

Older Clients Appreciate Awareness of Their Communication Limitations

By Diane E. Schaefer, CSA, MA

As the population of older adults increases, it is important to remind even the most seasoned business men and women that older clients may have invisible communication challenges that affect your ability to work with them effectively. These include cataracts, macular degeneration, hearing impairment and arthritis or other bone ailments.

Take a look around the room where you generally have meetings. If you notice glare from the lights, background noise, or experience difficulty moving the chairs, consider the following tips for making your office more welcoming to this special group.

- ◆ When greeting your client grasp her/his hand with both of yours using light pressure. This technique demonstrates concern and warmth, and avoids pain in clients with arthritis or osteoporosis. A painful handshake is not a good beginning to a meeting where serious discussions and decisions will take place.
- ◆ Take the initiative to ask your clients if they are comfortable when you begin your meeting. If given the opportunity, they will let you know if they cannot hear or see you well.
- ◆ Keep the room well lit but avoid glare. Even those younger clients who have had Lasik eye surgery experience glare from bright lights
- ◆ The temperature in rooms that are used infrequently tends to be different from the rest of the office. To avoid having the environment become a distraction from the business at hand, check the room temperature well in advance of a meeting. That way, you will have time to adjust the thermostat. Prepare the room early enough to assure that your clients will be comfortable.
- ◆ Often the chairs in meeting rooms are very heavy or do not have wheels that facilitate moving near to or away from the table. You should be aware that you might need to assist your client with these actions.
- ◆ Take an objective look at your printed materials. Notice if they look cluttered, are on coated paper that creates a glare or have print smaller than 12 points. White paper with black type is the easiest to read, and complex graphs should be avoided. The goal is to present details that enhance understanding rather than making an impression with unnecessary graphic gimmicks.
- ◆ Occasionally, we unconsciously exclude older persons from conversation when they are accompanied by someone younger. That's called age bias and it is dangerous in your business. If the issues under discussion affect the situation of

- the older man or woman, address your remarks and questions to that person. It helps to determine the role of the younger person. Perhaps s/he was simply available to provide a ride to the meeting!
- ◆ Organize meetings to be as short and productive as possible because long meetings can result in lost focus. You may be able to resolve more points by working in the order that is most important to the client and summarizing the issues. It also helps to take a break when you sense your client's attention is wandering or s/he seems to be confused or flustered.
 - ◆ Older adults may prefer to read documents at her/his own pace. This frequently means that s/he will not make decisions at your meeting. Rather than leave the next steps open-ended, ask if the client prefers to meet at another time to sign documents or continue the discussion. If so, set the date for the next meeting before s/he leaves.

Taking the time to assure your client's comfort pays off by maintaining the relationships that you worked hard to establish!

Diane E. Schaefer is president of Schaefer + Associates, LLC, a Baltimore-based firm specializing in issues that affect the quality of life of older adults. She can be reached at 410-935-7809 or through www.schaeferassoc.com.