

NONPROFIT-SPONSORED SOCIAL NETWORKS: Findings from Senior Planet Community



SENIOR PLANET COMMUNITY
FROM AARP



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT.....	3
PLATFORM STRUCTURE AND FEATURES	5
HOW SPC DIFFERS FROM COMMERCIAL SOCIAL NETWORKS	7
MODERATION AND COMMUNITY STANDARDS.....	9
GROWTH AND USER ENGAGEMENT	11
BROADER IMPACT	13
LESSONS FOR NONPROFITS BUILDING PURPOSE-DRIVEN SOCIAL PLATFORMS	15
OPPORTUNITIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS.....	17
CONCLUSION.....	19



INTRODUCTION

When social networks first appeared two decades ago, they offered the promise of connection, community and the opportunity for people worldwide to come together around shared interests. But as they evolved into massive tech and media businesses, those benefits have come at increasingly high costs of user safety, trust and quality of experience. For older adults, commercial social networks can be especially challenging: Algorithms amplify misinformation, interfaces are often unintuitive, privacy and data are poorly protected, and the pace of content can be overwhelming. Seniors, in particular, are frequently underserved—either ignored by platform design or targeted as vulnerable consumers.

But what if there were an alternative, designed by and for older adults, embracing all the benefits of social media without the overhang of business models that rely on advertising revenue and growth-at-any-cost strategies that prioritize engagement metrics over well-being?

Over the past several years, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP has been exploring this space with Senior Planet Community (SPC). Developed by a nonprofit with no commercial advertising agenda and a mission to empower seniors online, SPC is a place where older adults can connect meaningfully, free from the distractions and exploitative mechanics of commercial networks. Its mission is to foster safe, meaningful social engagement among seniors in a way that conventional social media platforms often fail to achieve. Combining thoughtful technology, purposeful design, and community-driven growth, SPC points the way toward a refreshing alternative to mainstream digital platforms.

This white paper explores how SPC, which launched as a proof of concept with limited functionality and a self-selected user base, succeeded where many better capitalized platforms have failed: by putting mission, trust and simplicity at the center of the user experience. Throughout the paper, key points are supported by anonymous quotes from a survey and interviews with active site users and volunteer community moderators commissioned by OATS in 2024.



ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

SPC was conceived in 2019 and catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the dangers of social isolation among older adults. In response, OATS assembled a team that included user experience designers and contracted developers (notably Herospace in San Antonio) to build a platform tailored for its demographic. Early design iterations incorporated extensive user feedback and pilot testing, ensuring that the final platform would meet the real needs of its users.

“I like the interaction, feeling a part of a group of seniors.”

SPC was built on the BuddyBoss community plug-in for WordPress. This cost-efficient decision enabled rapid development while maintaining flexibility and ease of use. The development roadmap calls for successful features of SPC to eventually integrate into a richer, custom-developed platform that incorporates all Senior Planet content and programming. Importantly, SPC’s design process involved older adults at every stage.

The site had its public launch on March 23, 2022.

The development of the platform was driven by meaningful engagement with older adults. Dozens of seniors took part in a months-long pilot program where they tested and offered feedback on the design, layout, and functional use of the platform. The project was informed by Design Thinking, a widely used collaborative process that reflects deep empathy and understanding of the people served.





PLATFORM STRUCTURE AND FEATURES

SPC organizes user interaction around **interest-based groups**, with popular themes including fitness, mindfulness, cooking, gardening and photography.

- Users must join groups to engage with content, promoting focused interaction.
- There are currently **over 50 active groups**, with many users participating in multiple groups.
- All content is user-generated, with no algorithms or influencer dynamics.

TOP INTEREST GROUPS ON SENIOR PLANET COMMUNITY



Own Less (Decluttering Tips):

2,439 members

Most popular group



The Book Club:

2,311 members

Group aligns with our Senior Planet's online book club



Recipes, Cooking & Foodies:

2,072 members

Strong engagement and sharing of recipes



Fitness Enthusiasts:

1,965 members

Fitness and wellness programs trend strongly with older adults



Fun with Photography:

1,215 members

Most active group (user posts)

The platform remains ad-free and avoids the use of algorithmic feeds, distinguishing itself from Facebook and Instagram. Site culture is closer to Reddit, with its orientation around specific interest-based communities and domain experts responsible for enforcing behavioral norms, but with less formal structure. These design choices help cultivate a more respectful, intentional and relevant social space.



