

Business of Aging

IT help for older Americans

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT:

Dec 9, 2016, 4:08am MST

Constance Artigues needed help with technology when her company, KiO Storage, started forging relationships with national retail stores.

KiO Storage designs and sells high-end but affordable polycarbonate closet organizers, meant for younger consumers unlikely to spring for fully custom organizers.

“I went into all these meetings with Target, Bed Bath and Beyond, AllModern, Wayfair, and their buyers were all people in their late 20s and early 30s,” she said. “I was dealing with a whole different realm, a different generation.”

Getting KiO’s systems in the known national stores and on the retailers’ website was crucial, but it also meant navigating online technologies beyond the spreadsheets and programs Artigues had dealt with previously, she said.

Artigues is in her sixties and has experience in business, but the terminology and processes of online services like CommerceHub and setting up online sales support was unfamiliar.

She needed help.

“There are a million different companies trying to get into these stores, and they won’t hold your hand through it,” Artigues said.

It’s a problem faced by a growing population of older Americans who are either semi-retired but still professionally engaged or starting businesses of their own.

Technological literacy has become a vital economic skill. For the young there are schools to help, and for younger professionals there are networks of friends and other digital natives they can tap.

Where do older Americans find the IT help when they need it?

Artigues found a Denver startup called GroovyTek, a technology support service specifically aimed at helping baby boomers and other senior citizens.

GroovyTek expected to mainly get customers from among the older generation of people needing help setting up iPads, learning to Facetime chat with their grandkids and friends, co-founder Matt Munro said.

GroovyTek is drawing nearly half its business from individual baby boomers hiring them to help explain technologies that would be useful to them professionally or in business.

“There’s a desire to be relevant,” Munro said. “There’s a need people feel to make sure they understand the pace of how things are done in business today.”

For a lot of people reaching retirement years, downloading apps to computer tablets, video chats, attaching files to emails haven’t been everyday tasks. It’s not always easy to ask family members to find the time or the patience to teach the latest online communication tools or social network marketing in order to remain up-to-date, Munro said.

GroovyTek started in Denver in 2015. Today it employs a dozen people.

It has expanded to offer instruction in Boulder, where it was finding a lot of older solo professionals wanting its services, Munro said. It’s planning to open in Florida next year to learn the dynamics of a new market and prepare for a possible broader expansion.



KATHLEEN LAVINE / DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL
 Alex Rodas and Greg Boman are two of the co-founders of GroovyTek.

A study by the Consumer Technology Association and IBM concluded that 85 million Americans, more than a quarter of the country's population, are potential adopters of technology to help them stay active, connected and maintain a high quality of life. A growing amount of those people intend to stay active professionally, the study found.

By 2020, there's estimated to be a \$42.7 billion annual market for tech products and serving the aging population, the report concluded.

A lot of people are retiring from careers where there was an IT staff or some other kind of assistance to help navigate new information technologies. Someone else could help attach a file to an email, make sure a document got uploaded to a file transfer site, or adjust the default settings on a new app.

Those supports fall away when a person hits retirement or strikes out on their own in business.

"They've had people to take care of setting up the technology, and now they don't," Munro said.

But most online consumer technologies don't account for this large population and frequently even alienate it with the way it brands its products and provides virtually no useful technical support for users, Munro said.

"Folks over 40 have been mistreated and forgotten by Silicon Valley," he said. "There's a real pent-up demand to be treated with respect and learn about these technologies."

For GroovyTek, decidedly analog touches, like handwritten thank-you notes from instructors, make a tremendous difference to clients, Munro said.

GroovyTek isn't the only Denver tech startup targeting the country's aging population.

In 2015, a group of entrepreneurs with executive experiences in technology and real estate started Silvernest, a roommate matching service for seniors looking to rent out space in their homes.

Silvernest is a little like a cross between Airbnb Inc. and Match.com, but is focused on long-term rental arrangements for retirees hoping to find compatible tenants, said Wendi Burkhardt, its co-founder and CEO.

Greg Avery
Reporter
Denver Business Journal

