

## THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Gwen Rose, president and founder of Wheels of Fitness, with displays of some of the products she sells

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BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

## The next boomer bonanza

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Raul Rupsingh's parents needed help with their computer.

In 2006, Mr. Rupsingh was a masters student studying medical biophysics at the University of Western Ontario when he recognized he was spending a lot of time coaching his fifty-something parents as they discovered e-mail and Skype.

Mr. Rupsingh and fellow student Stephen Beath, who found himself in a similar situation, developed [PointerWare](#), a program that makes using computers simpler for older adults.

To get the software just right, the pair did volunteer work, teaching seniors how to use Microsoft Windows. Some of the people they met test-drove the earliest versions of PointerWare.

The program, which can be used with a traditional mouse and keyboard, or with a touch screen, lets users

with minimal computer experience send e-mail, upload pictures and host video chats with simple clicks or by speaking. It uses large fonts, has clear instructions and includes a brain-games component.

PointerWare's potential customer base will continue to grow. The first batch of baby boomers reached 65 earlier this year and it's estimated Canada will have a retirement age population as high as 10.9 million by 2036.

This massive generation has been driving consumer demand for decades. Now, as it enters its later years, the boomer population is on the cusp of inspiring a whole new sector — niche businesses to serve it through those retirement years.

"You'd think there'd be a flood rushing to the forefront to open up businesses for older adults," says Colin Milner, chief executive officer of the [International Council on Active Aging](#), a Vancouver-based organization that supports professionals who work with older adults and offers advice to new businesses opening up in the sector.

"It's been slow. But since the boomers started to turn 65 earlier this year, we've seen a rapid rise in interest. Almost all of a sudden, people have gone: 'Oh, they're here.'"

Mr. Rupsingh and Mr. Beath now have offices in Toronto and San Francisco and employ six staff members and two co-op students. The company has agreements to set up computers loaded with PointerWare software with most of the major retirement and nursing-home chains in Canada, including [Extendicare Canada](#), [Diversicare Canada Management Services Inc.](#), and [Chartwell Seniors Housing REIT](#).

The partners are working to get their product in U.S. nursing homes and trying to increase brand awareness to help build the direct-to-consumer client base through online sales.

The balancing act? Entrepreneurs need to help out this aging demographic without making people feel old or disabled.

"It's about making them feel empowered. This is what Moses Znaimer has called the Zoomer: the modern senior is growing older but is unwilling to compromise on lifestyle," Mr. Rupsingh says.

Gwen Rose, president and founder of [Wheels of Fitness](#), got her boomer business idea from the frail seniors she met while working as a physiotherapist for 14 years.

She says she was always curious about physio equipment that could help with treatments, as well as devices that aid recoveries from injury or allow people to live independently for longer.

She launched her business in 2005, after sourcing a number of unique pieces at international trade shows. She teamed up with Alan Fine, a successful businessman who sells the [MOTOMed](#) line of exercise products for people in wheelchairs.

Ms. Rose and Mr. Fine, who also became life partners, now supply major retailers, home health care and specialty fitness stores with products such as the Resistance Chair — an exercise machine you use while seated — and the Roll-a-bout, a specialized walker for people who have suffered a leg injury that is an alternative to crutches.

Ms. Rose drums up business and awareness at trade shows by meeting potential distributors as well as by educating physiotherapists and occupational therapists whose clients can buy products directly from her company's website.

With clients ranging in age from 40 to 90, Ms. Rose predicts her business will grow as more boomers develop

or try to prevent age-related mobility conditions, such as arthritis, osteoporosis and diabetes.

“People want to live longer, healthier lives, yet there’s a disconnect. Less than half of baby boomers don’t get as much exercise to meet government recommendations. Therefore they’re more prone to diseases.”

Clearly, health-care related businesses have the best chance to flourish. “The whole alternative-medicine field like Reiki and massage, that’s going to boom,” Active Aging’s Mr. Milner says. They give people with long-term ailments such as diabetes and heart disease a way to make themselves healthier, or at least feel better.

But the tech sector also has a lot of potential. There are companies using electronics, the Web and mobile for increased home safety, or that are combining technology with medical needs to, say, monitor blood sugar levels in diabetics.

Laurie Orlov, principal analyst for [Aging in Place Technology Watch](#) in Port St. Lucie, Fla., says smaller companies that really get to know what boomers want will thrive. “You can’t develop the technology in advance. You have to go out and find the need.”

But entrepreneurs must tread carefully when working within this demographic. Mr. Milner says surveys show people 65 and older dislike the tag “seniors,” preferring the term “older adults.” (Ms. Rose counters with: “They don’t like being called older adults either.”)

Clients of all ages were not impressed with early marketing materials from Wheels of Fitness that featured models with grey hair. “We found out that people see themselves as 10 to 15 years younger than they really are,” Ms. Rose says. The company’s current ads and demonstration videos show people in their 40s and 50s – with brown locks.

“People in this group have had a lifetime of experiences, different experiences. They’re diverse. Coming out with one product to suit every boomer, if you do that, you’re missing the market,” Mr. Milner says.

For instance, many boomers plan to work into their seventies, so offering daytime services won’t always cut it.

Overpricing your products could also flop – some members of the demographic are well off, but many are not. Millions lost significant chunks of their savings in the recent economic downturn. (Ms. Orlov credits some of PointerWare’s success to its relatively low price point – just \$8 a month.)

And while some are technologically savvy, others – like Mr. Rupsingh’s parents – still struggle with their remote controls.

Having a top-notch call centre to back a consumer product or service is a must.

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