

COVID-19 Weekly Industry Updates

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Once an Afterthought, Nursing Homes Embrace Social Media as Essential During COVID-19 Crisis

Written by: Alex Spanko

4/7/2020

When Jonah Blumenthal, co-founder of the Pomona, N.Y.-based marketing firm TypoDuctions, first started pitching nursing home operators on the potential benefits of using social media, the response was decidedly skeptical.

“Five years ago, people thought we were nuts — why in the world would a nursing home want social media?” Blumenthal told SNN recently.

Engaging with potential customers over platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has amounted to table stakes for businesses across all sectors for more than a decade now, and it’s common among other settings in the senior housing and care continuum.

Independent and assisted living operators, for instance, look to attract the attention of the proverbial adult daughter — who’s been tasked with finding a place for Mom or Dad to continue a normal lifestyle with some supports — with pictures and videos of activities, luxury amenities, and happy seniors on exciting day trips.

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But for most nursing home operators, the perceived risk has long outweighed the rewards. With most people choosing a post-acute or long-term care center based on proximity to family and word-of-mouth recommendations, why invest the time and money in developing a social media presence for what amounts to a need-based business? Why invite the potential for negative reviews or comments in a space that has always been hyper-conscious about its portrayal in the media?

Then the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020 provided the answers to those questions.

After the federal government banned all non-essential visits to nursing homes, operators have rapidly built up their social media presences almost overnight, relying on their websites, Facebook, and even newer platforms such as TikTok to allay the fears of residents' families — and try to prove to the world that life is continuing amid a global pandemic.

"When you see your family member doing well, smiling and being taken care of, it really puts the families at ease," Shalom Friedland, vice president of operations at the Lakewood, N.J.-based Paramount Care Centers, told SNN.

Of all the strategies that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has implemented to stem the tide of COVID-19, its [early decision to bar nursing home visits](#) by all but the most essential staff has had the biggest emotional toll.

For weeks now, local news outlets have reported on the frustration that family members of nursing home residents feel, with bittersweet stories of conversations through closed windows and birthdays celebrated over Skype filling newspapers and evening news lineups across the country.

That feeling goes both ways: Residents of post-acute and long-term care facilities, some of whom have dementia and other conditions that prevent them from fully grasping the gravity of the situation, rely on regular visits for their mental health and wellbeing.

"They're missing that connection with their families and friends," Izzy Weinberg, managing member of the Rockville Centre, N.Y.-based Champion Care, said.

Virtual connections

Over the last month, TypoDuctions has seen its volume of social media posts on behalf of clients double, according to Blumenthal. Many of the company's customers have compiled lists of family members' e-mail addresses and phone numbers — information facilities don't normally collect — in order to send out coordinated blasts letting them know to follow the individual buildings' pages on Facebook and elsewhere.

"This way they still have that feeling of connection — I'm able to see that life is going as normally as possible," Blumenthal said. "I'm still seeing pictures of the loved ones. Even if it's socially distant bingo or whatever's going on, we're seeing that they're still being taken care of constantly, and that's a huge comfort to the families."

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Champion Care, which operates skilled nursing facilities across the Midwest, had used Facebook at most once every week prior to the start of the crisis, Weinberg said — typically to inform the community about significant events.

That has accelerated to every day, with Champion highlighting the range of socially distant activities that building staff have implemented across the company. Residents have turned hallways into bowling alleys, each taking turns to try to knock down the pins, and also played bingo while staying six feet apart.



Despite the visitation bans, Weinberg said engagement with residents, at least virtually, has never been higher.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an individual facility’s page would garner maybe 50 to 100 views per week, Weinberg estimated; for comparison, he shared a recent Facebook screenshot indicating 1,300 views and 538 engagements over a seven-day period.

“We see there’s more connections with children and their parents, or grandchildren with their grandparents, on Facebook due to all the posting and all the media that we’re putting out,” he said.

While Weinberg and Champion Care have come to embrace the two-way street of Facebook — building leaders can post, families can respond and share with their extended networks — it’s only one of the options in operators’ toolkits.

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Paramount Care Centers routinely sends e-mails to families of residents, and created text-messaging groups to provide updates as quickly as possible to the widest net of people, according to Friedland.

