ENRICHING SENIOR LIVING:
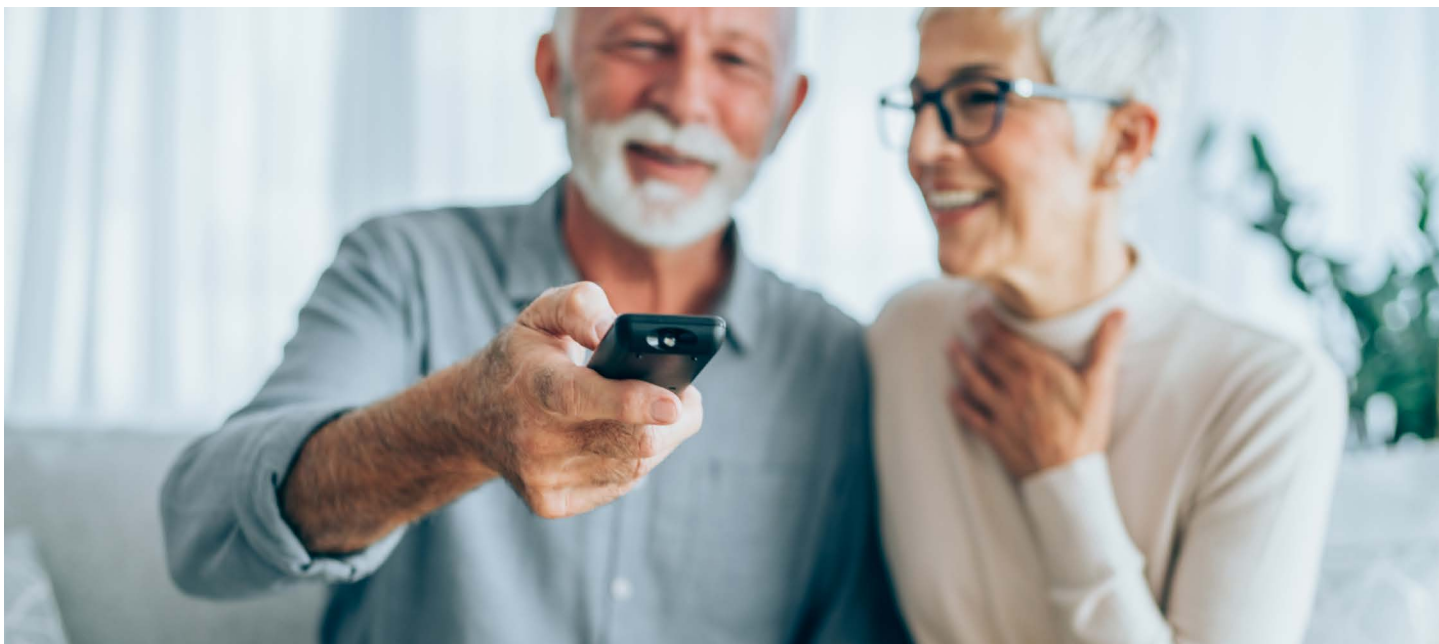
THE ROLE OF ADVANCED ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGIES

Photo: VioletaStoimenova/Getty Images

The senior living industry has seen sweeping growth in technology adoption in the past 15 years.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2010, just 32% of US adults aged 65 years and older were online, 26% had broadband access at home and 16% accessed social media via handheld devices.

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By 2017, 42% of members of that age group owned a smartphone, approximately one-third owned a tablet computer and 67% used the internet, with more than half having broadband internet access. In addition, once older adults were online, they engaged with digital devices and content at high levels: 75% of internet users aged 65 or more years went online at least once a day, and 76% of smartphone users accessed the internet multiple times a day from their devices.

In 2019, according to Pew and the American Time Use Survey, individuals aged 60 or more years were spending more than half of their daily leisure time (more than four hours) in front of screens, mostly watching television or videos. Screen time has increased for individuals in their 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond, and the rise is apparent across genders and education levels.

"The change we've seen in the industry over the past 15 years is quite significant, and I don't know if we'll see anything like it again," said Brian McWade, chief product officer at Sentrics, a provider of technology solutions tailored for senior living. "In 2010, the numbers were incredibly low, and communities were certainly built to support the residents' usage at that time."

McWade was speaking during a webinar, "Enriching senior living: The role of advanced entertainment technologies," which was sponsored by Sentrics and presented by *McKnight's Senior Living*.

As older adults have become increasingly familiar and comfortable with entertainment technology, senior living communities have an opportunity to enhance the experiences of their residents in ways both small and large.

MUST HAVES: INTERACTIVE GUIDES AND DVRs

According to McWade, two simple steps that providers can take to help ensure a positive resident entertainment experience are offering residents a TV-based interactive guide and offering a digital video recorder.

"Anyone who travels understands how frustrating it can be when a hotel room TV doesn't have an interactive guide, yet only about 35% of senior living communities offer one to their residents," McWade said. "These

guides are important, because they give residents the ability to control their experience. In addition, they're something that residents are very accustomed to having in their homes, and if they move into a community that doesn't offer one, they're going to have the feeling of missing something familiar and helpful."

Like interactive guides, DVRs also are familiar to many residents — they were introduced in the early 2000s — and allow viewers to record and store TV programs for later viewing. DVRs also offer useful features such as the ability to pause and rewind live TV. Yet, according to McWade, today, only about 10% of communities offer DVR access to residents.

