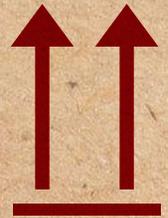


# HANDLE WITH CARE



## With the right approach, movers can profit from the rapidly growing senior market

BY LINDA BALLENTINE

**H**azel is 82, the average age of a senior who decides to leave his or her independent lifestyle behind and move to a more supportive senior community. Hazel's husband died suddenly a few months ago, and now her home, so comfortable for the past 40 years, feels empty and even threatening. Her children are all hundreds of miles away with busy lives of their own, and Hazel has no intention of involving them in her move. She has lots of friends, but none are physically capable anymore of helping her pack or even unpack.

The scope of the project keeps her up at night. What will she do with a house full of furniture that she can't possibly use in her new one-bedroom apartment? What about her husband's car and the woodworking tools?

Hazel's story is not unique. Multiply some version of it by 80 million over the next 30 years, and

you will begin to get the picture of an exploding market segment that will need special moving help. According to data from the 2010 census, the U.S. population 65 and older is growing faster than the total U.S. population—and is at a higher percentage than in any previous census. Between 2000 and 2010, the group of Americans 65 and older grew 15.1 percent, while the total U.S. population grew 9.7 percent. Within that age group, 85- to 94-year-olds swelled from 3.9 million to 5.1 million, an increase of 29.9 percent.

The benefits of focusing on the booming senior population are significant. Movers can augment revenues beyond the traditional busy summer season, since the movement of the older generation is not tied to the beginning and the end of the school year. The invoice for a typical senior's move is generally

higher because more billable hours are necessary to get the job done while handling all the details. With a broader calendar spread, movers can round out both local and long-distance manpower and equipment utilization.

### **A DIFFERENT BUSINESS APPROACH**

As with any business line, senior moving comes with its own set of requirements and challenges. Just as movers are willing to meet the demands of military or corporate moves, they need to accord a higher level of respect to moves involving seniors. This might mean establishing a senior move coordinator within their operation, someone who provides oversight for any move with a senior who is downsizing.

The decision for movers to make is whether they are going to do the work in-house or build alliances

with established senior move managers, similar to the way they work with real estate agents and corporate relocation firms. Some van lines and independents have developed systems to serve the Greatest Generation and the baby boomers coming in behind them.

Wheaton | Bekins established a specialization in senior moves after attending a conference of the National Association of Senior Move Managers (NASMM), an association of consultants who specialize in helping seniors handle all the details of their relocation—not unlike the way corporate relocation specialists manage employee transfers. Wheaton | Bekins, for example, gets referrals from NASMM for the physical move and leaves the other details, such as coordinating the sale of items not being moved, to the senior move managers.

“It is not so much about the move as it is about the clients,” said NASMM Associate Executive Director Jennifer Martin-Pickett. “The move is the smallest part. It is what you do with the rest of the stuff that is the challenge.”

Doug DeLor, vice president of sales and marketing for Wheaton | Bekins, agreed. “We are the experts in moving, and they are experts in the senior market, handling the downsizing and emotional side,” he said. “It would be a lot of work to bring our agency level up to that point.”

Wheaton | Bekins agents, such as Willie’s Transfer & Storage in Florida, did 200 senior moves as an NASMM partner last year, DeLor said. “Each senior move manager is equivalent to a national account,” he said. “We have one point of contact, and we customize that move.”

Charlie Bell, president of premier transitions for Memphis-based United Van Lines agent Armstrong Relocation, has formed a separate company to take care of the relocation needs of seniors.

“We approach the market from a total solution standpoint,” Bell said. “We address three basic categories:



Photo courtesy of Crowning Touch Senior Moving Services

Crowning Touch Senior Moving Services handled the move for Tony Campasini and Betty Hines into an assisted living facility in Blacksburg, Va. The job included packing and unpacking all the belongings they were taking with them, delivering some items to Hines’ daughter’s house and selling the rest at auction and consignment.

home sale management, home content management and, finally, move management.” While addressing the “total transition” of seniors nationally, Armstrong plans on using partners to provide the services they see are so necessary.

“This is a demographic that has to be addressed differently,” Bell said, citing the 10,000 seniors a day who turn 65.

### A HIGHER LEVEL OF SERVICE

Beth Warren of Tampa, Fla., knows exactly what those differences are. A senior move manager for 14 years, she launched her own moving company, Redefined Moving; only 3 percent of senior move managers do the actual moves as well. From the moment she goes in to do an estimate, her antennae are up, looking for what won’t fit, giving money-saving advice on what and how to purge, and generally being concerned with more than just delivering furniture with no damage. She understands that unpacking is not just laying items out on a horizontal surface, but “making the first night in the new home as comfortable as the last night in the old one.”

Moving companies that want to become “senior movers” need to understand some important distinctions. First,

you will need a senior move manager/estimator who is ready to embrace more details than the standard move coordinator. The process of moving can be overwhelming; these clients need help thinking through the details. Because of physical limitations, they typically need more help than younger clients with packing and unpacking, and more scheduling needs to take those limitations into consideration.

A senior move manager engages in much more communication among family members over a longer period of time. A great deal more time is spent, frequently running between the retirement community and the client, solving a host of problems such as floor plan issues, which seniors are unable to tackle without help. They often need assistance in determining the distribution of assets, selling their home and car, and cleaning their former residence.

Far-flung family members often are involved in the process and might even have power of attorney for financial affairs. Movers should be prepared to send estimates to several people; it’s important to determine a primary contact person and provide a steady flow of information. It’s a good idea to take pictures of furniture that isn’t going with the senior to their new home and send those to family members to

determine what to keep and what to sell, give away, or donate to charity.

The moving team, both packers and movers, needs extensive training to achieve a level of white-glove service; a special etiquette must be embraced because seniors expect to be well-served. The team needs to develop a great deal of patience; senior moves not only take longer, but the daily move-and-pack schedule must also be flexible to account for clients who tire easily and don't feel well. Seniors need more time in the morning, and they may not last past 4 p.m.

Many seniors are fragile, and while they want to "do"—and think they can—they can't, which makes for lots of last-minute adjustments to staffing and moving schedules. It also makes safety precautions critically important.

Finally, a list of reliable subcontractors and service providers, such as used furniture and antique dealers, real

estate agents and contractors, needs to be maintained so that the senior move coordinator can be the main resource and safety net for the client.

Obviously, the more services a mover can provide before, during and after the move, such as whole house cleanouts, picture hanging and electronics reconnection, the more revenue is generated. The community you serve will applaud your efforts and seek you out, saving you marketing dollars. And seniors will finally get the attention from movers they deserve. ■

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*Linda Ballentine is the owner and founder of 2011 AMSA Enterprise Award winner Crowning Touch Senior Moving Services. Based in Roanoke, Va., Crowning Touch is the nation's only moving company with a consignment shop, an auction house and a real estate division.*

## SAFETY RULES FOR SENIOR MOVES

- Always leave a 36-inch aisle for major traffic paths.
- Never leave dollies freestanding.
- Don't rack packaging supplies in hallways.
- Tape down box flaps when packing/unpacking.
- Never block handrails in retirement communities.
- Leave nothing on the floor in the packing area, especially art, mirrors, tape guns, bubble wrap, etc.
- When unpacking, remove accumulated packaging ASAP.
- Use large cones to highlight a parked truck profile.
- Always yield in elevators; don't overstack dollies.

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