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## Seeing Store Shelves Through Senior Eyes

- By [ELLEN BYRON](#)

BUFFALO GROVE, Ill. -- Before walking into a Walgreens drugstore here, Todd Vang donned glasses that blurred his vision, slipped un-popped popcorn into his shoes and adjusted tape that bound his thumbs to his palms.

The get-up was part of an exercise designed to help retailers better understand the physical challenges facing elderly shoppers. Mr. Vang, a 42-year-old [Walgreen](#) Co. vice president, struggled to pick up a can of soup. "I can't imagine how this would feel if the store were crowded," he said.

In a training exercise, Kimberly-Clark executive Don Quigley tries to shop while wearing vision-impairment glasses and gloves that simulate arthritis.

The program, run by [Kimberly-Clark](#) Corp. and delivered to retailers including [Rite Aid](#) Corp. and [Family Dollar Stores Inc.](#), is a sign of a next frontier in retail. The number of adults aged 65 and older will reach 71.5 million people by 2030, twice their number in 2000 and representing nearly 20% of the total U.S. population, according to estimates by the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics.

As baby boomers turn 65 years old beginning in 2011, they are expected to spend an additional \$50 billion over the next decade on consumer products in the U.S., estimates Sean Seitzinger, senior vice president of consulting and innovation for market-research firm Information Resources Inc.

Given their growing physical limitations and focus on health-related products, "there will be dramatic shifts in what they buy and where they shop," Mr. Seitzinger said.

Current store layouts present challenges for elderly shoppers, experts say. Worsening eyesight makes finding items more frustrating, arthritis complicates browsing and reduced balance intensifies the strain of stooping or reaching for products.

Much as industries throughout Western Europe and Japan have been adjusting to accommodate aging populations, American businesses are stepping up their preparations. The consulting division of Van Kampen Investments, a mutual funds unit of [Morgan Stanley](#), recommends that financial advisers ensure report colors and office lighting are friendly to elderly eyes. Drug-store chain Rite Aid is revising its private-label goods with bigger typefaces on packaging. Family Dollar is weighing new lighting and shelf labels.

A Walgreens merchandise manager's hands are taped to simulate arthritis during a sensitivity-training session.

Walgreen said some of the elderly-friendly changes will appear in the coming months as part of a broader revamping that costs about \$30,000 to \$50,000 a store. A spokeswoman declined to provide cost estimates for specific changes, such as redesigning its store fliers. Over the next year, Walgreen plans to install call buttons near heavy merchandise like bottled water and laundry detergent in some stores. It also will put magnifying glasses on store shelves and make its aisle signs clearer.

Retailers that accommodate the elderly with amenities such as nearby parking spaces, smaller store sizes and manageable carts will generate loyal customers, Mr. Seitzinger said. When stores are too hard to shop, senior citizens buy less, said executives from Kimberly-Clark, maker of Depend undergarments, Kleenex tissues and Viva paper towels.

Dallas-based Kimberly-Clark runs the program to let retail executives experience how difficult shopping can be for older adults. "Our goal is not to make your store a senior shopping center," said Amy Kuerschner, a Kimberly-Clark associate marketing-research manager, at a recent training session. "But if we make it easier for them, we make it easier for everyone."

Kimberly-Clark uses kits developed by Lee Memorial Health System that include items that can simulate the world as elderly people might. Cardboard glasses in the kits simulate common vision impairments including glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and yellowing of the eye lens. Large rubber gloves simulate the limited manual dexterity brought on by arthritis.

Kimberly-Clark introduced its elderly-shopper training for developers and marketers working on its Depend brand, whose packaging was designed based on insights from its program.

Eventually, executives spotted a way to persuade retailers to make their stores friendlier to older shoppers. About a half dozen have participated in the program over the past two years.

At the Walgreen session, Ms. Kuerschner challenged the executives to read their own store flier wearing glasses simulating glaucoma, macular degeneration or cataracts. Pressing their noses against the flier, the group struggled. "It's really small copy, and I just can't see it," said Robert Tompkins, Walgreen's vice president for its health and wellness division.

Next, the executives wore yellow-tinted glasses to replicate the yellowing-effect that comes with age. "How are your vitamins showing up?" says Ms. Kuerschner, pointing to

the flier's front page where vitamin bottles' yellow labels disappeared against a bright yellow background.

Such glasses led Kimberly-Clark product developers to realize that many older shoppers couldn't distinguish between green and blue Kleenex wrapping. Kimberly-Clark now uses text and images as well to distinguish between tissue versions.

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