

Age is no barrier to technology use

By Brian Skelly

Nowhere do the differences between old and young seem starker than in the adoption of information and communications technology. But while it is self-evident that the average 20-year-old will be more tech-savvy than the average 70-year-old, making too many generalisations of this type can be misleading.

Debbie Byrne, marketing director for consumer markets at Eircom, said it was too simplistic to classify young people as 'tech savvy' and those over 45 as 'luddites'. While it was true, she said, that the over-65s are generally much less au fait with technology than younger age groups, those in early middle-age – between the ages of 45 and 54, say – generally had a high level of comfort with it.

Byrne said this was especially true of the more affluent socioeconomic groups for whom flatscreen TVs and home entertainment systems had become de rigueur.

Even with the less technically-minded over-65s, activities such as digital photography and photo sharing were becoming more common, according to Byrne. "This older age group is starting to share photos online as a way of keeping in touch with their families. That's definitely a trend we've seen change over the past year," she said.

Katherine Thomas, media spokesperson for mobile provider 3, said there was growing evidence of technology engagement among older consumers. "There is a perception that the over-45s are out of



Older people have embraced technology

touch with technology, but we have found this not to be the case," she said.

Thomas said that the most popular product bought by the over-45s was mobile broadband, which provides web access via a dongle attached to a laptop or PC. She added that the most popular mobile handsets were the Sony Ericsson K610i and the new Sony Ericsson G502, which feature voice over IP (Skype) and instant messaging (Windows Live Messenger).

However, 3's competitor Vodafone said that many older users were still eschewing fancy handsets for functional ones. "We find that standard handsets are much more popular with the older age groups; they seem to choose function over fashion. While two-thirds of 18 to 25-year-olds have standard handsets, almost 80 per cent of 45 to 55-year-olds do. In this bracket, we'd include the Nokia E51 and Nokia 6300," said Astrid Smyth, devices manager with Vodafone Ireland.

According to Smyth, there is also a marked difference between what younger and older people use phones for, which is reflected in their choice of handset. "Customers over 45 tend to send fewer texts; they tend to focus more on calls. Customers in the 18 to 25 age bracket send nearly three times as many texts as those between 45 and 55," she said.

However, Vodafone is seeing some momentum building in the area of e-mail and web usage among older users, particularly those working in business. "Over the past year, we've seen an increase in e-mail and internet usage among the over-45s. Smart use of technology is seen as important for businesses to be successful. And users are becoming more educated in terms of what mobiles can do," said Smyth.

"Also, the fact that mobile e-mail devices have greater penetration within the business community indicates that connectivity is important for these customers."

Older people's attitudes to-

wards the internet and technology in general are encapsulated in the newly published Joint National Internet Research (JNIR) survey.

Covering the period from January to December 2008, the study revealed that, while many older people had never used the internet – 68 per cent of 55 to 64-year-olds and 88 per cent of over-65s – those that did tended to be big users of technology generally. For example, 88 per cent of 45 to 64-year-old internet users own PCs or laptops, and 99 per cent of them have mobile phones, while 42 per cent of 45 to 54-year-olds own an iPod or MP3 player.

Older web users are also big fans of broadband. Some 90 per cent of 45 to 54-year-olds and 87 per cent of 55 to 64-year-olds who use the internet do so via a broadband connection, the report found.

The survey also indicated that age had a big bearing on what the internet was used for. Older web users spend a lot of time on e-mail, news sites and online banking and very little on activities such as downloading music or TV programmes, gambling or instant messaging. They also buy goods and services online, particularly travel-related services such as flights and hotels.

Other popular online purchases for this age group were concert and cinema tickets, books, CDs and government services such as car tax.

While this survey did not show a big interest in social networking sites among the older demographic (just 8.5 per cent of users aged over 45 access social networking sites, compared with 28 per cent of those aged over 15), Krishna De, a

communications and brand engagement consultant, said that such sites were cultivating a growing audience among older age groups.

"People often think that social network sites are solely a place for the young, but my experience is that grandparents are on there as well," she said.

She said that the appeal of social networking sites was starting to broaden, a contention supported by a recent Nielsen report, Global Faces, which revealed that the biggest increase in usage of social networking sites internationally in 2008 was in the 35 to 49 age bracket.

De also said that social networking sites were becoming increasingly attractive to business professionals, and saw a growing number of middle-aged web users gravitating towards dedicated professional sites such as LinkedIn.

"The average age profile on LinkedIn is definitely not 25. The sorts of people I see on LinkedIn are chief executives and directors of companies – people who are definitely over 45," she said.

"The middle-aged and elderly are often portrayed as technophobics for whom the IT revolution may as well not have happened," she said.

"Truth is, while many older users have never switched on a PC or surfed the web, there are plenty of 40 and 50-somethings who are up to their greying temples in new technology and well able to handle it. As these users get older, the generation coming behind will be even more attuned to technology than they were – and the digital divide we see today between the generations will further diminish.