HOW SPC DIFFERS FROM COMMERCIAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

Unlike commercial social media platforms, SPC is built around a nonprofit mission and prioritizes community over commercialization.

KEY DIFFERENCES INCLUDE:

- No ads, no tracking: SPC is entirely ad-free, creating a clutter-free environment that doesn't rely on surveillance-based monetization.

"You don't have to have these dumb ads. You feel safe on [SPC]."

- No algorithms: Content is surfaced chronologically within groups, ensuring relevance is driven by shared interests rather than engagement bait.
- No influencer culture: Users do not follow individuals, which eliminates pressure to build followings or chase popularity.
- Focused on older adults: SPC was designed by and for seniors, incorporating features that meet their specific needs and preferences.
- Emphasis on data security and privacy: Users are not asked to provide any information beyond name and email to set up a profile on the site, and individual behavior is not tracked.

"I've never signed up for Facebook. My privacy is important to me."

- Human moderation: A multitier moderation system maintains civility and community standards without relying on opaque AI or mass reporting.

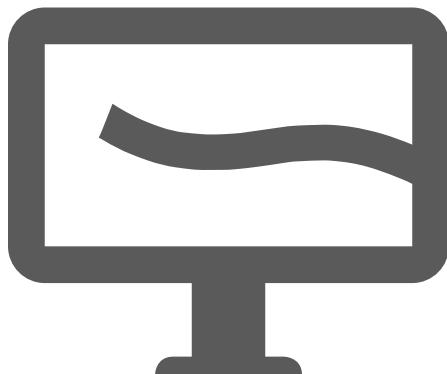
All these considerations were deliberate design decisions prioritizing clear navigation and support for those with limited digital fluency, in contrast to the complexity and information overload associated with commercial platforms.

Most importantly, SPC fosters meaningful engagement, not performative interaction. Whether it's sharing a mindfulness quote or participating in a photography club, users report feeling more connected, purposeful, and safe on SPC than on any other platform.

**TABLE 1: USER SURVEY RESULTS:
SATISFACTION WITH PLATFORM ELEMENTS**

PLATFORM ELEMENT	PERCENT SOMEWHAT/ HIGHLY SATISFIED	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Accessing the website/platform is quick and easy.	79%	187
Posting and leaving comments is easy.	61%	180
My notifications and the information on my homepage feed (My Community page) feel relevant to me.	64%	185
I feel like Senior Planet Community is a safe space against misinformation.	79%	185
Community in whatever way is most comfortable to me.	82%	184
I can join any group that serves my interest.	86%	184

High scores around empowerment, choice and safety suggest the platform is succeeding in its core mission. The lower scores around features like leaving comments and receiving notifications indicate shortcomings related to the bare-bones implementation for the proof of concept and represent opportunities for growth and improvement in future iterations.



MODERATION AND COMMUNITY STANDARDS

SPC MAINTAINS A STRONG CULTURE OF CIVILITY AND MUTUAL RESPECT THROUGH A THREE-TIER MODERATION MODEL:

1. Platform moderators, consisting of three staff members with backend access using a timeline interface to monitor new posts and comments as they come in.
2. Group organizers, who are super-users with authority to moderate within groups.
3. Community moderation, where users can anonymously report content.

This model, combined with SPC's nonprofit mission and organic growth strategy, ensures high levels of compliance and minimal disruption. Many users report feeling safer on SPC than on commercial platforms.

*“To me, SPC is more private. ...
The information is more relevant because of the different groups.”*





GROWTH AND USER ENGAGEMENT

Because SPC was intended as a proof-of-concept, the development team had to strike a balance between attracting a critical mass of users to sustain a good level of content, interaction and engagement without placing excessive demands on the limited infrastructure.

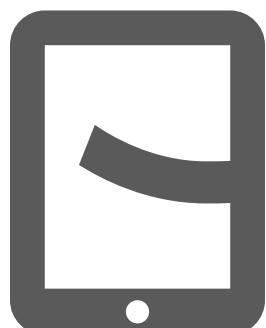
SPC set a modest goal of attracting 2,000 users by the end of 2022 (roughly nine months from launch) but exceeded expectations by doubling that number. As of 2025, SPC has nearly 15,000 accounts created, adding roughly five to 10 new accounts per day. As with any social network, a smaller number of highly active users account for the majority of content creation and engagement. Many users browse without contributing extensively, and a certain percentage of accounts remain dormant after an initial period of exploration and discovery.

