The fact is, products and services adapted to older customers often benefit everybody. Take, for instance, the Amazon Echo, a voice-activated technology innovation that has amazing potential for helping seniors. It’s similar to other voice recognition devices such as Siri on the iPhone.

At first glance, the Echo (also referred to as Alexa) might seem like another tech toy. But if you take a closer look, you’ll see how this “smart speaker” could improve quality of life for older adults with Alzheimer’s or dementia as well as for seniors with mobility limitations and other health conditions.

For example, a senior could easily turn on the light across the room or adjust the room’s temperature using only their voice. If they wanted to hear music or read a book, they could do it with another quick voice command. Without Echo, they’d have to ask someone else to help them with these simple tasks.

And whilst both young and old alike undoubt- edly benefit from the increased access, choice and convenience that new products and services will deliver, questions remain about consumer protection. This is essential when considering older persons.

The new consumer class

Ageing is not new to the standards world. Almost two decades ago, in 1999, the ISO Committee on consumer policy (ISO/COPOLCO) held a workshop on ageing populations highlighting the changing global demographics and predicted that “by the year 2025, one in every four persons in developed countries will be over 60 and that developing countries would also be impacted”. It concluded that addressing issues related to quality of life, independence, healthcare and safety are critical so that countries can develop the important infrastructure needed to support an ageing society, including its economic impact.

Consumers International, working alongside its European counterpart, ANEC, has been lobbying for many years for standards that make products and services safe and accessible to all consumers, whatever their age and ability. “It’s here that ISO standards can play an important role,” says Sadie Homer representing Consumers International. “We need to ensure that all stakeholders are taken into account in developing standards that business can use to deliver products and services, which meet these needs of ALL consumers, however they access them.”

Taking stock of the situation, ISO, the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) joined forces on a common accessibility policy formalizing their commitment to ensure all future standards contribute to making products, services and environments that are accessible to all.

Published in 2014 to coincide with the revision of ISO/IEC Guide 71, Guide for addressing accessibility in standards, the resolution emphasizes key points such as the importance of accessible (or universal) design, engaging older persons and persons with disabilities in standards development to safeguard their particular interests, and training standards developers to incorporate accessibility features into standards.