Fortunately, he said, an easy-to-implement option exists to provide both of those important features to residents: set-top boxes. Those versatile devices can include a customized interactive channel guide; a DVR with local, secure digital storage of recorded television shows; and the ability to pause and rewind live TV. Sentrics set-top boxes are Bluetooth-supported and integrate easily with Sentrics' Engage, a mobile app that provides a direct line of communication for residents, families and staff members.

"We have to start thinking about what we're offering to residents and what their expectations are, especially

with services like TVs and DVRs that have become commoditized," McWade said.

SEEKING A CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE

Set-top boxes solve another challenge for senior living providers: ensuring consistency of entertainment experiences within and across communities. According to McWade, most senior living communities favor a "bring your own TV" model, which means that communities often end up with TVs of varying sizes and ages.

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"One way to make sure that all of your residents are experiencing the same content, the same look and feel, and the same high quality, is to introduce a device that's very consistent across the board," he said. "With set-top boxes, the experience is the same whether you're on an older, 32-inch TV or a new, 65-inch TV."

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

McWade noted that TV can be delivered via various methods, including coaxial cable (common in many senior living communities), through a digital-to-analog (DTA) converter, or via IPTV (internet protocol TV, common in newer construction).

"This is where it gets interesting for operators who have a large number of communities," he said. "You don't want to have a set-top box for your communities that are 20 years old and a different set-top box for the ones that are being built today. You want to make sure, as you're selecting a device, that it can support a number of different deployment methods so you can put a device in a room in any type of building to create a consistent experience, while also limiting the different types of hardware on your sites."

Also, McWade said, consider the role set-top boxes can play as tech hubs in your community.

"One of the most important engagement points within a community is the television," McWade said. "So look for a device that can integrate with other services that are being provided at the community, such as food ordering, maintenance requests, music, or therapy and exercise content."
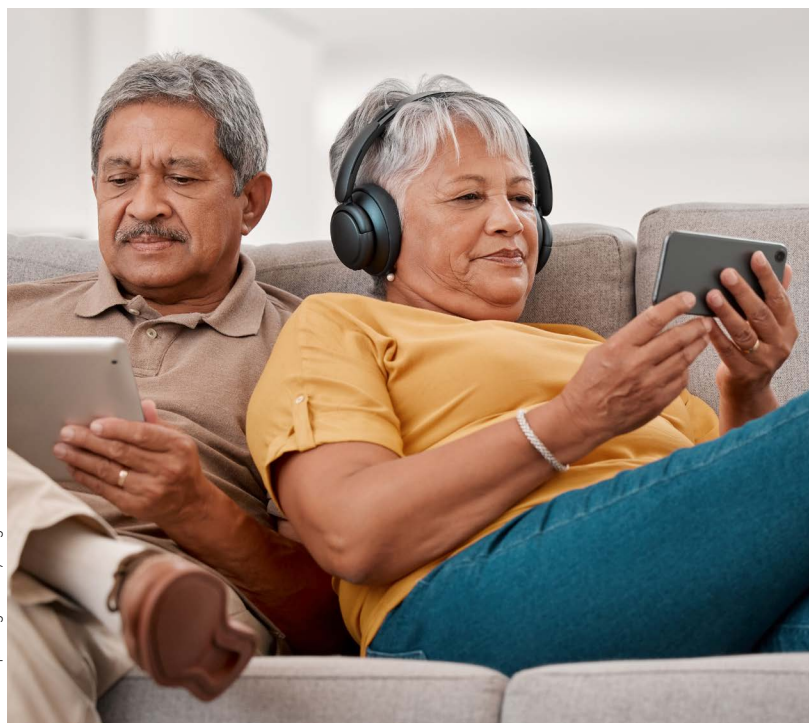

Photo: PeopleImages/Getty Images

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OPTIMIZATION THROUGH ANALYTICS

Data and analytics are everywhere, and senior living is no exception. In the world of senior living entertainment, analytics can allow for interactive engagement, tailored content and customized programming.

What are the average hours of TV each resident is watching per day? When are they watching? What genres are most popular?

McWade explained that analytics from set-top boxes can help you optimize your channel setup based on what is and isn't popular in your community. You also can mine the data to identify residents who are watching significantly more TV than others in the community, tailor activities around most-watched TV programs (such as "watch parties" for certain shows or sports) and focus on residents' entertainment habits at night from a social-determinants-of-health standpoint.

"Analytics provide an opportunity to identify changes in residents' TV consumption, or possible concerns with the amount of TV watching when the resident could be socializing or sleeping," McWade said.

MAKING THE INVESTMENT

McWade concluded that the marked progression of tech adoption in senior living communities happened very quickly, but today, many communities have responded and are investing in the infrastructure to support connected-device formats that enable interactive set-top boxes.

The bottom line, he said, is that set-top boxes offer an easy-to-implement and versatile solution to help providers standardize the viewing experience within and across communities, provide services to benefit residents, integrate TV with other services or activities, and gather data on residents' viewing habits to ensure that the community is meeting their interests and needs.

"One of the most challenging and rewarding things about building technology for an aging population is that there are so many different factors to consider," McWade said. "You have age, vision, hearing, dexterity and general comfort level with technology. The television allows control over vision, because the screen is so much larger than a phone or a tablet, and control over hearing, with various audio options and closed captioning. So you really have to take advantage of those in the products you offer, while always focusing on an experience that is easy to navigate and enjoyable for the resident." ∎

Photo: Westend61/Getty Images

Providers can mine data from set-top boxes to plan activities such as "watch parties" based on TV shows that are popular among residents.