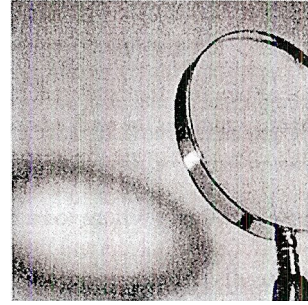


Coffee? Tea or Better Living?

Cafe culture provides support for seniors.

By Betsie Sassen and Carla Windhorst



Bill Jackson is 67 years old and considering retirement. He knows the relaxation will be great at first. He also knows he could soon become disconnected and isolated if he doesn't find something meaningful to do where his contributions are valued.

Imogene Warner is 63. She is suffering from mild depression following the loss of her husband. She needs to socialize, eat better and exercise, but how can her physician get her to take action?

Lydia Kramer is a 62-year-old woman raising her two young grandchildren. It's a stressful life and she takes little time for her own health.

These older adults all have a need for a support system to help them improve or maintain their health and quality of life. They are representative of the large numbers of older adults who won't seek help and avoid the traditional senior locations.

Now imagine a neighborhood cafe where people of all ages and throughout the community come to eat and meet. A place where people are recognized as individuals rather than members of an age segment. The setting looks hip, ageless, inviting and energizing. Once you're there you realize the Cafe offers something more than the food and friendly service. Bright colors and contemporary furnishings create a warm, inviting environment. A friendly host at the front desk provides a warm welcome and answers questions. You see that several classes and activities are in progress, including computers, digital photography; foreign languages, Zumba, Pilates, travelogues and more. Cafe Plus is a place where Bill, Imogene and Lydia can enter without any ageist stigma, under the guise of a great local restaurant and once inside find the support systems needed to keep their, good health and wellness.

What Is the Cafe Plus?

When Mather LifeWays was designing the Cafe Plus model in 1999, the goal was to create a community venue for older adults that presented a new kind of experience. The problem? Becoming a place where older people would want to go for services, programs and resources. The solution? To connect eating with renewal, potential and support-all in a venue that avoids institutional stigma and is tailored toward vital, active people who are lifelong learners and integral part of the community.

Mather UfeWays targeted the Northwest and Southeast sides of Chicago for the initial launch of three Cafe Plus locations. These particular communities are densely populated with older adults who are primarily lower middle class or working middle class and often "house-rich, cash-poor." More than 20 percent of the community population is 65 or older compared to the national average of 14 percent, and more than 20,000 people 65 or older live within a two-mile radius of each cafe location. The two communities on the Northwest side of Chicago are made up of a mixed ethnic, mostly European, population. The population on the southeast side is primarily African-American. The oldest Cafe has been in operation for seven

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years. All are open five days a week for breakfast and lunch; one location offers Friday evening dinner hours; and two locations offer Saturday hours. The Cafes are located street front in retail areas that are mixed in with residential neighborhoods, so they blend into the community. Each has various business licenses in order to operate the restaurant and a variety of classes and programs.

Keeping in mind the Cafes' economically challenged customer, all Cafe operations are underwritten by Mather LifeWays through mission spending. The typical cost to build a 5,000 square foot Cafe is \$500,000, and the annual subsidy per Cafe is in the mid-\$300,000 range, much like a small senior center. The Cafes use space efficiently. These small spaces serve between 3,600 and 5,000 older adults per year plus younger local business and neighborhood customers whose participation is not tracked in the customer database. In fact, the Cafes have been set forth as examples of Smart Growth, which is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in the center of a city to avoid urban sprawl. Smart Growth advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, streets that work for everyone and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.

The Cafe Plus locations are managed by a Cafe manager who is responsible for the overall operation, helps direct programming, manages the staff, advises on marketing plans and sets the Cafe atmosphere. Because involvement of the customers is key to the spirit of the Cafe Plus, the Cafe has designed multiple part-time positions to be filled by customers who become skilled volunteers and then move into employee positions. Recent customer service research shows a correlation between higher customer satisfaction and the similarity of the employee to the customer base. In the case of the Cafes, having older workers not only meets the needs of those workers, but supports higher customer satisfaction.

