

Boomers Challenge Healthcare Choices. Employers Evaluate Key Benefits for Older Workers



We're Ameritas. We're for people.®

A Division of Ameritas Life Insurance Corp.
A UNIFI Company

By Paul Policella, Ameritas Group

“Don’t count your years, make your years count,” is a saying that aptly expresses how many members of the baby boomer generation feel about getting older. To many it was only yesterday when they were setting the world on edge during the 1960s and 70s, questioning traditional ideas and methods. Forty years later, they still are not accepting the status quo as they face retirement, especially when it comes to their healthcare.

Although boomers tend to be independent, the reality is that they will face a variety of physical health concerns as they age. The particular benefit needs of boomers present an opportunity for producers to provide employers with value-added services to help address those concerns, including offering some types of insurance they may not have considered in the past, such as eye care and hearing options. Boomers are apt to be highly sophisticated, educated, and very opinionated. They do not want to be perceived as any different or less capable than the younger generation. Many refuse to adopt any type of physical support that might indicate they are getting older, including hearing aids or unstylish glasses with thick lenses. They seek better alternatives and better healthcare.

Today, one in four persons in the United States is a baby boomer. The generation is now 78 million strong, and the first members of this group will reach age 65 in 2011. The life expectancy for these workers is projected at nearly 20 years beyond their retirement age, which is seven years more than any previous generation.

Notably, many boomers are not interested in full-time retirement, but prefer to switch to a flexible work schedule so they can enjoy the challenges of their jobs while also pursuing personal interests. They anticipate working until at least to age 70 or even older, possibly at the same job or maybe pursuing a new career or business opportunity.

The boomers’ determination to challenge the status quo, along with traditional methods and answers, will continue as they enter their retirement years. They will not be content to fade quietly into the sunset. Suitable and affordable healthcare solutions will remain a paramount issue.

Health Challenges Facing Boomers

The National Institute on Aging reports that in 2006, 37 million Americans were age 65 or older. By 2030, that number will nearly double to 71.5 million, or 20 percent of the population.

The demand for health insurance coverage and medical services will significantly rise over the next 22 years. The Institute projects that by 2030, 8 out of 10 older Americans will be managing multiple health issues and chronic illnesses. However, they may be able to delay some of these issues by keeping fit,

making healthy lifestyle choices, and participating in preventive health programs.

Hearing Troubles

The EAR Foundation reports that at least 50 percent of boomers surveyed have difficulty hearing, with most blaming it on exposure to noise, both occupational and recreational. Of this group, 75 percent said they find themselves in situations where people are not speaking loudly enough or clearly enough, or where the TV volume is too low.

Most boomers are reluctant to admit that they have a hearing problem and avoid exploring medical diagnosis or treatment options. Many do not want to take time for an examination and diagnosis. They are also concerned that if they do have a problem, the only corrective option is a hearing aid, which would serve as a visible indication that they are getting older. But today, in addition to hearing aids, there are several hearing improvement options, such as infrared listening systems or stylish personal amplifiers that look like trendy PDAs or iPods and magnify sound close to the listener's ear.

Physical and psychological effects of hearing loss. Hearing loss may also result in a variety of psychological, social or physical consequences for boomers, including depression, anxiety, concentration problems, vertigo, headaches and muscle pain, exhaustion and fatigue, stress, high blood pressure, and eating and sleep disorders.

According to the American Academy of Audiology, hearing loss is a significant, but treatable, health problem for aging Americans. Today's Baby Boomers have the most active and noisy lifestyle of any previous generation, which may lead to higher incidences of hearing loss.

Employers respond with hearing benefits. Many employers are recognizing the importance of raising employee awareness about the potential of hearing loss and treatment options, especially for boomers. Some provide educational lunch-and-learn sessions; others offer hearing benefits and encourage employees to seek routine hearing examinations to establish a benchmark for their hearing or treatment of hearing loss.