SPC drove the first phase of user growth by placing paid online ads. However, paid advertising ended after two years. Subsequent growth has been entirely organic, driven by word-of-mouth and outreach through newsletters and the main **SeniorPlanet.org** site. Keeping the site UX simple and intuitive helps maintain user engagement beyond the initial discovery phase.

"It's self-explanatory and easy to work with. I don't have any problems in that area."

OATS TRACKS USER ENGAGEMENT THROUGH METRICS INCLUDING:

- Number of posts, comments and content uploads.
- Time spent on the platform.
- Number of active vs. passive users.



Because SPC made a deliberate design decision to simplify sign-up and the initial creation of user accounts, the site lacks the ability to track user behavior at a granular level, something organizers consider a benefit rather than a drawback. Future iterations of the site may leverage an existing Senior Planet online profile if the user chooses.

One other important consideration regarding growth and engagement metrics: In this initial phase, SPC is exclusively web-based. There is no mobile app, no push notifications, and limited ability to alert users at the OS level: all the mechanisms that larger social media networks use to drive engagement.

Despite these limitations, SPC retains a loyal user base, with many returning regularly to post or read group updates.

“It’s the interaction that kept me with SPC. It helps me stay engaged.”



BROADER IMPACT

Ideally, social media and other forms of digital connectivity can offer unique benefits to seniors who face special challenges around isolation, community engagement, health and access to information. One goal of launching SPC was to reassert those benefits that have been buried under layers of algorithmic manipulation and monetization.

OATS CONDUCTED A SURVEY OF SPC PARTICIPANTS IN 2024 THAT EXPLORED THE PLATFORM'S BROAD IMPACT, FROM EASING LONELINESS TO INSPIRING NEW CREATIVE PURSUITS:

- One community organizer shared, *“Knowing people read what I post and that what I post is helping someone—that was the highlight of my day.”*
- Another user, reflecting on retirement, said, *“You have 24 hours, 7 days when you’re not doing anything. ... SPC got me involved in many things.”*
- One user described how her husband discovered a passion for photography through the platform, leading to community connection and personal growth.

“It’s been a wonderful experience, being part of Senior Planet and being on the platform.”

Passive users also appreciated the platform’s sense of safety and privacy, even if some struggled with navigation or clarity around group structure.

“[SPC] is part of AARP ... [so it] felt safer. It’s been around for many years. Just felt safer as it’s a contained community.”

However, feedback also pointed to opportunities for improvement:

