

## Seniors key market for self-driving cars, Google says

### ‘For the first time in history,’ older people poised to become lifestyle leaders for a new technology, MIT prof says

Florence Swanson has lived through every American car from the Ford Model T to the Tesla Model S. Now, at 94, she has stepped into what Google hopes will be the automotive future: self-driving vehicles.



*TONY AVELAR/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS* Google's self-driving Lexus car navigates along a street during a demonstration in Mountain View, Calif.

After her painting of a guitar player won a Google contest, she became the oldest person yet to ride in a model with the company's autonomous technology.

“You haven't lived until you get in one of those cars,” the Austin, Texas, resident said of her half-hour excursion. “I couldn't believe that the car could talk. I felt completely safe.”

Google is betting others will share her sentiment. With more than 43 million people in the U.S. now 65 and older, and 10,000 more hitting that mark every day, aging Americans are a natural target market for self-driving vehicles. Mobility needs — getting to the doctor or the grocery store, seeing family and friends — become paramount for seniors, especially since 79 per cent live in suburbs and rural areas.

“For the first time in history, older people are going to be the lifestyle leaders of a new technology,” said Joseph Coughlin, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab in Cambridge. “Younger people may have had smartphones in their hands first, but it's the 50-plus consumers who will be first with smart cars.”

John Krafcik, chief executive officer of Google's Self-Driving Car Project, featured Swanson during a January presentation in Detroit. His mother is 96; both she and Swanson gave up their licences roughly a decade ago.

"A fully self-driving car has the potential to have a huge impact on people like Florence and my mom," Krafcik said.

Ford Motor Co. also sees autonomy "as a way to strategically address an aging population," said Sheryl Connelly, the Dearborn, Mich.-based company's in-house futurist. To help design vehicles for the elderly, engineers and designers have donned a "third age suit" incorporating glasses that impair vision and gloves that reduce finger control and strength.

Baby boomers — who came of age in the suburbs and equate car keys with freedom — want to remain mobile. Older Americans are keeping their licences longer, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. But advancing age often brings health problems, including poorer vision, memory loss and arthritis that can affect driving ability. Fatal crash rates are highest among drivers ages 85 and older, according to the institute's analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

And older people are willing to use new technology "if it provides a clear value to them," MIT AgeLab's Coughlin said.