomer children of current or prospective residents, said Janel Wait, digital director at Glynn Devins, a marketing agency that specializes in senior living.

The pages often include dozens of photos of recent activities at the communities. Edgemere regularly updates its new Facebook page with pictures from its theme parties, piano recitals, art exhibits and celebrity chef cook-offs, said managing director John Falldine.

Visitors to the page can become "fans" and post comments. A recent photo of the gourmet pizza served at Edgemere brought good-natured queries on how someone might ship one out-of-state. Sorry, came the reply. The pizza is available only on the premises.

"Many of our residents' families live out of town, so the page will be a convenient way for them to keep tabs on our events," Falldine said. "We also hope it will give future residents and their families a better sense of our community here."

At the moment, a retirement community's use of social media isn't likely to influence anyone's decision of where to live, Wait said. But she expects that will change over the next decade as the boomer generation starts knocking on the door.

"What we've seen so far is just a dress rehearsal for the 78 million boomers, who will be much more accustomed to social media," she said. "They will expect to have whatever's new on the Internet, and communities that don't offer it will be left behind."