The company has also begun hosting conference calls with the family members of residents at each facility at a minimum of twice a week, attracting nearly 200 people — a considerable uptick from previous efforts.

“People are very worried, very understandably, and people are using the tools that we’re putting out there,” Friedland said.

Even the simple facility website has become a vital hub of information for operators: Blumenthal’s team has worked to implement pop-up notifications directing visitors to the latest updates from management, including daily letters from administrators and the most recent guidelines from CMS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Having centralized places for information not only helps to put families at ease; it also eases the strain on nursing home administrators and other leaders who find themselves swamped amid the constant battle against COVID-19.

“They’re inundated right now, and there’s a sense of relief from them, seeing what’s going on through social media,” Blumenthal said.

The widespread development of coronavirus-specific mailing lists, text message chains, and social media groups can also help operators remain in compliance with rapidly evolving regulations. In New Jersey, the state health department has begun requiring providers to notify families or designated caregivers of either confirmed or suspected coronavirus cases within 24 hours “via telephone, e-mail, or another form of communication,” [according to a report from NJ.com](#).

Though that initial notification must be followed up with a letter within three days, having the existing digital infrastructure makes that task easier, Friedland noted.

“That’s a big job, obviously, especially with everything going on,” he said.

Not just for residents, families

In addition to providing reassurance to families, operators have also turned to social media outlets to boost the spirits of caregivers. Workers at Paramount Care facilities have recorded videos for TikTok, a popular platform where users create short clips with music, while also demonstrating to the public that they have sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE).

“It helps build teamwork in the facility, and it helps distract the staff,” Friedland said.

Staffers at a Champion Care facility posed with rolls of toilet paper and a sign assuring the community that they had plenty of supplies; a different property posted photos of a staffer receiving balloons to celebrate her 40th anniversary of working at the same nursing home.

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Blumenthal's clients have made a point to send photos and videos of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and other staffers performing their jobs and working to keep residents engaged — both as a way to recognize their hard work during a difficult time, and to illustrate that not every nursing home is currently a COVID-19 disaster zone.

“A big part of it is talking about the employees, and how they're compliant, and how they're happy,” Blumenthal said.

And just as leaders have predicted that the emergency waivers around telehealth and transfers could become permanent once the crisis abates, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 could mark a generational shift in the way post-acute and long-term care facilities see social media — and interacting with the public in general.

At least for Paramount Care, the pivot to Facebook will likely be permanent, according to Weinberg. After all, even once the peak of the coronavirus has passed, families will still need ways to connect with their loved ones in nursing homes in faraway towns, states, and even countries.

“There is a good thing that is coming out,” he said. “There is that connection, where families are connecting with their family members in the nursing homes a little more than they used to.”



As Hospitals Struggle to Free Up Beds — and Nursing Homes Lock Down — In-House Dialysis Provides Relief

Written by: Lyndee Yamshon

4/8/2020

By waiving the three-day stay requirement for post-acute skilled nursing coverage under Medicare, the federal government has clearly indicated a desire to free up hospital beds by relying more heavily on nursing homes to provide higher-acuity services.

Residents who require routine dialysis treatments are some of the most at-risk patients — and although this population is not the current focal point, if not treated safely inside nursing home walls, they may be endangering themselves and others when traveling in and out of outpatient clinics three days per week.

“Stakeholders right now in the health care industry need to realize that dialysis patients ... need to be placed in nursing facilities that have on-site home hemodialysis to reduce the exposure and transmission of the disease that is part and parcel with an outpatient dialysis center transfer,” Dialyze Direct chief compliance officer and general counsel Jonathan Paull told SNN last month, adding that as more dialysis patients are transferred to nursing homes, additional hospital beds will open up — beds very much needed during the pandemic.

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The New Jersey-based Dialyze Direct offers in-house dialysis machines and staffing in nine states, and is expanding. So far, the company has seen varying responses to dialysis needs, based on region, in terms of deciding how to discharge these patients.

While some hospitals have quickly rolled out SNF-based hemodialysis strategies, with expedited government-based emergency approvals, other states show hospitals still discharging those with kidney failure back into the community.

