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Consumed

Muscular Metaphor

By [ROB WALKER](#)

Posit Science Brain Fitness Program

A few years back, before the company now known as Posit Science even had a product on the market, its founders considered how to position just what it was they were aiming to sell. One of those founders was a neuroscientist named Michael Merzenich, a professor at the [University of California](#)-San Francisco, whose research focused on “brain plasticity.” One way of characterizing the commercial applications that his work helped spawn was “cognitive behavioral training.” Not surprisingly, such phrases gave way to something a bit sexier: “When we talked about it as ‘brain fitness,’ people got it instantly,” recalls Jeff Zimman, Posit Science’s chief executive.

Posit Science’s Brain Fitness Program is a computer-aided series of exercises designed to improve memory and other mental functions, and it’s part of what has quickly become a category of fitter-brain products. Along with similarly rigorous rival products with names like [BrainBuilder.com](#) and MindFit, there’s the less-scientific portable Nintendo game called Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day, and murmurings of a future when perhaps a cognitive analogue to cosmetic surgery will emerge — instead of a face-lift, a “brain-lift.”

Recent research in the field of neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change with determined effort), some of it by Merzenich, has fueled this trend; the Posit Science Web site is crammed with research backing the company’s approach. But the new raft of products also seems to be the latest iteration in the by-now-familiar narrative of the 78 million Americans born in the baby boom: they keep getting older, and they still don’t want to.

Selling boomers the latest mortality-denial aid sounds like (ahem) a no-brainer. But the Posit Science approach is not an instantaneous or a minutes-a-day affair: it involves setting aside chunks of time to complete the lessons, including listening exercises that require special headphones. (One unit called “Listen and Do,” for instance, works on “the short-term memory that is critical in almost all cognitive tasks related to thinking.”) The company recommends completing the 40-hour program within three months. At the end, you get a score telling you how much fitter your brain has become. The cost: \$395.

So far the company has largely relied on third parties to connect with consumers (probably numbering in the thousands at this point, the company says). Most notably, the health insurer Humana began offering the program to some of its members. Posit Science's first sales, Zimman says, were to assisted-living and continuing-care centers in 2005, and it has since been licensed by about 130 such retirement communities. Cognitive functions like memory, attention and visual skills noticeably decline around age 60, Zimman says, and the Brain Fitness Program was designed to "pull people back from the edge."

But along the way the company's research suggested that the program benefited people who didn't need to be pulled back from edge but simply wanted to keep an edge. "Suddenly," Zimman says, "our business looked different." It looked, for instance, more likely to appeal to baby boomers. Brent Green, a marketing and communications consultant who specializes in the boomer market, draws a parallel to the jogging and fitness booms that took off when that demographic group hit its 30s. "We've reached a life stage where a new kind of fitness starts occurring to us," he says. Boomers are more comfortable with computers than older generations, he adds, and have a marked "propensity to push the envelope on personal development." And not incidentally, to compete with one another by any personal-development measure available.

The Los Angeles Unified School District's adult-education division has become a licensee, offering the Posit Science program as a class that attracted students in their mid-50s to mid-80s. Anova Senior Kare is another licensee, and its chief operating officer, James Luce, has an eye on boomer consumers who "want to keep their brain at a high level." Along similar lines, Zimman of Posit Science says the company is now devising additional programs to aid other keep-your-edge areas of brain function, like "visual processing" and "executive function." He compares it to working out your quads instead of your lats. He also speculates about a day when you'll drop by the "brain fitness center" to do your workout. You can see why such ideas are attractive to the company: pulling back from the edge sounds like a one-time act; but keeping your edge (and keeping it sharper than that of the guy in the next cubicle) is a process that never ends.

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