

Engaging older consumers to invest in technologies to sustain independence into great old age

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Abstract

Assisted living technologies are cost-effective in supporting self-care, but uptake among older people and carers remains low. An awareness campaign by a consortium, including 14 Local Authorities, demonstrates the potential for collective action to increase awareness, stimulate demand and encourage market growth. Drawing on this experience the panel raises important strategic issues for a future in which we will all need to plan for and utilize technologies to manage our old age without state support.

Introduction

The challenges of supporting a rapidly ageing population are now well rehearsed and over the last two decades successive UK governments have implemented legislation and policies designed to shift the balance of responsibility for care towards the individual and away from the state. Most recently, the Care Act 2014¹ placed legal requirements on health and social care services to inform their citizens of available care and support options and contribute to market development, but progress with this appears to be slow.

Consumer research undertaken by Years Ahead², has found that low consumer awareness is often compounded by a reluctance to recognise needs (arising from ageing) that could be addressed by using appropriate technological solutions. As a result, older people often ‘struggle on’ until a health crisis requires urgent attention, or a healthcare professional advises them to use assistive living technologies (ALT) to reduce further risks to their independence. Coventry University’s COMODAL study³, in which Years Ahead was a partner, investigated the barriers and enablers for consumer choice and market growth. It also found that a key barrier was low consumer awareness. In addition, the research revealed a mismatch between industry’s views of consumer behaviors and expectations and those of consumers themselves.

Subsequently, the Centre for Ageing Better published a report from an information gathering exercise that concluded that “there is a need to not just focus on commissioners but also consumers/self-funders. It was estimated that there are 80% who could self-fund but need support/choices to make informed decisions”⁴. In a piece published by The Lancet in December 2015, the World Health announced its Global cooperation on Assistive Technology initiative (GATE) citing ‘absence of awareness or availability, high cost and apathy are among key reasons for poor access to assistive technology’⁵.

Despite growing evidence that technology enabled care and ALT are cost effective in supporting people to self-manage long-term health conditions and maintain their independence at home, central government has been reluctant to instigate any awareness campaigns promoting their use. Government funding to local authorities (LAs) to support social care will cease in 2019 contributing to the need for urgent action towards supporting self-funders and promoting self-care.

A project was established in 2014 to address these issues, when a group of thought leaders got together and, after lengthy discussion, agreed that low public awareness was a critical barrier to the

social change needed to stimulate growth. The group, comprising key stakeholders such as industry, charities, academia and LA representatives, decided to collaborate to test out and build a business case for a national campaign. With financial support from Naidex, the group¹ commissioned an advertising agency to design a suite of communication materials for use via digital and traditional media. Through the West Midlands Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (WMADASS) group, 14 authorities agreed to use it to raise awareness in their respective communities and the AT Home Campaign was launched early 2015.

Methods

The main platform for the campaign is the AT Home website (<http://www.athome.uk.com/>) which was set up with a strap line of “*Have you thought about investing in your future independence?*”. It has become the repository for information, signposting to other sources of help and personal accounts of using technology. Information and advice are provided through a growing list of web-sites as well as the Disabled Living Foundation’s Help Line and ASK SARA self-assessment programme.

All the participating authorities have adopted the AT Home style and imagery and used it on their own web-sites. Over time a number of short films of real life experiences of using technology have been uploaded to the web-site to bring consumers’ voices to the fore. Leaflets and banners have been used for community events and presentations to promote the site locally. There is an ongoing requirement to manage the site, ensure it is kept up to date and monitor activity and use.

Results

Under the aegis of WMADASS and Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands (IEWM), 14 LAs have made use of the AT Home campaign materials, potentially reaching a population of 5.6 million people. Interest in taking it up has been shown from six other authorities.

Over the past year (to 01-Nov-2016), there have been 2500 unique visitors to the AT Home site and over 14000 page views. Around a quarter of all visits have come via other sites, two-thirds from direct visits to the site and the remainder via social media links. The top sites that visitors to AT Home are coming from are: Dudley Council website; Warwickshire Council website; Naidex website; Telford Council website; Fab NHS Stuff site; Reddit; Manage at Home – Medequip site; Carers Bucks site.

It has been difficult to measure the impact in quantitative terms as there are very few ways of tracking what a visitor does after viewing the site. Some visitors have reported its usefulness; some have requested specific support in finding solutions and some have gone on to use retail sites. The videos have been viewed 4311 times, but it has not been possible to identify individual views, or from which source they have found the videos and what this has led to. However, suppliers have begun to engage in the campaign and have shown willingness to fund videos about how their products can be used to add to the site.

Building a sustainable future to manage the site and build the business case has proved more challenging, although discussions are currently underway with potential host partners to take it from a regional to a national platform. To date the project has shown that there is an appetite for support to engage older consumers and raise awareness, but competing priorities and shrinking resources have been limiting factors that continually have to be addressed in order to maintain momentum for the project.

¹In 2014 the Naidex Ambassadors group comprised: Andrew Stephenson (British Healthcare Trades Association); Julia Skelton (College of Occupational Therapy) Chris Lofthouse (Research Institute for Consumer Affairs); Ed Mylles (Disabled Living Foundation); Dr Gillian Ward (Coventry University); Helen Trousdale and Jim Ellam (Staffordshire County Council) Peter Jackson (West Midlands Association of Directors of Adult Social Services); Maggie Winchcombe and David Silver (Years Ahead); Kevin Snowball (Simply Health/Foundations); Eric Filbin (Millercare/Countrywide Care Network)

Discussion

The need for greater public awareness of the benefits of ALT endures and the AT Home campaign illustrates how a simple approach to promoting uniform messages across a wide audience can be achieved. It is a pragmatic response, at a time when public funds are limited, to tackling an increasingly pressing topic – encouraging older people and their relatives to think of future support needs at a time when many are struggling to cope with managing busy lives and looking after others.

A number of questions are raised by the initiative, not least who has got the most to gain from growing the ALT market - industry and business, government and public services, or consumers themselves? The lack of commitment by LAs and their partner agencies, such as Public Health, primary and secondary care (through Clinical Commissioning Groups) to seriously tackle prevention work and promote self-care in this arena has been woeful. When limited resources are rapidly shrinking in the face of rising demand there could be more public debate about what their role should be with regard to Prevention and ALT.

How much longer can authorities afford to continue funding provision of telecare? Could their money be better spent in the longer term by using it to find new ways to promote self-care? Will Prevention ever be taken seriously by agencies when it is not perceived to be part of their 'core' care and support role?

For too long industry has relied solely on public provision and resisted taking positive steps to growing a retail market for these essential products for independent living. The fact is that everyone has a stake in this and responsibility for raising awareness should be shared equally across agencies and sectors – we're all in this together.

Conclusion

The demographic time-bomb is ticking; can Governments really afford to just pay lip service to the Prevention and self-help agendas? *'Investing in your future independence'* is a vital message to convey to people as they approach their old age. It requires creativity and commitment to changing public attitudes to ageing and raising awareness of digital and technological solutions. One of the keys to success is surely reaching out and engaging with the population with the same commitment that the Government has demonstrated with its successful smoking cessation, pensions provision and healthy eating campaigns.

References

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