The Cafes are usually placed in neighborhoods lacking corner diners. Competition for the Cafes may include other restaurants, coffee shops, senior centers, church groups, senior clubs and congregational meal dining sites. But the Cafe is truly a unique blend of restaurant, gathering spot, coffee house and learning and exercise center. The goal of the Cafe is to be a part of the customer's day, not their entire day. The Cafe empowers its customers to make new friends and develop new interests so that they pursue things inside as well as outside of the Cafe.

The Typical User

Regardless of age, anyone is welcome to eat at the Cafe. Approximately 12 percent of all meals sold are sold to community and business people outside of the target older adult market. This customer mix contributes strongly to the lack of ageist stigma in the Cafes. Classes and other programs are reserved for those 55 and older. The typical user of the "Plus" piece is primarily female (71 percent). More than 50 percent are 69 years or younger; more than 50 percent are married; 20 percent are widowed; and most describe their health as fair or good. Most of the Cafe customers live one to four miles from the Cafe, and frequency of visits range from one to two times weekly to two to three times a month. A typical customer will spend \$7-\$13 per visit, which covers a meal and a class. Length of stay varies per purpose (i.e. meal, class or both) but averages around two hours. The "throughput" is a welcome and unique feature as it renews the energy in the Cafe, and the constant coming and going creates a buzz. There is no membership required. On any given day, each Cafe welcomes more than 100 people. Last year, the three Cafes had more than 46,000 visits. About 50 percent of those who try the Cafes return and each year about 50 percent of the customers are new.

No doubt the restaurant is a very important piece of the Cafe Plus, but the major underlying goal is to engage the customer by providing opportunities to meet new people, have new experiences and learn new things. The "Plus" piece of the Cafes is important because powerful evidence suggests that social activities prolong life, lower the risk of all causes of death as much as exercise and have an independent influence on how long we live.

The Cafes have had many success stories, including a proven track record for attracting younger older adults. By creating a place that is hip, inviting and exciting, the Cafe has been able to attract older adults who wouldn't normally consider using services geared toward seniors. At one location, more than 60 percent of the customers are 69 years age or younger. The older adults' willingness to come indicates that they are not seeing a stigma associated with the Cafe.

Quality of Life Impact

Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging's Quality of Life project began in 2000 as a way to assess the success of the organization's mission to create "Ways to Age Well." A key component to fulfilling the mission is measuring how Mather LifeWays' services enhance the well-being of customers at the Cafes.

The Quality of Life Survey measures impact in eight dimensions: autonomy, individuality, personal growth, meaning in life, social well-being, enjoyment, dignity and vitality. The tool also measures impact in the six dimensions of wellness—vocational, spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual and social—and the satisfaction with specific programs in these dimensions. Managers are provided with annual survey results that indicate both how important the dimension or service is and how satisfied the customers are with performance in that dimension. An action priority list lets managers know where improvements would have the greatest impact on the overall quality score. The overall quality score is made up of overall satisfaction, value of services, reputation of services and whether or not the customer would recommend. Since the Cafes opened, the overall quality score has consistently been 4.5 or higher on a 5-point scale.

It's interesting to note that those customers who reported their overall health as "fair-poor" on Quality of Life Services also perceived that Mather services provided them a high degree of autonomy, personal growth and individuality. Additionally, those reporting poorer health were the group most likely to recommend Mather services to others.

Customer Service

In 2002, Cafe staff embarked on a journey to document how they create and manage customers' experiences. In conjunction with K. E. Peterson of Experience Ovation Inc., a "dream" was developed to guide the journey and serve as the basis for a customer experience program. The dream was to create vital connections, extraordinary experiences and exciting possibilities for customers.

Employees were trained on the following five behaviors to increase the connection between themselves and the customer:

- Welcome. Greet everyone and extend warm welcome and welcome back.
- Initiate. Go the extra mile to exceed expectations.
- Invite. Invite people back, invite customers to tell their friends and invite people to participate.

