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Designing for the Senior Surge

Makers of Appliances, Bath Fixtures Target Aging Boomers; Cooking for the Forgetful

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Baby boomers brought ugly grab-bars to bathrooms and wheelchair ramps to hallways to prepare for growing old at home. Now they can take credit for products that people without infirmities could appreciate.

Makers of appliances and bath fixtures are finding new ways to ensure their wares age gracefully along with their users. Among the innovations: stoves that monitor pots to prevent them from boiling over and appliance control panels with adjustable typefaces. The race to invent senior-friendly designs has prompted researchers at General Electric Co. to plug their ears with cotton to simulate hearing loss and don goggles that blur their vision during product testing.



General Electric

General Electric appliance researchers try to simulate the infirmities of old age with goggles that blur vision and gloves that deaden the sense of touch.


Redesigning products for aging consumers seems to make good business sense. There are 78 million U.S. baby boomers, and roughly one-third will be 62 years old or older by 2013, says AARP. Unlike their parents, who often moved into retirement communities or assisted-living centers, most boomers plan to remain in their own homes, surveys show. In recent years, this "aging in place" phenomenon has triggered home renovations and new construction including halls and doorways wide enough for walkers and wheelchairs, and master suites and laundries on the ground floor so residents can avoid stairs. Now, the technology behind home appliances and fixtures is catching up. Controls are being revamped to be easier to operate for arthritic hands as well as minds that aren't as sharp as they once were. Safety is taking a higher priority.

But marketing these senior-friendly features before they're needed requires a delicate touch. "The older consumers don't want to be treated like they're ready for retirement," says Mark Delaney, director of the home-industry sector at NPD Group, a market research firm.

And with the housing market and economy sluggish, such features may be a tougher sell. Fewer U.S. homeowners will remodel their kitchens this year -- 7.2 million, down from 7.5 million in 2007 -- and they will spend about 12% less, \$84.7 billion, according to the National Kitchen & Bath Association. Bathroom renovations this year are expected to decline to 10.4 million rooms from 10.9 million in 2007, while spending will fall 7.5% to \$64.9 billion, the trade group says.

Still, product makers want to target older boomers now, since homeowners undertake major renovations

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infrequently; kitchens are redone every 20 years on average, the association says. Here's a look at aging-friendly home products, many of which were displayed earlier this month at the big annual National Kitchen and Bath Industry Show in Chicago.

Motor Skills

Older people can have a harder time gripping things and bending over. Appliance makers are moving controls to the fronts of stoves for easier access, and levers are replacing knobs on sink fixtures. Delta offers a faucet that turns on and off when you tap it anywhere on the spout or handle (right). The technology, which the company calls Touch2O, came out last year in a high-priced line, but now Delta offers faucets with it that sell for about \$500.



This Delta faucet turns on and off when it is tapped, making it easier to operate for people with weak wrists or arthritic hands.

To accommodate older backs, some manufacturers are promoting dishwasher drawers that can sit directly below the kitchen counter, or even on top of it. The same principles of putting work at a more comfortable height are evident in new refrigerator and oven designs. Several makers, including LG and Haier, unveiled refrigerators at the kitchen and bath show with four doors: two French doors on the top and two freezer drawers on the bottom stacked on top of each other. The top doors are easier to open because they're half the size of one big door, while the top freezer drawer, featuring a shallow basket for everyday use, reduces bending over.



The short doors in the GE Profile Single/Double wall oven make it easier to reach inside to move food in and out.

The needs of older users also figure into the new GE Profile Single/Double wall oven (left). The built-in appliance with two separately operated ovens fits into the space of one traditional wall oven. The smaller upper cavity offers enough space to cook a meal for two, while the lower oven is large enough for a 22-pound turkey, GE says. The shorter oven doors mean users won't have to lean over as far to move food in and out. The 30-inch oven is due out in October for \$2,799.

For Barbara Borvansky of Riverside, Ill., the single-double wall oven looks like the perfect solution to replace her 40-year-old single-door wall oven. "My door now is deeper than those," she says. "With things that are really heavy, they'd be a big plus --

especially with, say, a turkey."

Vision Problems

A person's eyesight typically begins to decline starting in their 40s. Smaller print appears less sharp and, by age 70 or 80, vision can take on a yellow tint.

The Discovery wall oven by Dacor features a display panel with adjustable font sizes and color-contrast options to make words easier to read. Users also can choose the volume and pitch of the oven's alarm. General Electric has come out with LCD touch screens that allow users to select from eight color

combinations, and the company is looking into larger-font displays.

Stumbling on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night could become a thing of the past. Lutron Electronics offers a motion-sensor lighting-control system that can be programmed to turn on night lights when a person gets out of bed. (All bets are off if you have rambunctious pets.)

Kohler's solution for the nighttime bathroom visit includes a toilet with an electric-blue night light and a motorized seat and cover that rise with the touch of a button. The \$3,800 toilet, part of the brand's Fountainhead line, also heats the seat.

Senior Moments



Flowban shuts off the incoming water when it reaches the overflow pipe of a tub or sink, to prevent floods.

Several new products appear geared toward heading off household disasters that could occur when memory slips. Thermador this summer will release an electric cooktop that uses an infrared beam to monitor the amount of heat coming from cookware. Called Sensor Dome, the device rises about an inch above the stove and switches the heating element on and off to maintain a consistent temperature to prevent pots from boiling over. The feature requires enamel-coated cookware, or a dishwasher-safe sticker that can be attached to other types of pots. The cooktop starts at \$1,760.

Last year, Bosch introduced an induction cooktop that sounds an alarm if liquid boils over. The cooktop, which starts at \$2,200, uses electromagnetic energy to heat a pot and its contents. Appliance makers are promoting induction -- a decades-old stove technology -- as a safer option because it doesn't produce a flame or give off radiant heat; its cooking elements are cool to the touch.

To prevent spills in the bathroom, a British design student developed Flowban, a device that shuts off incoming water to faucets when the tub or sink is full. The device, which costs about \$250 and doesn't require an electrical hookup, is triggered when water reaches the overflow pipe of a sink or tub. Its maker, About Time Design Ltd. of England, sees huge potential in marketing the product to nursing homes and hospitals.

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