

Incorporating hospitality into long-term care demands blending style with substance

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Senior living communities increasingly look to the hospitality industry for a model of exceptional service and desirable amenities. The trend signals senior living's growing sophistication and market orientation. But leaders should be mindful of what drives this move to hospitality.

It could be just a cosmetic choice to win over consumers who are often skeptical of senior living. Or it could be an opening for communities to more fully embrace their missions. Leaders motivated by mission might consider that hospitality calls for a reorientation to customer service, or even further, a profound shift in culture, which encompasses the common vision, corporate personality and shared habits of a community.

The move toward hospitality has been underway since the 1980s—but with limited reflection on the appropriateness of the model and its usefulness beyond the appropriation of a few systems and roles, such as turning the receptionist into a concierge. The field has witnessed improvements in customer service over the past two decades—more personalized attention, for instance. Yet the efforts are often piecemeal or episodic, because leaders are not dealing with the more fundamental issue: a community's culture.

Our industry needs more rigorous thinking on this issue. The shift toward hospitality begs several important questions: How can a retirement community emulate a hotel when the retirement community is fundamentally home, not a vacation or travel destination? What in the design and customer service of the finest hotels transfers to senior living? Is there something in the meaning of hospitality itself that may provide an opening for a more transformative approach to senior living?

Seniority has a vested interest in thinking through this issue of hospitality. We are deep into culture change in our company, [Seniority Inc.](#), and in the midst of rolling out a new hospitality initiative called Seniority Spirit. We learn from the hospitality industry and have spent considerable time studying with the best: the leaders of the Ritz-Carlton.

Our company defines hospitality as the “attitude, behavior and the standards enabling us to provide exceptional service and positive experiences to our residents, team members and clients.” For us, as for other senior living leaders who embrace a larger view of hospitality, our work is about culture formation. Ultimately, our task is to create a culture that honors what we

know to be true, and best, about our service in the senior living field. So our hospitality motto is very specific to our profession: “Exceptional people providing exceptional care and services.”

The energy that senior living leaders invest in this issue marks the difference between hospitality as style and hospitality as substance. For leaders who want to realize the full potential of hospitality, several challenges must be addressed. To move from style to substance in hospitality, senior living communities must contend with three challenges: the culture challenge, the customer challenge and the leadership challenge.

The culture challenge

Like any organization, a retirement community has a culture. That culture is the community's common vision and its corporate personality, its shared rituals and cherished habits. A culture shifts when its members take an active role in realizing the experiences they desire. To be hospitable is to truly welcome the self-determination of residents. Hospitality in this sense means to make room for residents to have the experiences they seek. Resident engagement can take the form of participation in governance, leadership in programs and decision-making that affects the shape of community life. Of necessity, resident engagement requires owners and staff to let go of some control.

If our aim is to support residents in aging successfully, then our real work is to create environments where people thrive. That calls for a different mindset among team members who want to “take care” of others. Although seemingly noble, “taking care” gets in the way of flourishing. To embrace the latter, we need places that are truly hospitable. Obviously, that's a major culture shift for senior living.

The customer challenge

“Hotel-like” works for a certain group of affluent, highly independent consumers. Senior living's primary market today is the Silent Generation, which is accustomed to the style of the hospitality industry. Many of these consumers are professionals who have spent their lives traveling, enjoying fine dining and expecting exceptional service. As healthy and independent residents, their presence is felt in senior living communities.

But the customer challenge is to recognize that senior living communities will continue to serve residents with diverse needs. Assisted living and memory support will likely see the most growth in the coming years. Some argue that the trend toward frailer residents will intensify, as baby boomers put off moving to retirement communities until their later years.

Along with these frailer residents, communities will welcome a growing number of residents who want the security of care, if they need it down the road, but for now regard the community as a base to re-engage the world on their terms, whether that means continued employment, volunteer work, travel or college studies.

The leadership challenge

Leadership in a culture of hospitality is shared. In Seniority Spirit, the foundation of service is the same for every staff member:

1. Greet everyone with a smile.
2. Anticipate, acknowledge and act.
3. Be warm and genuine.

Frontline employees are empowered to make decisions when a hospitality approach is fully implemented. One commitment that all Seniority team members make is the following: “I own every problem I see.” The team member might not personally resolve every problem, but he or she owns the responsibility to ensure the problem is resolved—to find the right person, to communicate the need, to assist in any way possible.

Hospitality in hard times

Senior living leaders are challenged to move from style to substance in hospitality. And this challenge comes amid the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. But, interestingly, the economic turmoil provides an opportunity to recast hospitality in its larger sense.

Hospitality as style can come with a high price tag. Conventional thinking is that consumers will pay for the extra level of service. But the recession places that assumption in doubt. In fact, researchers are forecasting a “post-recession consumer” who is cost-conscious, debt-averse, yet still interested in creating experiences, albeit experiences of simplicity.

Smart senior living leaders will understand that an exceptional experience is not contingent upon offering an upscale product or service; the exceptional experience can occur amid simplicity. While post-recession consumers are likely to retain habits of frugality, as human beings they will still yearn for meaningful experiences. Senior living communities have an opportunity to welcome – to be hospitable – to these desires.

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<http://www.mcknights.com/incorporating-hospitality-into-long-term-care-demands-blending-style-with-substance/article/161703/>