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Targeting physical activity to women 55-70

by Shelley Callaghan

Within the growing population of older adults, women ages 55-70 are part of a unique group that needs to be targeted. The investment made today will go a long way to ensuring these women are healthy over the long term, reducing the burden on the health system and increasing their quality of life as they age.

To better understand the barriers to physical activity for these women, our organization conducted a series of focus groups to hear from women 55-70 years old and from community stakeholders. The discoveries from these discussions provided plenty of ideas on how to modify facilities, programs and communication materials to encourage physical activity.

Along with the challenges for service providers, there are many opportunities.

Challenge 1: *Women 55-70 are a large, growing segment of the Canadian and United States populations.*

Developing physical activity programs and services that respond to the needs of women 55-70 will ensure providers are ready to handle their increasing numbers.

Making programs, facilities and communities more appealing to women 55-70 and communicating these opportunities effectively has the potential to increase activity levels and revenues.



Challenge 2: *Health is an issue for women 55-70.*

Arthritis/rheumatism, food allergies and high blood pressure are the health issues most reported by women 55-70 (1). Obesity and hip/knee replacements are also found in this age group. Acknowledging that these health issues are a reality and developing programs with this in mind is essential if women 55-70 are to feel comfortable participating. This will involve both training instructors to modify activities and empowering women to bring forward their health issues as concerns.

Challenge 3: *Disabilities are a reality for women 55-70.*

Facilities and communities need to be better equipped to accommodate people with mobility issues. Universal design is the most recognized approach being used today and operates on the premise that

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if you make something accessible for people with a disability, it will be easier for everyone. This means non-slip tiles for the shower and changing rooms, hooks at a height everyone can reach, good lighting (everywhere), wider paths that accommodate wheelchairs, and well-cleaned sidewalks free of ice and snow. By making these changes, facilities and communities will be much safer, livable and inviting for everyone.

Challenge 4: *Physical activity participation becomes more important as we age.*

Building strategies aimed at younger 'seniors' will allow these women to bank the health benefits of physical activity. Women live longer and make up the majority of the very old population. Investing in women 55-70 does not need to be difficult. If you already have a strategy for older adults, making women 55-70 a sub-section is a straightforward approach.

Challenge 5: *Many women 55-70 are not able to participate in physical activity during the day.*

Many women 55-70 are still working or have other responsibilities during the day. Providing flexible physical activity choices will allow them to fit in physical activity when it is most convenient. By increasing the number of women 55-70 participating in programs, providers have the opportunity to bring in additional revenue.

Challenge 6: *Women 55-70 are dissatisfied with available physical activity opportunities.*

The 2004 *Physical Activity and Sport Monitor* found that the majority of women 55-70 were not satisfied with physical activity and sport opportunities available to them (2). They identified their top barriers as:

- lack of information on opportunities
- wrong type of programs/facilities
- unsuitable hours and class times
- cost
- lack of skill

**The 55-70 age group
will be the fastest
growing segment of
the Canadian
population over the
next 25 years ^{4,5}**

Based on this, it is apparent that the current physical opportunities offered for women 55-70 are not meeting their needs. Current programs, infrastructure and facilities need to be modified.

Challenge 7: *Community development and design do not support physical activity.*

The current development of urban and rural communities (for example, big box stores) does not support physical activity and needs to be re-examined from an age-friendly perspective to allow for maximum participation. An age-friendly community benefits people of all ages. Some examples of what communities can do to become more age-friendly are:

- including positive images of older persons
- accessible transportation
- barrier-free and enabling interior and exterior spaces
- places and programs for active leisure and socialization
- safe places to walk

Challenge 8: *Multiple stakeholders have major roles to play.*

Getting more women 55-70 physically active is the collective responsibility of all

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stakeholders. Expanding current partnerships between health and recreation and developing new partnerships with non-traditional stakeholders such as employers, grocery stores, pharmacists or adult learning centers is important.

By having a variety of stakeholders involved, everyone will have access to more resources (human and physical), greater and more varied expertise and diverse networks to communicate and promote initiatives. Women 55-70 have a lot to contribute and should be sought out as advisors around the construction/renovation of new facilities, development of programs and services, and in the establishment of program fees, subsidies and discounts.

If you want to know if something will work for women 55-70, ask them.

Challenge 9: *Visible minority women are a growing segment of the population.*

The unique language, culture and physical activity interests of women from minority populations must be taken into consideration. More and more communities are moving to inclusion strategies and offering groups incentives to do more multi-cultural programming. Additionally, many visible minority groups have their own associations. Teaming up with them to develop, deliver and promote physical activity will ensure your programs and services become more inclusive to the entire community.

Challenge 10: *Many women 55-70 have low incomes.*

Women 55-70 have lower incomes than younger women and men ages 55-70 (3). With less money to spend, these women tend to be very frugal and watch pricing carefully. Deciding what to charge for programs and services is always a challenge, but providers need to recognize that these women will be looking for lower-priced options. Discounts, coupons or bring a friend (2 for 1) options will be well-received.



