

Friday, Jan. 18 2008

Innovation: Your Brain Needs Just as Much Exercise as Your Body

Donna Fuscaldo
FOXBusiness

New York -- Your muscles aren't the only thing that needs working out.

As the baby boomers age, concerns over diminishing cognitive skills are on the rise. A handful of companies think they have the answer: software that works out your brain.

"It's like a gym membership, but instead of doing maintenance to your body your doing maintenance to your brain," said Yossi Mazel, vice president of sales and marketing at CogniFit, which makes a software program called MindFit. "People are living to their 80s or 90s, and if they don't take care of their brains they will have great bodies but no memories."

CogniFit, Posit Science and even Nintendo are just a few of the companies making computer based software games that help people work out their brain. While aging people are the obvious target for these types of games, it's also being used by professional athletes and in the military.

The market, however, is still small. According to Alvaro Fernandez, who co-founded market research and consulting firm SharpBrains, which is focused solely on the field of brain fitness, in 2007 the market was valued at \$225 million, which is up from \$150 million in 2005. Fernandez thinks there's potential for it to surge, reaching more than \$2 billion by 2016.

"Some of the programs are improving areas that decline, which lets people remain independent and productive for as long as possible," said Fernandez at SharpBrains. It's the same premise as working out your body, he said.

For \$149, consumers can buy CogniFit's software designed to improve brain functions like memory. The program will first assess your weaknesses and then custom design a program for you to improve those areas. Customers are expected to use the software three times a week for twenty minutes. In the case of memory, the program asks you to memorize numbers and as you improve, the amount of numbers to memorize will increase.

"There's no limit," said Mazel of CogniFit. "The better you are the harder it gets."

The company also offers another program called DriveFit, which aims to improve cognitive abilities around driving. For example the software tries to improve judgment, which Mazel said is one of abilities that diminishes as you age. According to Mazel, a handful of insurance companies are interested in DriveFit.

Posit's software program is focused on auditory exercises designed to speed up brain function, improve accuracy and recording. Posit's product sells for \$395 and puts people through a series of auditory exercises using a computer and headphones. Both companies have a team of scientists helping develop the software.

Eric Mann, vice president of marketing at Posit, said a lot of these programs are emerging because of an uptick in interest in the brain.

"It's all about the brain," said Mann, noting that clinical studies have shown that exercising the brain does indeed work.

Indeed, Nancy Ceridwyn, director of special projects at the American Society on Aging, said there is a lot of science behind some of the programs designed to work out the brain.

"Anything that enhances health and prolongs ones capabilities are something the ASA would certainly promote as an education opportunity," said Ceridwyn. "I think we will see a tremendous boom in these areas."