A few states are starting to conduct more discharges to nursing homes for dialysis treatment. Paull highlighted the New York Department of Health in working to facilitate faster approvals of dialysis dens in facilities, as well as some Florida independent hospitals and nursing homes developing on-site hemodialysis initiatives.

But these programs are still too far and few between, and more needs to be done involving local departments of health and other state agencies in partnering to safeguard this population by avoiding unnecessary exposure to the virus, Paull said.

Dialyze Direct has created a telehealth model for nephrologists and their patients in order to speed up admissions and provide faster care while alleviating exposure and possible transmission of the virus. Licensed in every state where the company provides care, the virtual program allows providers to review files, create orders, and conduct physician visits, sometimes working in tandem with registered nurses.

In agreement about best dialysis practices occurring inside nursing home walls, the Chicagoland-based Concerto Renal Services is advocating for continuity of care and home dialysis as the smartest way to service these patients.

“It’s always safer for a geriatric patient to dialyze in-house. It’s always less disruptive. There’s always more continuity of care,” Concerto chief operating officer Nosson Factor said.

But for most of the nation, outside of the Chicago metropolitan area, Maryland, and a few areas in Kansas, “there’s not a lot of nursing home dialysis in the country.”

Concerto Renal Services currently serves more than 500 patients inside nursing homes in the Chicago area. The company also recently took over an outpatient clinic located inside the 267-bed Clinton Healthcare Center in Clinton, Md., part of the Communicare Family of Companies, which has more than 50 patients.

That dialysis clinic was formerly operated by “one of the large dialysis providers ... who had effectively given [the SNF] notice on the unit,” Factor told SNN in an April 1 interview.

That transition was effective April 1, and one of the first steps Concerto is taking is to open up new shifts, which will help the operator, he added.

“They had a few extra beds, like seven to 12 extra beds, and the hospital’s been calling them every day saying: We need to offload these dialysis patients, we need open beds in our hospital to handle COVID patients,” he said.

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With Concerto opening a third shift and moving the facility to an in-house one, it is now in the process of admitting more patients. And for Kyle Stone, Concerto's executive vice president and general counsel, this is the key point: These patients would either have had to go to outpatient care or the hospital setting if the unit closed. The COVID-19 outbreak made Concerto potentially reconsider continuing the transition, which had been scheduled before the scale and scope of the disease became clear.

But ultimately, Concerto felt it had a duty to the patients, Stone said.

"We didn't really have a choice, because we would have been putting a lot of folks in a real tough spot had we not been in a position to ensure we could come in ... and begin offering services," he told SNN on April 1.

Factor also emphasized the importance of keeping dialysis in this setting amid the COVID-19 outbreak, which has spread across the country.

"They're inside one of the safest places; they're in a nursing home where every single person who walks in is having their temperature checked, and they're having to fill out a full attestation saying where they've been," he said.

Concerto is collaborating with their operator partners to identify exact openings for separate dialysis shifts involving COVID-19 patients. In the future, Concerto is expecting a larger infected population, and at that point will begin increasing the capacity of their in-house dialysis program. The company has proactively run through many possible worst-case scenarios in order to be ready for a possible "wartime environment."

"If I gave you some of the scenarios of what we plan for, it would cause the hair on the back of your neck to stand up," Factor said. "We're talking about scenarios where we have no staff, where the entire building is infected, where we have no PPE, and then try to run through those scenarios and say, okay, now what are we doing?"

Even in these dire hypotheticals, Factor advocates for dialyzing and getting creative with alternate PPE options — as well as asking for help from local health departments.

Constant communication between dialysis companies and nursing home partners helps to save lives when nursing home protocol changes based on new information.

"We've been in touch with all of our partners proactively and are constantly engaged with them on a daily basis to see what is changing on their end and if there is new policy that they've created that they should be sharing with us, to ensure that there's no lack of communication," Concerto's chief executive officer Shimmy Meystel said.

Dialyze Direct and Concerto Renal Services are carefully screening staff and working with nursing homes to ensure they are conducting due diligence on their end. Both companies applauded their hard-working staff for showing up with a positive attitude.

"Those people are the real heroes right now that are going out there on the frontlines and providing care," Paull said.

