

Computer-free e-mailing attracts low-tech seniors

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Anyone who has tried to show grandma how to use a mouse knows that computers are anything but second nature to America's older population. But where other technology companies saw a nonexistent market, one firm has established a niche.

Celery, a new service developed by a Troy, N.Y., company of the same name, allows users to send and receive e-mail messages and photos without a computer.

"For we older people, it is just the most wonderful thing," said 85-year-old Dorothy Miller, who found computer keyboards too complicated and now uses Celery to keep in touch with her family.

The service involves a phone line and its own brand-name device or standard fax machine. To send an e-mail, users hand write a note or tape an image to a standard-sized piece of paper, place it in the machine and press two buttons. The message then appears in a recipient's inbox in a portable document format.

When they receive an e-mail, Celery users get an alert in the form of a phone call.

"My mom is 77, and she refused to go online," said Andrew Gibson, Celery's chief executive officer. "It resonated with me. I saw the need for it."

The 13-person company, which has been selling the product since March, prices its color copier and fax machine device, with a one-year subscription, at \$259. Those who have an existing fax machine can purchase one year of color service for \$139.

"People are using this thing the way that you and I use e-mail," Mr. Gibson said. "We've heard some very fun anecdotes that it's changed their lives."

Ms. Miller, a Troy resident, said the device has helped her get to know her third grandchild, who suffers from epilepsy and is not very talkative on the phone.

"I write him every day," she said. "He'd give me a weather report, and then I got all sorts of news about the family."

Celery isn't the only product that lets people without computers receive e-mails and photos. Its nearest competitor, Presto, debuted two years earlier. It charges users \$100 a year, or \$10 a month. Unlike Celery, Presto users can only receive, not send, e-mails and photos.

While teens and businesses might compose the most obvious technology market, seniors are not totally ignored: A 2004 Consumer Electronics Association study listed seniors among five technology consumer populations to watch.

Jenny Pareti, a spokeswoman for the Arlington trade group, said the research revealed several "common-sense" buying habits of older Americans when it comes to technology.

"Seniors are interested in space-saving technologies because a lot of them have downsized their homes," she said. "They are interested in technologies that have fewer wires."

Celery includes several features geared toward seniors. Although e-mails can be sent and received 24 hours a day, users can specify hours to avoid late-night phone-call alerts. Those with trouble reading can magnify the font size.

Each Celery user has a Celery buddy -- usually the person who bought the machine as a gift -- with a computer who manages the user's preferences and address book with names and e-mail addresses. Celery users, when sending a message, only need to write out the recipient's name in block letters, as opposed to an e-mail address.

"My mom is 92, so that really says a lot," said Harriet Diamond of Nevada City, Calif., who bought a Celery device and subscription for her mother, Iris, who lives in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "She loves it, and I think it's picked up her spirit."

Not all Celery users have trouble understanding computers -- David Springer, 60, a former Episcopal priest, said he simply prefers sending handwritten notes.

"With e-mail, I'm not able to use any nonverbal communication so I had really gotten to the point where I wasn't using e-mail anymore," said Mr. Springer, a Troy resident. "Now I can write a note to someone."

Mr. Gibson said three-quarters of the company's clients are baby boomers buying Celery as a gift for their parents. He declined to discuss profits but said the private company expects to post \$8 million in sales next year.

"Every single person that calls us or e-mails us says, 'I've been looking for this for years,' " he said.

