

As the Building Bridges to Tomorrow project begins to analyze the data from the Centres of Interest surveys, many interesting trends have been identified. Even though each centre is unique in terms of its membership, programs, and problems it faces, there have been a number of common trends that are beginning to appear in the data.

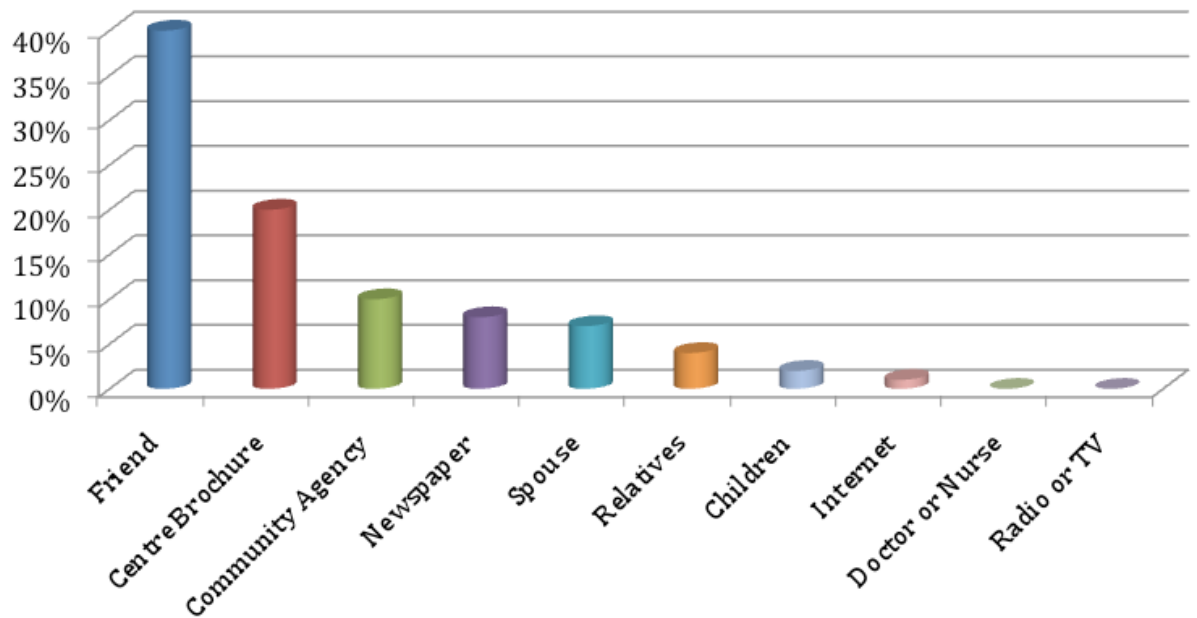
Our research has indicated that at least 40% of the older adult centres in Ontario are experiencing a decline in membership and it is widely known that most older adult centres are always striving to increase their membership base. One question that continues to be brought up by centre staff is “how can my centre increase our membership”. Centres, no matter where they are located, if it is in a small community or the heart of a city, are striving to be better known in their community and have new members walk through their doors.

Within all marketing strategies being used by centres, the number one way people found out about centres was through a friend. The “Tell-a-Friend” approach suggests huge implications in terms of developing marketing strategies to reach possible new members. With the financial constraints faced by many centres, the use of word of mouth is a very inexpensive and effective marketing tool. Centres can create new strategies with this information in mind. Centres may develop promotions and incentives to encourage current members to approach their friends. Possible

ways of doing this is by developing a free trial membership which can be given to member’s friends as a gift, possibly over the holiday season. Another possibility is to develop a type of reward or discount system to members who refer their friends.

One center participating in the Building Bridges project has just initiated this type of reward system. Any current member bringing a friend into the centre who becomes a member will receive \$5 off of either their annual membership, a centre trip, or a program.

How Members Learned about the Centre





“The use of the internet has not been the most effective way of marketing for my centre at the moment, but its use is coming along.”

Linda Rataj, Manager, Better Living Community Centre

On the other end of the spectrum, it was interesting to note that the Building Bridges research also illustrated that the internet or centre web sites are currently not effective ways of informing possible members of centres. There are a number of possible reasons why the internet and or centre web sites are currently not effective. Seniors may not think of using the internet to look for centre information, as they may not be as familiar with the internet, or not think of using it to search for information. Other possibilities are that, some centres across the province may not have a web site associated with its centre. Some centre’s web sites may be difficult to find and or have information that is not up to date. Either way, it appears that at the moment, it is not cost efficient to be placing a lot of funds and resources into web site development for recruiting new members.

However, as the baby boomer generation begins to approach

a point in their lives where they are interested in joining a centre, there may be a shift in the use of the internet as a means to find out information. Linda Rataj, the manager of Better Living Community Centre has found that *“The use of the internet has not been the most effective way of marketing for my centre at the moment, but its use is coming along. Currently, it is more caregivers looking for information for their parents, rather than the members themselves”*. This shift may give centres opportunities to improve their web sites and fix problems related to searches before more computer savvy generations look towards the internet to find out about centres. It is not suggested to abandon marketing strategies through the internet, but to examine its restrictions and keep in mind that as future generations age, its use may be more effective. It should be noted that there is great potential in using web sites for program registration and providing information to existing members.

Finally, our research indicated that for the surveys completed to date, no referrals were made from doctors or public health nurses. It has always been a struggle for older adult centres and community support agencies to get health care professionals to make referrals to older adult centres or to provide patients with literature about centres. This would appear to be a potential marketing strategy for the future.

For information or questions about the Building Bridges to Tomorrow project please contact Lisa Mistelbacher, Research Analyst at 416-447-7244 ext. 726 or lisam@betterlivinghealth.org.

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For further information about the “Building Bridges to Tomorrow” research findings, visit our website at www.oacao.org or contact Lawrie Bloom, Executive Director lbloom@oacao.org.