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Staff are rising to the occasion on the clinical side, Factor added, comparing the current situation to school closings amid major Chicago snowstorms — both external challenges that are part of being in the health care industry.

“Chicago has had some tough winters. Whenever there’s a situation and it’s like, really, really difficult for everyone to get to work, that’s when we have no call-off. That’s when people who are in health care remember why they signed up,” he said.



McKnight's Senior Living COVID-19 Survey: Most Communities 'Coping' or 'Shaky But Confident'

Written by: Lois A. Bowers

4/9/2020

Senior living communities have much to manage when trying to prevent or contain COVID-19, but 56% of respondents to a new McKnight's Senior Living survey said the overall mood in their building is “coping day to day.”

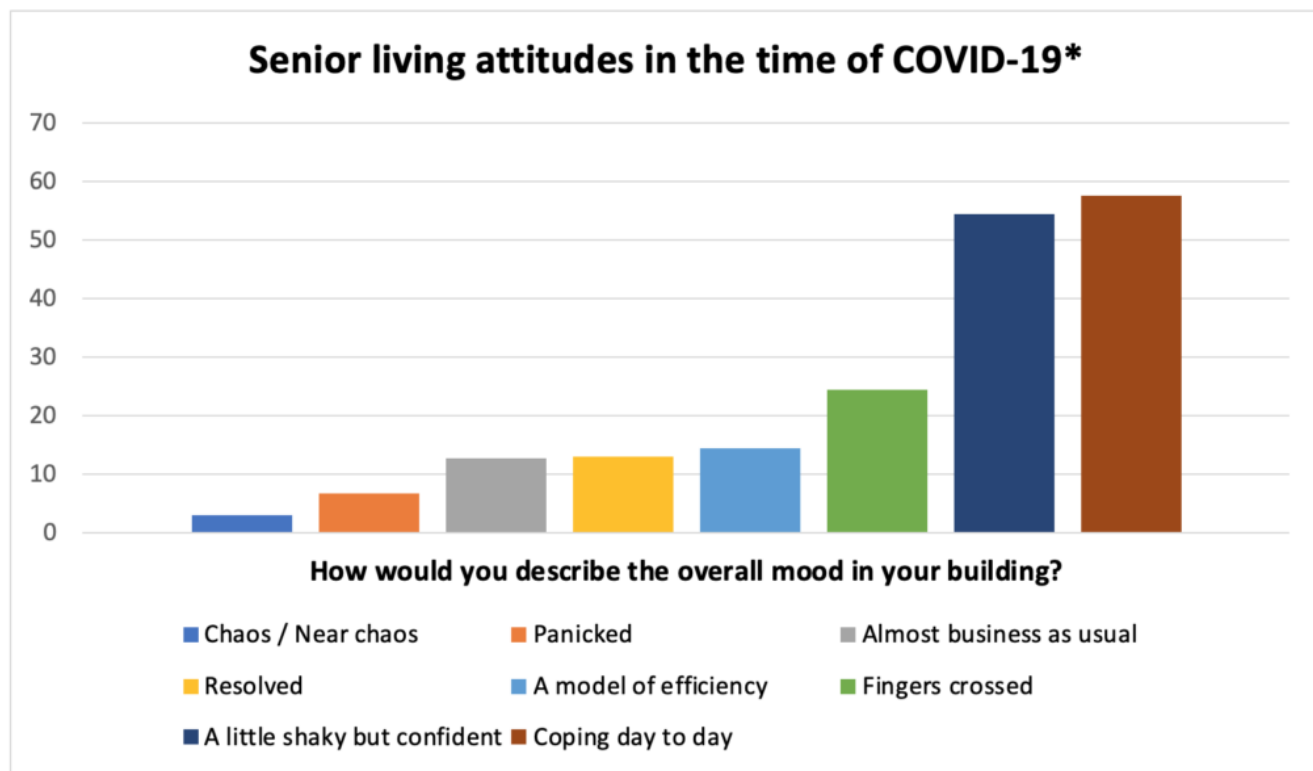
“This is new to everyone, so we are doing our best to stay a step ahead and be prepared,” one poll-taker said.

The next most selected choice from a list of survey options was “a little shaky, but confident overall,” picked by 54% of participants, who were permitted to select more than one option.