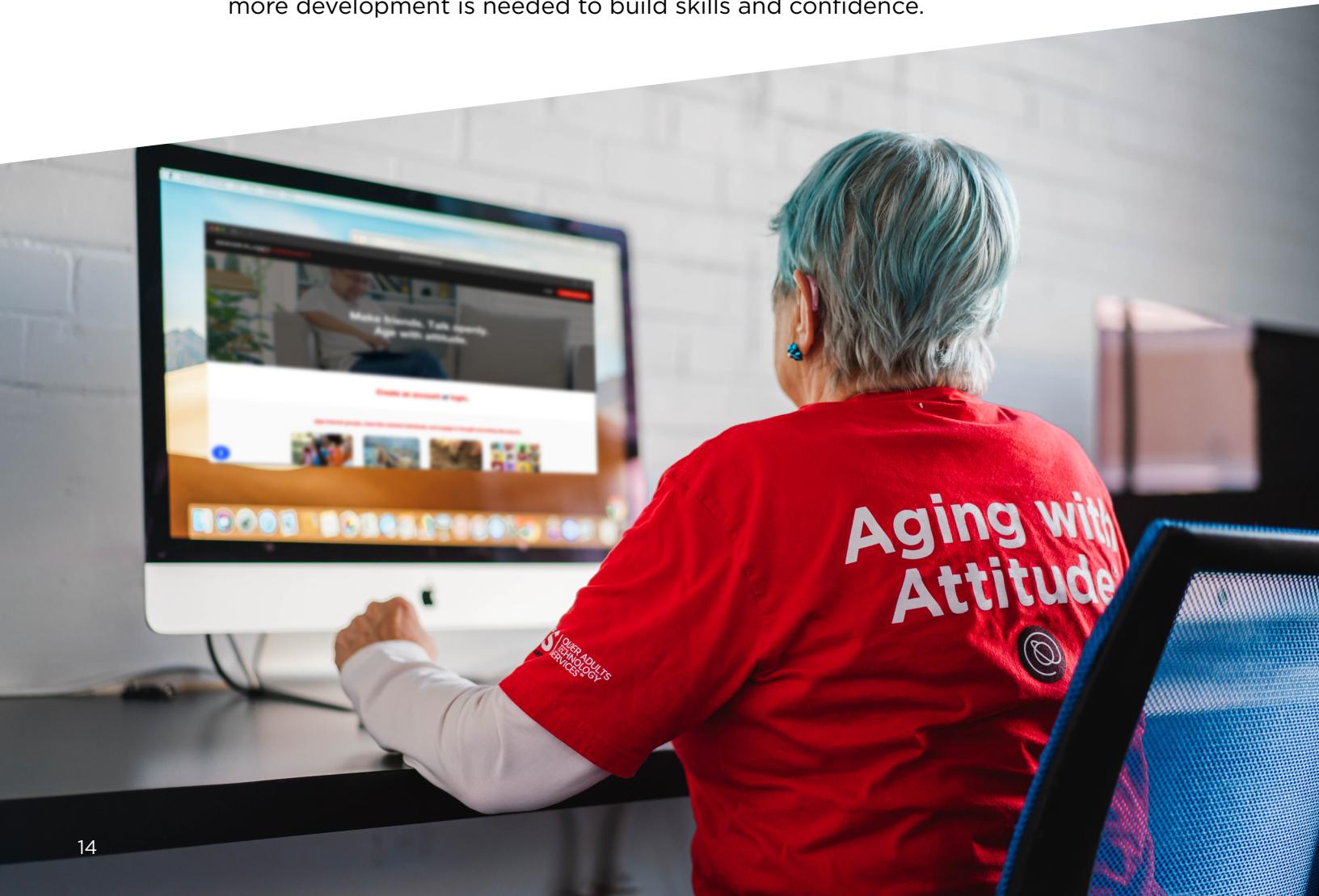
- Some passive users found the interface difficult to navigate.
- Some users faced confusion about group formats (e.g., asynchronous vs. live discussions).
- Some users experienced occasional issues with login or unclear group activity status.

OATS intends to incorporate this feedback into improvements to the SPC platform as it moves out of proof of concept and becomes a more integrated component in the next version of the Senior Planet online platform.

**TABLE 2: SURVEY RESULTS:
BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**

STATEMENT <i>"As a result of visiting Senior Planet Community, would you say you feel..."</i>	PERCENT SOMEWHAT/ HIGHLY SATISFIED	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
More connected to the world around you	73%	185
More confident using digital skills to connect with your friends and family online	61%	186
Better equipped to find resources online through increased digital skills	63%	184
Like you are a part of the community	73%	187

Responses from users point to some successes that Senior Planet can build on around creating connections and community, while indicating more development is needed to build skills and confidence.



LESSONS FOR NONPROFITS BUILDING PURPOSE-DRIVEN SOCIAL PLATFORMS

The SPC experience provides valuable insights for nonprofit and mission-based organizations seeking to build digital communities for targeted audiences.

KEY TAKEAWAYS INCLUDE:

1. Start with the user in mind

SPC was developed in collaboration with its intended users: older adults. Early feedback loops, pilot programs and real-world testing ensured the platform responded to actual user needs rather than assumptions.

2. Prioritize simplicity over sophistication

A clean, uncluttered interface with limited friction points (no ads, no algorithm, minimal data collection) encouraged adoption and retention—especially among less tech-savvy users.

3. Community moderation strengthens trust

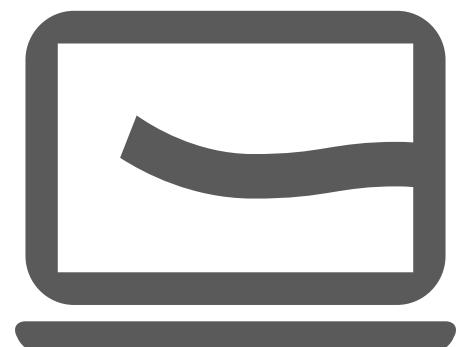
A three-tier system of moderation (staff, volunteer group organizers and peer reporting) reinforced safety, civility and a sense of ownership within the user base.

4. Align design with mission

Every aspect of SPC, from its nonprofit structure to its ad-free model, reinforces its core mission to combat social isolation among older adults. This alignment builds trust and distinguishes it from commercial networks.

