The age wave is coming

And tech companies are getting ready.

It's official: as of 2022, the oldest baby boomer has now turned 76, and there's an "age wave" coming. And, as Laurie Orlov, an eldercare advocate and tech industry veteran, puts it, "the baby boomers have all the money." An AARP survey from fall 2021 found that three out of four adults between the ages of 50 to 70 rely on technology to stay connected, for entertainment, and for day-to-day living.

That's why companies have been rolling out an increasing number of tech devices, online platforms, and services that fall under the ever-widening umbrella of age tech – technology created specifically for older adults. The products cover a range of areas that are most important to the senior lifestyle, including independent living, caretaker solutions, support for senior living, and health care and wellness.

However, the progress may not yet be fast enough to keep up with a population of almost 70 million baby boomers in the U.S., with a longer life expectancy than ever before. And if you're still wondering how urgent the need for well-designed age tech really is, consider that 1 in 6 people in the world will be over the age of 60 by the year 2030.

But the pandemic did manage to bring greater awareness of and focus on tech consumption among older adults, and there are a number of gadgets and services already on the market that aim to improve senior living, going above and beyond the usual smart home devices created for the general market.

By offering an intuitive, no-frills design, large buttons, and wireless charging, new products make it easier for seniors to adapt to and use technology for all their needs. For combating loneliness and depression, robotic pet companions like ElliQ, Paro the baby seal, and Joy For All cats and pups have become more common and affordable, especially since the onset of the pandemic. VR headsets are also being used to help seniors with depression and Alzheimer's.

To stay connected with others while focusing on health and wellness, there are online platforms like SeniorPlanet.org, Hank, and SecureSeniorConnections, a sort of Meetup.com for active seniors. Artificial intelligence-driven and radar-enabled solutions, such as EchoCare and SafelyYou, are able to detect falls without the need for a wearable. And smart hearables are now able to detect biometric data and even predict the onset of a stroke.

And in the past year, voice-first technology (which helps lower depression in seniors, according to various studies) has seen a lot of movement beyond the usual voice assistants, although these devices continue to evolve. Orlov says that voice-enabled interfaces are critical for older adults, allowing them to swiftly and easily communicate, hands-free, with their devices and get a (mostly) appropriate response to their questions, access to services, and health advice. This tech will continue to be in high demand, and Orlov expects to see its incorporation in all smart displays, apps, vehicles (like Amazon Echo Auto), and even appliances, like televisions and washing machines, as seniors embrace independent living.

Although more companies are jumping into the age tech arena and creating a bit of hype, Orlov says that the ideal age tech products remain free of buzzwords and involve less clutter overall. She notes that the Samsung Galaxy Easy Mode is a good example of this, as it streamlines the clutter on a smartphone. A few other products that Orlov points to as well-designed age tech:

- Amazon Alexa Smart Properties: voice access to services in senior living communities;
- Microsoft Seeing AI: for the blind
- Apple Watch, Galaxy Smartwatch, Fitbit, etc: to encourage movement and exercise
- Google Translate: for interaction with someone who speaks another language

Orlov points out that most tech should already "be useful for older adults, and only some tech is specific to older age ranges, such as hearing aids, vision tech for macular degeneration, and devices that simplify tech for the oldest and uninitiated in its use."

One particular challenge is that "user interfaces of smartphones and apps are mostly poorly designed – too much poking around through too many screens, not enough obvious assist messages," she says.

Age tech design should be developed by first testing it on older adults, including those with vision, mobility, or dexterity issues. Orlov recommends creating focus groups of older adults before a product is released to ensure the design is optimal for the intended users.

But as this specialized market is forced to evolve by a quickly aging population, Orlov remains excited by sensor technologies for aging in place and independent living. This includes motion sensors, camera-based technologies, in-home exercise programs and socialization technologies to connect to family. It's this type of age tech that "will enable older adults to remain longer in their home, especially those who live alone."

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