Solutions for communicating programs and services

Since one of the top barriers is lack of knowledge about physical activity opportunities, these solutions will help attract the attention of women 55-70.

Photos: It is important for the women to see themselves portrayed in active, healthy ways in graphics, photographs and illustrations. This helps normalize physical activity participation for both the women and society. You'll find a source of photos in the Resources list.

Testimonials: Including testimonials is an excellent technique that allows women 55-70 to understand what is possible. Be sure to include a range of testimonials from everyday people with a focus on how they have overcome challenges.

Descriptions: To help them make informed decisions, provide more information than just time and place. Outlining the expected skill level, social opportunities, what to wear and the average age of participants is helpful.

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Communicate solutions: Anticipate potential barriers that might prevent women from participating, and present positive solutions, activities or tools with contact information so they can get started right away.

Build capacity: Developing effective marketing techniques and communication materials requires dedicated effort. Provide staff training on advertising, slogans, messages, social marketing and how to work with media.

Solutions for encouraging participation

Invite: Instead of sending out generic flyers, invite the women to attend (verbally or in writing). Being invited adds a personal touch and makes everyone feel special.

Word of mouth: Word of mouth is the best way to communicate opportunities to women 55-70. Peer recommendations carry a lot of weight, so encourage your current participants to bring friends or spread the word to others about your programs or services.

Demonstrations: Encourage the women to learn more about your programs and services by offering free demonstrations. These try-it sessions should be fun, interactive and include registration options so they can sign up right away if they are interested.

Outreach: To ensure your message reaches women 55-70, make an effort to go to them. Offer to speak at community or association meetings, set up displays in grocery stores, lobbies or during flu shot clinics, and provide information sessions in apartment buildings, churches or community centers.

Media: Women 55-70 access information in different ways, so plan to structure communications with this in mind. Develop communications for TV, radio and print, utilize local newspapers where possible as



these are well-read, develop websites where information can be found and send out personal invitations by mail or email.

Solutions for wording

- Use the word *fitness* instead of exercise. People see the word exercise and feel it will be just like the gym class that they hated as children.
- Women 55-70 do not identify with the terms “senior” or “older adult.” Identifying them through an age range (55-70) instead is more widely accepted and works best.
- Use *introductory*, not beginner, to describe skills development or classes for totally new participants.

Taking the next steps

A first step is to examine your community. Are women 55-70 active? Is the community walkable, safe, accessible? If not, what needs to change? Organizing a focus group or community consultation is a great way to listen and learn from the women in your community, allowing you to address issues and plan accordingly.

To have the greatest impact, share information and brainstorm around what can be done with a variety of stakeholders.

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Resources from CAAWS

Canadian Association
for the Advancement of
Women and Sport and
Physical Activity

Focus Group Report:
Women 55-70 and
Physical Activity

Making the Case:
Physical Activity and
Women 55-70
business case document

Women 55-70 and
Physical Activity Fact
Sheets

DVD of photos free for
noncommercial use. All
photos in this article
are from the DVD.

www.caaws.ca/women55plus/index.cfm

International
Council on
Active Aging
www.icaa.cc
604-734-4466

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Stakeholders could be key decision-makers in your organization and within your community (managers, directors, councillors, etc.).

Making the case for resources (time, money, human) will be necessary before implementing solutions. Everyone has a role to play and should be part of the solution, including women 55-70.

The next step is to examine your programs and services. Are women 55-70 attending? What are they attending and what are they not? Use the ideas from the women and stakeholders to make modifications.

Once you have done the research and generated support, try out your ideas and evaluate their impact. Plan to start small, perhaps adapting a single existing program or communicating a service in a different way. The important thing is to evaluate the success of your interventions so you can adapt what you are doing and continue to build on what is successful.

Shelley Callaghan is the president of Purple Dog Consulting and has been working in the area of physical activity and health promotion/prevention, communications and program development and management for over 17 years. Shelley has a Master of Arts degree in Leisure Studies and a Bachelor of Social Science degree. Shelley currently manages the Women 55-70 and Physical Activity project for the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity and is the primary author on newly developed publications resulting from this project.

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2. Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. 2004 Physical Activity and Sport Monitor. Available August 20, 2008, from <http://www.cflri.ca/eng/statistics/surveys/pam2004.php>



Courtesy of CAAWS, Mariann Domonkos Photography

3. Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity 2008. Making the Case: Physical Activity and Women 55-70. Using data from Statistics Canada. 2006. Women in Canada 2005 5th edition. Referencing 2003 Statistics Canada, Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics.

4. Statistics Canada. 2006. Annual Demographic Statistics, 2005.

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About the Project

This article summarizes information from a three-year project undertaken by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS). In 2006, CAAWS conducted a series of cross-Canada workshops with women 55-70 and community stakeholders. The results of the focus groups are contained in a comprehensive report available on the CAAWS website, www.caaws.ca/women55plus/index.cfm. Funding was provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada, through the Population Health Fund.