5. Organic growth is sustainable growth

By resisting the pressure to scale quickly or use invasive marketing, SPC has cultivated a user base that is both engaged and self-selecting, leading to high compliance and satisfaction.





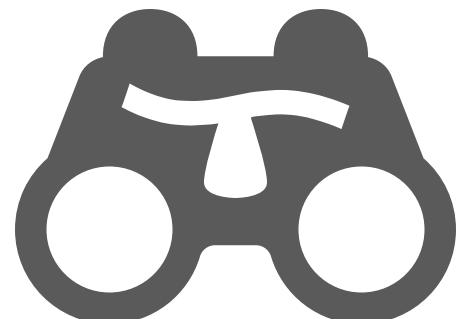
OPPORTUNITIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The platform's success, built quickly and simply with existing plugins rather than extensive custom development, points to even greater potential with sustained investment.

AS SPC LOOKS AHEAD, SEVERAL OPPORTUNITIES ARE ON THE HORIZON:

- Integration with **SeniorPlanet.org** for a seamless user journey.
- Development of a mobile app to increase accessibility.
- Improved onboarding and user guidance for less tech-savvy participants.
- More interactive elements, including live discussion features or hobby-based virtual events.
- Continued research and evaluation of SPC's impact on well-being and community connection.
- Sustaining sponsorship and support from OATS partners, to ensure continuity of service while maintaining the commitment to an ad-free, user-centric experience.

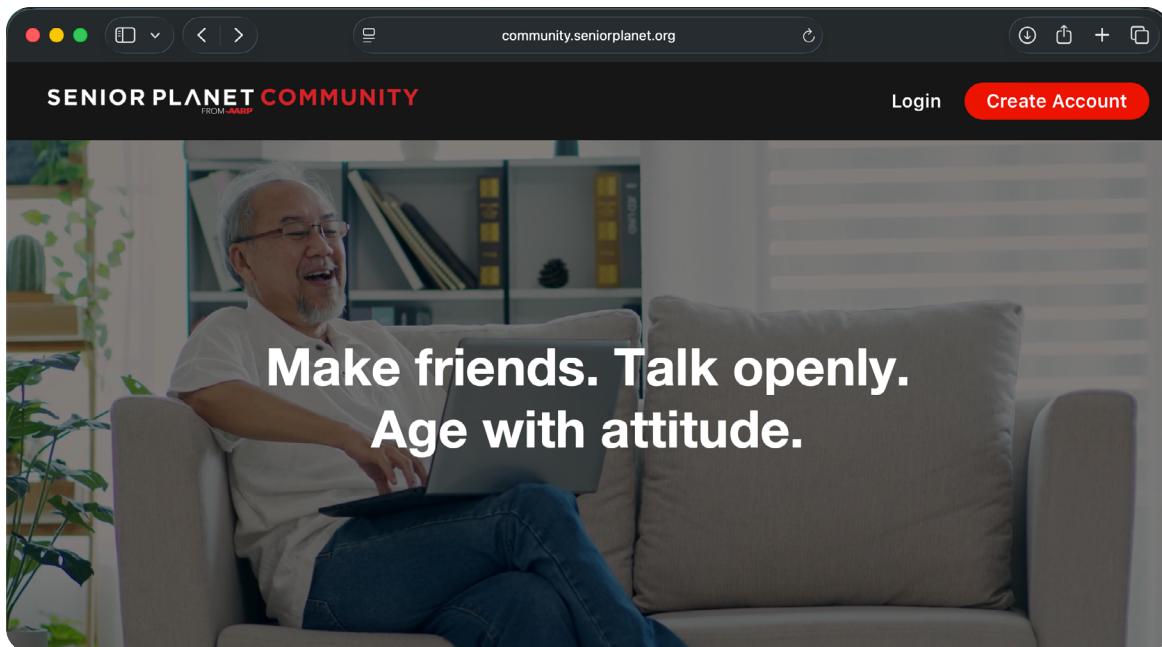
“Imagine what's possible with a serious platform push.”





CONCLUSION

Senior Planet Community may never become a billion-user mega-platform like more mainstream social media companies, but that is not the metric for success. By offering older adults a welcoming, purposeful and well-moderated space to connect, share and thrive, free from the noise and manipulation of traditional social networks, SPC stands as a compelling model for nonprofit-run digital engagement platforms.



Click the image or visit community.seniorplanet.org





community.seniorplanet.org

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