“This pandemic has sorely tested our overall processes, and we have generally been up to the task,” one respondent said.

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McKnight's Senior Living conducted the survey April 1 to 3 via email; 336 usable responses from administrators, owners, operators, health and wellness leaders, frontline caregivers and others working in independent living, assisted living, memory care and continuing care retirement communities were received. Seventy-seven percent of survey-takers said that no cases or presumed cases of COVID-19 had been detected among residents or workers in their communities.

The majority of respondents suggested that the pandemic response is being handled as well as can be expected in their buildings, with only 3% of participants describing the mood as "chaos / near chaos" and 7% using the word "panicked."

"We've been able to keep the panic down by being completely prepared and ready for the unknown," one poll-taker said. "Not being prepared and having to admit quickly only leads to mass-panic, call-ins and walk-outs."

Twenty-four percent of participants said the mood in their building is hopeful, with "fingers crossed."

"Our team is solid and showing grace when one of us is struggling emotionally or needing a break," one person said. "It's been a real testament to the unity and teamwork we feel for each other. Many are jumping in to help other departments."

"In the true sense of disaster-planning, we're preparing for the worst but hoping for the best," said another respondent. "We have leaned heavily on our peer connections for moral support, validation and guidance. Our

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residents and staff are resilient, but everyone shares a pretty high level of anxiety and worry that we try our best to stay positive.”

Speaking of staying positive, 14% of respondents said their building is “a model of efficiency and pride” and 13% said the mood where they work is “almost business as usual.”

“Our leadership was prepared and has handled this crisis effectively to keep residents and employees safe,” one person said.

“I am proud to be part of an organization that is preparing for this pandemic,” said another.

Thirteen percent of respondents said the mood in their building was “resolved.”

“The protocols we’ve put in place make me proud. Our staff is doing well after almost 20 days of these measures and resolved to make it through,” one participant said.

“Situations like we are facing today bring out the best in people. Many have found they have talents and resolve that they didn’t even know they had,” another said. “We are in this industry for a reason. COVID-19 reminds us of this reason.”

[McKnight’s Senior Living COVID-19 survey: Operators cope with staffing issues by paying overtime, having managers fill in](#)

Some respondents, however, expressed unease or concern with COVID-19-related plans.

“We are waiting for a surge. It feels like the calm before the storm when we begin losing significant staff to disease or quarantine,” one respondent said. Another said the pandemic has been “mentally exhausting. Concerns of the unknown make days stressful.”

One person with a long tenure in the industry said, “I have been in several roles in senior living over 35 + years; feeling very uneasy about the situation at work and home.”

Communication is a key to calming staff member nervousness and ensuring that the community response is appropriate, several respondents said.

“It is unnerving to have the rules changed almost daily, but with extra communication, we are managing to be good to each other and ourselves,” one person said.

“We are having daily senior leader meetings and communicating with residents and staff weekly via a newsletter,” said another.

“My company has been phenomenal in getting us information as it is available, getting us supplies and offering support as needed,” one respondent shared.

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Citing a potential weakness, one person recommended “a mass communication process” to update families every day. “Staff is fielding hundreds of calls a day,” the participant said. Some respondents’ thoughts already are on the future. “I hope we all learn from this experience and are ready / prepared for the next pandemic,” one said.



3 Ways Voice-first Technology Can Help Older Adults in the Era of Social Distancing

Written by: Jason Gottschalk

4/9/2020

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the country, our day-to-day lives continue to be drastically altered. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in fact, recommends that older adults stay home as much as possible due to the virus’ high fatality rate for people aged 60 or more years. The result: older adults living in senior living communities may be even more restricted, and those living on their own largely are isolated in their homes and advised to keep physical contact with other people to a minimum.

Abrupt changes to daily life

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services recently directed nursing homes to restrict communal meals, group activities and prohibit guests — even family members — from visiting. Many senior living communities are using this advice as a guideline even if they do not receive federal funds, and most states have their own mandates.

The isolation can make communication, access to timely information and a sense of independence more difficult for many older adults, especially for those who aren’t used to turning to technology for help.

