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A Live Connection

By Mitch Anthony

For over three decades, I've been tracking gerontological studies on the factors influencing "successful aging." I've always been fascinated with people in their later years who defy stereotypes—marching to the beat of their own drummer, retaining their mental acuity and staying in touch with the modern world.

Perhaps my interest has been stoked as well by the idea that I might be aging one day myself. There is one goal I have for certain when I get older: I'm not going to be a grumpy old man. I have gained some pretty good clues on how this condition, known as "hardening of the attitude" takes place.

In my book *The New Retirementality*, I summarized a generation's worth of these gerontological insights in a chapter called, "The Vitamin Cs of Successful Aging." One of the earliest findings that surfaced almost 30 years ago was the importance of staying connected. Studies discovered that those who maintain connections with people they cherish and are energized by—as well as with people who also cherish their presence and are energized by them—had a much greater likelihood of aging well.

So what have the typical retirees in America done for the last generation? They moved away from their meaningful connections to a gated community a thousand miles away where they don't know a soul, and in some cases, can't stand their accents! Who thought this up? Oh yeah, that's right—Del Webb! I've talked to people who saw the party fizzle rather quickly, finding themselves surrounded by condo association, ever-extending "happy hours," and tee times with grumpy old men who have nothing better to do than complain and rail for 18 holes before heading to the bar rail for the afternoon. No one intentionally moves into a covey

of complainers and ingrates (“accelerated agers” is how I think of them), but many find themselves surrounded by these types nonetheless.

I’ve met some lucky ones as well—those individuals who are thrilled with the acquaintances they have made and who enjoy the community activities and company of bright and happy people on their daily rounds. But it’s a crapshoot when you leave your connections behind for what’s behind the curtain where Carol Merrill is standing.

You really don’t know what kind of deal you’re going to get until you get there.

In the next decade, I would suggest that we will begin to see the reversal of the Del Webb-inspired retirement trend in the form of a mini-exodus in the opposite direction of the last generation of retirees. Many in this exodus are headed to places north of Florida. The first signs of this reversal are beginning to show, according to developers. Some say it’s the challenge of living on fixed incomes in Florida, while others say that the abundance of retirees in the state has led to undesired congestion. Those looking for less-congested areas are stopping in places like the Carolinas and Virginia, to name a few.

Indications are that many boomers are thinking of staying for longer periods in their original homes—opting for renting in southern states for a couple of months a year instead of making those states their permanent retirement residences. I’m hearing this from more and more couples as they approach their 60s. They plan to reside predominantly where their most meaningful connections abide.

Also germane to the topic of maintaining meaningful connections is the idea that for many, some of those meaningful connections are related to work. Many people end up missing the camaraderie, the energy and the fellowship of “the shop.” This is also an important consideration for the next generation of retirees.

I remember hearing a story from Bob, a Florida advisor, who told me about his 65-year-old mother being ceremoniously swept from her front-counter job at a family-owned piano store. Since everyone expected retirement at 65, no one questioned the assumption. Six months into her retirement, the family doctor called and told Bob that if he didn’t get his mother back to work, she probably wouldn’t live out the year. Bob told me that she got her job back (part time) at the store and is 85 today—and going strong. A great deal of her joy and energy in life came from working in that store and connecting with longtime customers.

I also remember meeting Nils, a “failed retiree” (in his own words). We were talking on a westward flight and I asked him if he was retired. He said, “No. I tried that ...didn’t work so well.” I asked him to explain. He told me that he had left his job as a representative of a manufacturing firm and within weeks was stir crazy, wandering around the garage looking for something to break so he’d have something to fix. Six months into his retirement, his old firm called to see if he would be willing to consult with old accounts and mentor some of the new guys.

Nils said he had an epiphany on his first trip back to an old account. They all jumped out of their chairs to greet him, wanted to catch up and invited him to have a beer and dinner. “They missed me,” Nils said. “And at that moment, I realized that, in fully retiring, I had left all those meaningful social connections behind.” These people made him feel valued, useful and productive—something we must all consider before we leave connections behind in the wake of our RV fumes.

Keep your connections vital if you want the best of your mature years. If you trade those connections in, be sure of what you’re trading for. We are all going to age (if we’re lucky), but we don’t have to get old. Keep the connections that keep your heart feeling young and needed. A growing consideration is keeping roots down here where you’ve spent a lifetime raising family and making friends. The ties that bind, the directions in which our heartstrings pull, the people who enjoy our company and are enjoyed by us—these are the connections to consider when looking at the “where” of retirement planning.

Mitch Anthony is widely regarded in the financial services industry as an expert on building client relationships and has been recognized for his pioneering work in Financial Life Planning. His innovative tools for strengthening client relationships are available through his Advisor Insights™ at mitchanthony.com.