Personalize. Use customers' names and remember personal preferences and milestones.

Appreciate. Express thanks and appreciation for participation and referrals.

Extraordinary experiences. It was not enough for customers to have good service; they needed to have a reason to increase their return visits. It was important for the customer to realize that just coming to the Cafe would be an extraordinary experience. The dream used to describe this stated, "We believe that having fun and celebrating invigorates our work and adds meaning to our purpose. We strive to have each interaction that a customer has with us be valued, celebrated and remembered."

Exciting possibilities. Because Mather LifeWays' mission centers around aging well and continuing to grow, learn and contribute, the idea of enabling or increasing the possibilities in someone's life was key. This part of the dream was described as follows: "We value childlike curiosity, lifelong learning and the question, 'Why Not?' We create opportunities for our customers to learn new things, meet new people and have new experiences. "

Staff members are trained on this dream and taught to implement it. Early implementation programs included the use of reminder pins, personal recording notebooks and prizes. The program has been simplified with regularly collected stories from all staff about how they've implemented these behaviors with customers and each other. Stories are then shared and celebrated throughout the organization.

The dream was introduced in 2003. In terms of measurable outcomes, in 2004 the Cafes welcomed 4,545 individual customers, and in 2005 they welcomed 6,277—a 38 percent increase. From 2000-2003, the overall growth in customers from year to year was about 6 percent. This was a dramatic increase.

Potential Hospital Adaptation

A hospital could easily adapt the Cafe Plus in a variety of ways for myriad benefits. The restaurant setting offers a non-threatening, attractive way to draw in older adults and, while not proven, could attract potential patients and create loyalty before they get locked into a healthcare system. The Cafes offer a way to deliver services to older adults and could be integrated into an outpatient setting, next to a doctor's office or within a hospital-based fitness center. It could also be a stand-alone venue. Having a Cafe Plus as a hospital-operated decentralized service has the potential for many benefits. It would allow the hospital to be the single point of contact for older adults seeking health resources and offer the opportunity to showcase doctors and other hospital services and programs. Many referrals could be generated back to the hospital's medical services. Rather than investing in senior membership programs where the relationship is usually through the mail, telephone or Web site and the return on investment difficult to quantify,

Benefits of the Cafe Plus Concept

1. Attract younger older adults
2. Increase active participation of older adults in improving their health and wellness.
3. Break down stereotypes that surround services for older adults.
4. Sharpen your customer service orientation.
5. Provide another health service: the opportunity for engagement.
6. Use the Cafe to showcase doctors and other hospital services.
7. Keep older adults out of the hospital.
8. Enhance your hospital's reputation.
9. Attract new customers and build a loyal customer base.
10. Build physician practices with older adult customers.

a hospital could spend that same money on a Cafe Plus where more direct contact is possible with current and potential customers. Also, since the goal of the Cafe Plus concept is to help older adults find ways to age well, a hospital's adaptation of this model could be viewed as a community outreach and social marketing strategy.

Second, a Cafe Plus could help generate good feelings, loyalty and trust toward the hospital. According to a J.D. Power and Associates 2005 National Hospital Service Performance Study, perception of reputation plays a very important role in a patient's choice of a hospital.

Evidence supports that the Cafe Plus Concept has a protective effect on customers' abilities to age in place, which aligns well with a hospital's goal of keeping older adults out of the hospital and receiving healthcare in community-based settings. The Cafe sites are used as places for learning healthy behaviors, acquiring health information and having regular monitoring and screening. The Cafes partner with local healthcare providers on many of these programs. Area doctors are attracted to the Cafes because of the primary target audience and often volunteer themselves for lectures and screenings. Not only that, doctors make referrals to their patients to go to the Cafe for a variety of reasons including to combat depression or to begin an exercise regime. MHS

About the Author

Betsie Sassen is executive director of Cafe development for Mather LifeWays. She may be reached at bsassen@matherlifeways.com.