

**Nobody Asked Me But... No. 13**  
**Turning Gray Into Gold**

**By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC**

The face of aging in the United States is changing dramatically and rapidly, according to a new report from the U.S. Census Bureau. Today's older Americans are very different from their predecessors, living longer, having lower rates of disability, achieving higher levels of education and less often living in poverty. In fact, recent demographic estimates indicate that seniors comprise 47% of the leisure travel market or 144 million roomnights per year. Today's seniors are relatively active, healthy and young at heart. They control half of the nation's discretionary income and are America's fastest growing age group. The U.S. Federal Reserve Board reports that the over-50 age group now controls 77% of the nation's financial holdings worth about \$800 billion; represents about 35% of the total U.S. population and accounts for 42% of after-tax income.

The U.S. population age 65 and over is expected to double in the next 25 years. By 2030 almost one out of five Americans (some 72 million people) will be 65 years or older. The age group 85 and older is now the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.

What does all this mean for the hospitality industry? Simply that there is a largely untapped market out there that is growing at a phenomenal rate. The mature market is generally willing to travel in the shoulder seasons if there is enough incentive. Since many do not work, they can travel midweek and arrange their travel plans in accordance with rooms availability. Many pay in full on departure by personal check (reducing credit- card commissions) and many are willing to give large deposits, providing a cash-flow benefit. In general, they also eat more meals at the hotel than other guests.

However, to reach this market, hotels must understand the needs and wants of the older traveler and provide services that appeal to them. A tour of scenic spots is of little value when most senior travelers must remain in the tour bus because the hike to the falls is uphill all the way. A

couple celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary should not be turned off in the hotel lounge because the disc jockey plays only heavy rock and roll music.

Even in a hotel marketplace that is projected to operate at 68.0% occupancy in 2006, whatever can be done to attract this market is worth the effort. But you should beware of preconceptions. Most seniors, for example, are more youthful and progressive in their thinking than people imagine. They are open to new ideas and are information-hungry. Seniors, it seems, are sensitive about their image and, therefore, any direct reference to age is objectionable.

Most marketing experts now try to avoid using terms like the “Golden Years” or “The Over 60’s crowd,” in favor of the more generic term “Mature Market.” For one thing, not all persons in this target market are old, and there is increasing evidence that the market will swell from the bottom up as more people, especially those in North America, work reduced hours or take early retirement.

Some traveling seniors have a high disposable income and like to visit specific destinations where they can meet people. They are not just looking for sun, sand and sea, but want to see and do things that they have never had time to do before.

#### Older Travelers’ Needs And Preferences

Older persons often want more personal attention than other guests. Many travel largely for companionship and need to talk to people of different ages. Older citizens are a heterogeneous group ranging in age from the mid-50’s to 70, 80 and older. But there are certain common characteristics within this varied group. For example:

- Lighting levels should be higher for those who are 65 years old
- One older American in three suffers from a serious hearing impairment

Prejudice against the elderly, which is characterized by rude behavior toward older persons is fairly widespread. Direct-contact hotel personnel must be trained to work with the older traveler. The staff must be taught how to communicate with persons with weak eyesight or poor hearing or both. The cleanliness of rooms and of public areas is especially important to mature travelers.

Many prefer rooms with two beds and they often prefer locations on the low floors near an elevator. Safety and security are concerns, so smoke detectors can be a strong selling point. More than other travelers, older guests enjoy public areas where they can gather to talk and socialize. Such rooms should generally be separate from the cocktail lounge.

Groups of mature travelers usually enjoy attending some kind of welcoming reception. You might meet them as they arrive – to explain meal times, hotel facilities and the like – and then offer coffee, lemonade and home-baked goods. Most older persons also like to participate in organized entertainment after dinner, such as a trip to a local theatre, a sing-along, or a shopping excursion. Guide services for these activities and for day trips are a plus.

### Older Travelers Physical Requirements

Interior design for senior citizens must take into account the elements of hearing loss, diminished vision, lessened color perception, poorer short-term memory and weakened upper body strength.

