

Old is Gold

*by John Hazlehurst
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The United States might be going through one of the deepest recessions since the early 1980s, but some businesses that cater to baby boomers and the generation that preceded them are thriving.

Collin Sutz, a hearing instrument specialist at All American Hearing said his company is seeing new clients and staying busy.

“You know that ringing you get in your ears after a rock concert?” he asked, “that’s hearing damage in real time, when it’s happening. We live in a much noisier environment than folks did a few generations ago, and our hearing suffers. More than half of the population, regardless of age, has some hearing loss, and virtually everyone past 65 has substantial hearing loss.”

The Palisades, an assisted living center that describes itself as “a luxurious community of independent, assisted and memory care apartment homes (that incorporates) innovative partnerships with UCCS (the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs) and the Beth-El College of Nursing” is actively hiring.

“I saw today that T. Rowe Price is laying off 44 employees,” CEO Toby Gannett wrote in a recent e-mail. “Just so you know it is not all bleak, because of the strong leasing, Palisades will be hiring over 25 full- and part-time positions in the coming months.”

But, Gannett said, his company’s success doesn’t mean that catering to an aging population guarantees success.

“Everyone wants to get into it,” he said. “Marriott tried it for a while, and found very quickly that it was nothing like the hotel business. We decided that we wanted something different, something that would support the rest of the individual. It’s like any business: if you know your clients, charge reasonable rates and provide extraordinary service, you’ll succeed. That’s the nature of American business.”

Nationally, facilities similar to The Palisades are

experiencing mixed success, according to Kathy Mills of Factiva Research, which advises businesses about how to reach the 55-plus market.

“Even though a CCRC (continuing care retirement community) transaction is not a real estate transaction, CCRCs are hurting from the real estate market because prospects don’t want to sign contracts until they sell their current homes,” she said. “CCRCs are offering incentives and promotions to move certain units that have been vacant for too long.”

Although ever-optimistic boomers might regard it as an avoidable option, aging carries one inevitable consequence: death. And census statistics support the obvious connection between an aging population and mortality, which bodes well for businesses like Wilhelm Monument Co.

“I’d say that our sales are slightly up this year, as they have been for every one of the 60 years that we’ve been carving stone,” said Dick Wilhelm. “With so many cremations, we thought that our sales would be affected, but people now buy a smaller burial plot - and we still end up doing a memorial.”

Which hasn’t gone unnoticed by mortuaries, some of which are looking for alternate streams of revenue.

“It’s tough out there for the traditional funeral homes, so they’re looking for more niches, more ways to increase revenue, and carving stone may seem like an opportunity,” he said. “But, it’s not that simple. We’ve benefited from diversifying. We don’t just carve gravestones. And as people have wanted to have monuments be more creative, more expressive of their individuality, we’ve learned how to help them achieve that.”

And Wilhelm said he’s learned not to take anything, including what would appear to be a recession-proof business, for granted.

“When you’re in this business, you learn to treasure every day,” he said. “I hear people say ‘Oh, I wish the day would go faster,’ they don’t know what they’re saying. Enjoy every minute!”