

Research, Innovation, and Imagining the Best Day Ever

By Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP Director of Impact and Learning Inés Escandón

If you could describe your ideal day without having to plan around the realities and constraints of life, what would it look like? This is what we asked older adults at three technology-themed community centers in New York and Colorado, and the results were informative. Through employing a design thinking approach to the exercise, participants provided unfiltered and authentic responses that were then used to draw conclusions and inform nonprofit program design.

Design thinking is a human-centered, collaborative approach to designing products and services that reflects deep empathy and interest in the people served. By asking questions and looking beyond assumptions, researchers seek to understand and learn from end users, not just after products are finalized but throughout the design process. Many organizations use design thinking to better reach their customers and produce solutions that can be prototyped, tested, and scaled. Increasingly, nonprofits are using it to create programs and strategies that are informed by authentic engagement with participants.

At Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP, we established our flagship Senior Planet program to be grounded in design thinking, looking at challenges from a user's perspective. We developed a methodology called Best Day Ever to help older adults build a broader framework of ideas around what program strategy can evolve toward. Best Day Ever was implemented as an exercise where Senior Planet participants visualized what their best day would be, without limitations or considerations of cost or logistics, and rather simply imagining a great day.

Exercise Details

In April of 2023, Senior Planet participants in New York and Colorado offered some intriguing insights to this methodology and how it can be used for nonprofits to build better programs. We learned about participants' dreams, goals, and interests, while also hearing directly from them how Senior Planet could play a role in realizing those visions.

Senior Planet announced the event through electronic newsletters and fliers distributed in-person at Senior Planet centers. After receiving the invitation to participate, 51 participants at three Senior Planet centers in New York City, Plattsburgh (upstate New York), and Denver then completed a survey either digitally or on paper. Survey forms were printed on pastel paper to make it appear more inviting.

OATS staff used response data to analyze and review participant comments and organize them into key themes. Interest areas and preferred formats were generated using data analysis software to aid in prioritizing possible interventions. Key findings were cross-referenced against an audience exploration report and participant interviews done at the New York City center.

Three Key Themes

In describing their ideal days, respondents' answers revealed similar interest areas: travel and excursions, family and friends, and mental and physical health. For travel and excursions people mentioned everyday activities like "a walk in the woods," "something that combines a nature walk, or a swim in a lake," and "being at the beach in Florida." Participant answers involving family and friends highlighted communal activities like having "all of my family together," "breakfast with friends/family,"

“my best day is when I spend time with my family,” and “having something to do that involves friendly with others.” For mental and physical health, people said, “my best day would be to wake feeling mentally and physically good,” “good sleep the night before, awaken pain free,” and “a sharper mind.”

Beyond these commonalities, three themes arose when analyzing participant responses. Purpose and accomplishment stood out as a common thread, regional differences revealed themselves, and feedback surrounding enjoyment from participating in the study was an unexpected disclosure.

1. Purpose and Accomplishment

In addition to the shared interest areas, a common thread among respondents was the importance of having a sense of purpose and accomplishment in their Best Day ever. Personal growth was cited by participants in comments including “spiritual growth, and napping if tired,” “to learn avenues to better myself and help others,” and “trying to make every day my best day.” Others cited tasks and short-term goals, such as “just waking up healthy with goals and objectives, and some place to use my talents,” and “when at the end of the day I feel accomplished; things done, cook, clean, crafting, reaching out to friends and relatives, and reading for learning.”

Having a sense of purpose and accomplishment is foundational for healthy aging. Numerous studies show myriad cognitive and health benefits in retaining a sense of purpose as an older adult. Getting older adults to reflect on purpose and accomplishment speaks to the potential, both as an emotionally and cognitively engaging practice in itself, and as source of impactful program design, of the Best Day Ever methodology.

2. Regional Differences

The exercise revealed regional differences around finances and social networks. Participants in New York City and Colorado prioritized social engagement over health and wellness, while Plattsburgh participants identified health and wellness as their priority impact area. For the preferred format, participants overwhelmingly cited workshops and 5-week courses for impact areas except for Financial Security, for which they selected lectures alongside 5-week courses.

The importance of money and financial literacy came up more often among participants in New York City, with mentions of winning the lottery or simply having or working towards financial stability; “having knowledge around finances to educate others to live comfortable financial lives,” and “learning something new and financial is very important to me.”

3. Participant Enjoyment

Staff reported that participants in the exercise enjoyed the opportunity to think creatively about how they would spend their dream day. Responses ranged from an ideal routine “fitness class, walk or run with my dog, lunch with friends, nap, cook dinner, eat with hubby, watch a really great film together, and go to bed late” to fantasy thoughts like “winning the lottery...” and dream vacations “a cruise to Bora Bora with friends.” Some described their best day ever in general terms stating, “it would involve routines and new experiences. Elements of family, physical, spiritual, educational, and social...” Nature played an important role in many of the responses given, especially among participants in Plattsburgh.

Differences existed between people who were either very positive about the experience themselves and wanted to be asked about it more, going beyond the research agenda to motives of customer

engagement, and those who were not as interested. For participants who were interested, Best Day Ever served as both a research exercise and a way to engage on a deeper level. They expressed a desire to be included in design thinking exercises to develop programs based on Best Day Ever, and to participate in those programs.

Additional Learning

One of the values of design thinking is not telling people what to think by avoiding leading questions and the hemming in of responses with parameters to find out what you care about in a more authentic way. An important way to do this is by having open-ended conversations, to provoke connection and the highest idea of what is possible and how they imagine themselves in most idealized form. Design thinking can be an extremely powerful exercise because it allows us to go deeper in visioning elements, which can guide us when we build programs. By avoiding tactical questions like, “what computer do you want to use?” and instead allowing participants to respond without limitations, feedback gathered pointed to deeper desires and goals.

According to one participant, the Best Day Ever was “my first day I came to Senior Planet.” To continue creating programs that inspire this type of commitment, Senior Planet staff asked participants to suggest ways in which Senior Planet could facilitate the Best Day Ever. Participants described two key roles for a senior-serving organization: assuming the role of a technology resource and creating a safe space for older adults to socialize and learn. Specifically, participants cited more fitness and technology classes, intergenerational and themed events, organized conversations and gatherings, and facilitation of travel and excursions.

Conclusions

Guided by design thinking principles and a commitment to creating extraordinary user experiences, OATS used the three impact areas identified in the exercise as a springboard for identifying new activities and programs. The Senior Planet center in New York City has already set up walking groups equipped with Fitbits, providing a tech-based fitness program that creates a new community. The Best Day Ever analysis report will also be shared with regional program managers and center managers, so that we can develop more center-specific activities, given the variances in regional preferences.

Design thinking provides a valuable framework for organizations like OATS to develop programs that truly reflect the needs and desires of older adults. By gaining deep insight into our users gleaned from research projects like Best Day Ever and incorporating those insights into a program design methodology informed by our 19-year history of working with older adults, OATS is creating outstanding user experiences that flip the script on aging by transforming individual lives. We plan to pursue this and similar activities on an ongoing basis, perhaps expanding the data collection to include all sites where in-person activities are conducted (e.g., partner sites) and possibly posing the same questions to our virtual participants.