Eye Health Concerns

As boomers age, chances are they will experience some type of eye health concern. However, most do not know the risks and early warning signs of diseases that could potentially blind them if they do not seek treatment.

In a National Eye Institute (NEI) survey of Baby Boomers, 71 percent stated that a loss of their eyesight would rate as a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10, meaning that it would have the greatest impact on their day-to-day life. However, only 8 percent knew that there were no early warning signs of glaucoma, a condition that damages the eye's optic nerve and can result in vision loss and blindness.

As workers age, reports of major eye diseases will increase, but many new cases of blindness or impaired vision are curable or preventable through early detection and treatment.

Eye Diseases. Eye diseases and vision problems are associated with increased illness, decreased quality of life, and higher risk of death.

There are four primary eye diseases linked to vision loss or blindness: age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, cataracts, and retinopathy. These diseases usually develop slowly and are considered silent stealers of health. According to the NEI, there are more than 130 million Americans aged 40 and older. Of this group, more than 30 million suffer from eye diseases.

Consider these statistics:

- Currently 2 million Americans have been diagnosed with AMD.
- Diabetic retinopathy affects more than 4.4 million boomers, and the number of cases is expected to continue to soar.
- More than 2 million boomers have glaucoma, and another 2 million have the disease but do not know it.
- Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness, and 22.3 million boomers have the disease. Fortunately, surgery is a viable option to eliminate cataracts, but many boomers do not have access to affordable care.

The importance of eye care benefits. By 2020, more than 5.5 million Americans will experience blindness or low vision, according to NEI. Many new cases are curable or preventable by detection through a comprehensive wellness exam and proper treatment, which could result in an estimated annual medical savings of more than \$1 billion. Employees are more likely to get their eyes checked regularly if their employers offer eye care insurance.

Reaching Employers with Benefits for Boomers

With the threat of a serious workforce shortage looming as boomers reach retirement age, the role of benefits in employee retention will become more important than ever.

Employees in the boomer generation want healthcare providers, employers and producers to view them as valuable partners in their health and benefits decisions. They want a range of options they can evaluate to identify those that best fit their needs.

As the boomer employee group increases in size, producers have an excellent opportunity to help employers meet the challenge of providing the right mix of health benefits that will meet the increased health challenges boomers will face.

Benefits that stress healthy lifestyle choices and prevention, and reward boomers for staying fit and active, will go a long way in keeping them satisfied. And those that help keep older employees healthy will save employers money over time.

Ideas for successful presentations. For success in selling these benefits options to employers, I encourage

producers to develop a thoughtful sales strategy that targets both the benefits decision-makers in the organization, and the boomer employee group.

A few ideas to consider:

- Evaluate the employee demographics of the group and segment them into age groups.
- Study the benefit plans currently offered. Do any address the changing health needs of older workers? What are the utilization trends of the plans, and by which employee groups?
- What are the concerns and expectations of the benefits decision-makers? Do they make the healthcare decisions for their own families? What value do they place on health benefits?
- Does the company consider boomers to be critical contributors to the organization's success?

Answers to these questions will help you organize your benefits recommendations and communication strategy, identify the information and messages you want to emphasize in your presentation, and package a successful proposal.

Target Your Strategy

The changing healthcare needs of boomer employees provide producers with new opportunities to market important health care benefits to employers, including eye care and hearing options. A thorough understanding of baby boomers' preferences, expectations and emerging healthcare challenges, as well as the valuable contributions these employees make to the overall success of the organization, will assist producers in preparing the right communication strategy to reach benefits decision-makers.

Paul Policella is regional vice president of Northeast Sales for Ameritas Group, which is headquartered in Lincoln, Neb. He has worked in the insurance industry for more than 16 years, joining Ameritas Group in 2004. In New York, products are sold through First Ameritas Life Insurance Corp. of New York. For assistance in understanding eye care, hearing or dental plans or comparing coverage options, contact the Ameritas Group Marketing Department at 800-776-9446.