



Selling to Seniors

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As more senior-living communities begin to emulate hotels instead of hospitals, Seniority Inc., a senior-care consultancy, advises them to ensure that the hospitality model brings about a substantive culture change, not just cosmetic improvements to the campus.

Seniority Inc., a retirement-community management firm, is rolling out a new hospitality initiative called Seniority Spirit, which will help retirement communities achieve that type of culture shift.

"The move toward hospitality has been under way 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," says Sloan Bentley, president of Seniority Inc. "The industry 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."

The Culture Challenge

A retirement community's culture is built on its common corporate personality, shared rituals and cherished habits. A culture shifts when its residents take an active role in realizing the experiences they desire. "Resident engagement" is the term used in senior living to describe this active role.

To be hospitable is to truly welcome the self-determination of residents, says Bentley, who is a gerontologist and licensed nursing home administrator. "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. Resident engagement requires owners and staff to let go of some control."

Hospitality Calls for Consistent, Exceptional and Anticipatory Care

To relinquish that control and achieve a truly hospitable environment, Seniority has examined its entire team member structure, from job descriptions to hiring practices to orientation to performance evaluation and ongoing training and has looked critically at all of its resident programs. "To support residents in aging successfully, our principals believe their real work is to create environments where people thrive," Bentley says. "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 Resident-Preference Database

That culture shift involves providing exceptional service consistently -- not just providing basic care and services but anticipating the needs of residents and their families. For example, one of the 30 programs that Seniority Spirit has developed to support the culture change is a resident-preference database that was custom-built.

"When our resident assistants or anybody in our community discovers, for example, that Mrs. Smith's son loves two Splendas in his coffee when he comes to visit his mother, usually only one person in the dining service may know that. But now we input those preferences into the resident profile, so all the staff members know this information," Bentley tells *Selling to Seniors*. "So now we know what the resident's or family member's preferences are, and we can provide service that is one step above -- anticipatory or exceptional service. It's all about how to go above and beyond. That's a small example, but those kinds of touches accumulate on a daily basis when we work with all of our residents and their families."

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