The power — and potential — of voice-first technology

Speech is the fastest and most natural way for people to interact. In many instances, people would prefer to talk rather than type, swipe or click when interacting with technology. Indeed, anyone who has watched someone struggle to navigate a smartphone might completely dismiss the idea of them being able to use a smart speaker. Once things are connected, however, voice assistants are extremely simple to use.

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Adoption rapidly is expanding among older adults

We often equate early technology adoption with the young, but recent studies have pointed to a rapid growth in adoption among older adults as well.

- AARP's "2019 Tech and the 50+ Survey" found that adoption in adults aged 50 or more years almost doubled in one year, from 7% in 2017 to 13% in 2018.
- In January 2019, Voicebot.ai reported that 20.1% of adults aged 60 or more years own a smart speaker and of those, 46.6% are daily users.
- The Pew Research Center reported as early as 2017 that 37% of U.S. voice assistant users were aged 50 or more years.

What does all of this mean? Instead of humans learning "computer code" — whether it be navigating an app, website or program — computers are learning our language, and older adults stand to gain great benefits from voice-first assistance.

Top three benefits older adults receive from voice-first technology

Three of the top reasons that older adults could benefit from voice-first assistants are that they provide an easy means of communication with family and necessary providers, instant access to services and information, and are empowering, helping older adults maintain independence.

1. Easy communication

Communication is perhaps the most important thing for older adults during periods of social distancing. This is not only essential for their physical health — being able to contact a health professional — but also for their mental health through keeping in touch with loved ones, accessing services and information and maintaining their independence as much as possible.

Voice assistants function well as a speaker phone when older adults chat with family and friends. These smart speakers can make voice calls. It's a lot simpler, in fact, than some smartphone touchscreens. Also, although most smart speakers cannot call 911, they can call any other phone number. So in the event that someone needs help but cannot get to the phone, this capability can be a lifeline.

CMS recently expanded its telemedicine coverage (including relaxing patient health information confidentiality rules), and the agency continues to urge older adults to take advantage of this program to keep social distancing. Telemedicine services allow people to virtually consult with their doctors and other health professionals, reducing the need to seek medical attention in person and opening up a safe channel for many older adults to connect and still get the medical advice and care they need, without leaving their senior living community or wherever they call home.

2. Instant access to information

Voice-first assistants can provide immediate access to information that older adults find useful and relevant to their daily lives, another likely reason adoption of technologic tools continues to rise among this age group. For

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example, in 2018, Virgin Trains, a British transportation company, launched an Alexa skill that allowed customers to book rides. The average booking time decreased from seven minutes to two minutes. Likewise, in a recent article, Tomasz Woźniak argued that voice results in general are much faster than the average website (0.54 seconds versus 2.10 seconds).

We also speak faster than we type, so using voice generally is more efficient. Typical speech is 140 words per minute on average, whereas typing is 40 wpm and texting is 24 wpm. Couple that with the current accuracy rates — Alexa’s accuracy is on par with human accuracy (approximately 95% accurate) — and voice-first technology is poised to be the largest disruptor in recent history.

3. Empowerment

Voice-first technology can enhance the user’s experience because it is hands- and eyes-free. Older adults experiencing isolation or with vision impairments, mobility issues, illness or other physical difficulties can remain more independent with the assistance of voice-first technology. A recent industry consumer study reported that 51% of those 55 or older said a top reason for using their voice-activated speaker is “it empowers me to instantly get answers and information.”

According to the CDC National Health Interview Survey, 16% of adults aged 65 or more years have vision trouble, and 35% of the same age range have difficulties in physical functioning. What’s more, these percentages gradually have increased every year of the survey. For these individuals especially, voice-first technology can reduce or eliminate the barriers created by small touch screens, keyboard awkwardness and even television or phone placement or usability. Being able to communicate hands- and vision-free, even from a distance, without having to move can provide a remarkable quality of life benefit and empower individuals who have relied on others to regain some of their independence.

Older adults are embracing voice-first technology at a rapid pace. Such technology has the potential to disrupt traditional service models by making the experience simpler, faster and more personalized. Older adults also can benefit from this technology, because it can empower them to remain more independent, especially when isolated or required to maintain social distancing. There is no question that voice-first technology is a key to the future of connectivity for older adults as well as an essential enabler of functions of daily life.