

The use of online social media is here, it's growing, and it's not going away anytime soon. Most companies know it and have implemented some social media plan into their marketing campaigns. Google uses social media statistics in its complex search engine algorithms, and internet users flock to social media to sound off on everything from current events and politics to gossip and entertainment. As companies create social media plans, keep in mind that residents are plugged in, online, and socializing, too.

The 50+ age group is the largest growth demographic for social media use. In 2010, AARP released statistics from a study showing that more than a quarter of Americans 50 and older use social networking sites. In fact, the number of baby boomers using social networking is now more than the 13- to 17-year-old demographic. In other data released in

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2009, explosive growth could be seen between 2007 and 2009 for survey respondents ages 63-75. In 2007, ten percent of these respondents were active in social networking. By 2009, the percentage had ballooned to 36%. And both the baby boomer and senior demographics show continued growth in social networking activity.

And AARP isn't just reporting statistics. They're working to help baby boomers and seniors learn how to use popular social media. A quick search of the AARP website will bring up pages of articles, many with titles such as, "How to Create a Family Facebook Page" and "Facing Facebook Without Fear." So, how

members and staff. Some of them have turned to TheResidentPortal.com to help build these sites, tailoring them to each community and keeping them current.

Eskaton, a CALA member based in Carmichael, California, recently launched a site known as "eliving" at three of their communities with plans to expand access to all of their communities. The site is built and maintained by an outside company and the service is subscription-based. According to *Kaitlin Cuffe, Planning Associate with Eskaton*, Eskaton's "eliving" site offers social networking, games, movies, karaoke, books, and

video chat to residents, family members and staff.

# Social Networkin and Your RESIDENTS



Perusing the site is fun and intuitive. The buttons are large, easy to find, and make actions like sending

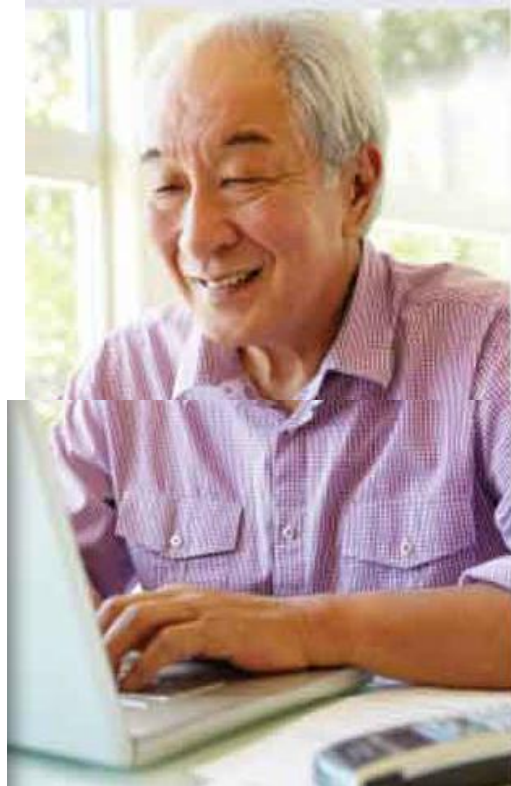
can Assisted Living communities better utilize this trend?

Meeting residents' social needs may come to include their need to be online, keeping up with family and friends via Facebook or even Twitter. Most communities provide a computer that residents can log into to read email, check Facebook statuses, and catch up online. But as current residents become more tech savvy, and technology expectations of residents and their family members increase, will that continue to be enough? CALA members are hearing more and more questions about internet accessibility or how the wifi works within a community a potential resident is considering moving to.

Several CALA members are meeting this new request head-on, creating online portals for their residents, family

messages and setting up a profile easy. Once logged in, the center of a user's homepage scrolls through information such as news items, weather forecasts, and links to community information as well as a list of upcoming community activities. There are pages for keeping contacts, calendars and events organized. Also included is an icon of Einstein at the bottom of every page; rolling over him with the mouse explains that he is Mr. Help and he's here to help, of course. For Independent Living residents, there is even section to manage doctor's contacts, medication reminders, and other health information a resident may want to track.

Steve Vasio of TheResidentPortal.com took some time to talk about how the company got started building these sites and what the future holds for the service. "We were



working with a skilled nursing facility on a site for their internal communications, and through our research we noticed this hole, where no one was providing this service to the residents. We're filling the hole."

This direction is right on target, as a new study just released by a team of Italian psychogeriatric researchers shows that seniors who participate in social networking and web surfing can keep their brains more active and flexible than seniors who don't. The resident portals are adding more cognitive games to help provide better memory care features, and they've even added a way for residents at one community to challenge residents at another community in games and trivia. Currently, the site works well on all android-based tablets, and most of the features work on the iPad.

So, how are residents responding to the site? "We've seen so much positive feedback from our residents and their families about the site," says Kaitlin. "They're engaged, and they've started to suggest new features, such as a recipe box for a

popular menu item, or games that aren't available yet. They even get impatient when we haven't posted the pictures from an event fast enough!" Communities still face the challenge of getting more hesitant residents involved and active on the sites. Baby boomers and seniors are less likely to post their own photos and statuses, using social networking more to keep up with others. It's not uncommon, in fact, for these groups to have younger family members and friends set up the accounts for them. To address this, the resident portals have tools and activities for use by activity directors and family members built in to help residents get more comfortable using the site themselves.

Assisted Living communities know the importance of adapting to the social needs of their residents. As the world relies more and more on the internet, Assisted Living residents do as well. Sites such as Eskaton's "eliving" portal are great innovations, and can provide the social tools many people will begin to not just want, but expect in their home. ■