While experts agree that hotel facilities for seniors should be designed to offset these difficulties, I believe that, in fact, all hotel guests would benefit from the following improvements:

#### In Guest Rooms

1. Better lighting at writing table, at bedside, in closet, at TV set, at room entry.
2. Master electrical switch at bedside to control all room lights.
3. TV and radio operation instructions that are easy to read, clear in direction, simple to operate and well lit.
4. Blackout drapes and/or shades that actually keep light out.
5. Clear instructions on how to use the telephone.
6. Provide an alarm clock that is easy to program and read.
7. Lamp switches at the base of the lamp where they can be easily seen and reached.
8. Real clothes hangers in the closet along with irons and ironing boards.
9. Make sure that all descriptive printed materials are well written, clearly printed, and large enough to read easily.
10. Provide a refrigerator and a microwave oven

### In Bathrooms

1. Apply good non-skid material to both the bathtub floor and the bathroom floor.
2. Install well-placed and secure hand holds and grab bars in bathtub/shower area.
3. Make sure the adjustable shower head is easy to adjust and does the job.
4. Eliminate hot water surges and provide scald-proof hot water.
5. Provide good lighting over the mirror.
6. Install night lights which won't disturb sleeping but will provide safe night trips to bathroom.
7. Install a magnifying mirror on an accordian bracket.
8. Provide a UL-approved hair dryer with a wall-hung bracket.
9. Supply better-quality, more absorbent towels in color.
10. Make sure all shower curtains are long enough to reach well below the bathtub top.
11. Provide bathroom amenities (shampoo, lotion, etc.) in containers which are easy to identify (with large print) and which have raised surfaces on the cap for easy turning when hands are wet.
12. Provide some bathrooms for handicapped and wheelchair access. These will need higher toilet seats and showers with pull-out seating devices.

### In Corridors And Elevators

1. Make certain that corridors are well illuminated, especially over guest room doors to expedite the use of electronic door lock cards.
2. Provide easy to read, well-designed directional signs.
3. Elevators should have clear and well lit floor buttons with "Door Open" buttons easily located.
4. Elevator door bumpers should retract readily when touched.
5. Elevator signs describing restaurant facilities should be colorful, simple in design with clear directions.
6. Exit signs should be installed close to the floor so that they won't be hidden by rising smoke.

### Security And Safety Considerations

1. Voice activated fire emergency alert systems.
2. Smoke detectors
3. Sprinklers
4. Medical service availability with provision for emergency illness.
5. Valet parking
6. Well-lit parking areas with shuttle to and from the front of the hotel.
7. Uniformed security guards on duty at critical times.

Finally, one organization that has recognized this market since 1975 is Elderhostel which is the nation's first and the world's largest education and travel organization for adults 55 and over.

Elderhostel has grown to offer more than 8,000 learning adventures each year in all 50 states and more than 80 countries from Austria to Australia, Chile to China. Its theme-based educational programs are infused with a spirit of camaraderie and adventure. In addition to lectures led by educators and local experts, field trips, excursions, and cultural events, Elderhostel provides experienced, knowledgeable Group Leaders, all accommodations and meals and travel during the program. For more information, contact [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org) or 1-800-454-5768.

Stanley Turkel operates his hotel consulting office as a sole practitioner specializing in franchising issues, asset management and litigation support services. Turkel's clients are hotel owners and franchisees, investors and lending institutions. Turkel serves on the Board of Advisors and lectures at the NYU Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management. He is a member of the prestigious International Society of Hospitality Consultants. His provocative articles on various hotel subjects have been published in the Cornell Quarterly, Lodging Hospitality, Hotel Interactive, Hotel & Motel Management, Lodging, FIU Hospitality Review, AAHOA Lodging Business, Bottomline, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Travel & Leisure, etc. If you need help with a franchising problem such as encroachment/impact, termination/liquidated damages or litigation support, don't hesitate to call 917-628-8549 or email [stanturkel@aol.com](mailto:stanturkel@aol.com).