

Marketing Seniors' Housing



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MORE AND MORE HOSPITALS and health systems are purchasing, building, partnering with, or sponsoring housing developments. These developments include facilities for assisted living and skilled nursing, independent living arrangements, continuing care retirement communities, rehabilitation and subacute care programs, and low-cost housing for people of all ages. Even hospitals that do not have investments in housing are affiliating with senior facilities for the purposes of education and medical and market share. And with the arrival of the baby boom generation, this trend is likely to become even more prominent.

As with their other programs, health care organizations must craft and implement comprehensive communications plans intended to increase public awareness of and appreciation for their housing activities, because such awareness and appreciation will help increase market share and profitability. Health care organizations must also understand that the target audience—depending, of course, on the resident's health status—may include both the resident and his or her family members and caregivers.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Marketing elder housing is more personal—because it is based on developing and maintaining one-on-one relationships—than marketing hospitals. Because it is more personal, those who do the marketing must connect with health care providers, such as physicians, social workers, rehabilitative therapists, nurses, and case managers, as well as with community organizations like senior centers—and also, directly, with the potential resident and his or her family.

Here are some tips on marketing housing for senior citizens.

Start with Research Numerous sources of research material are available. They include your organization's own demographic data and information

from senior citizens' groups (your senior membership group, for example), chambers of commerce, city planners' offices, universities, and health associations. Don't forget reliable sources on the Internet. Tap college students and volunteers to conduct phone surveys, focus groups, interviews with key decision makers and "influencers," and on-the-spot surveys at senior programs and events. Conduct periodic surveys and satisfaction assessments among the residents of existing housing, to learn what they like and don't like.

Talking and listening to residents, their families, and loved ones will not only help you develop a marketing plan but will also reveal practical ideas on how to improve their quality of life.

Educate Consumers Educate consumers about the cost of senior housing and long-term care. According to a 2001 study conducted for AARP, most consumers are uninformed about the costs of long-term care.¹ To educate seniors about senior living expenses, the financial impact of health care costs, and the role of Medicaid and Medicare in nursing care, form alliances with government, business, service organizations, educators, and other health-related groups. An understanding of these costs helps seniors and their families to make wise choices and reduces "sticker shock."

Enlist Staff and Friends Involve employees, physicians, volunteers, and board members in promoting your senior facilities. Inculcate pride among staff members by giving them customer-service training. When you are recruiting new staff members, include in your job ads descriptions of the role that employees play in creating positive impressions in patients.

Encourage Diversity Recognize the cultural and religious diversity in the facility. If necessary, conduct a self-assessment to better understand your residents' backgrounds. Engage staff members, residents, and families to sponsor programs that

honor different religions and cultures, perhaps by sharing traditional foods, stories, and other cultural artifacts.

Put Residents First Always put the residents first, giving them an opportunity to make choices concerning their activities, meals, social interactions, and surroundings. You might, for example, allow them to design their own rooms and choose their mealtimes, thereby enabling them to feel more at home than they would in more institutional surroundings.

Focus on Activities Create activities for residents that improve their health, functioning, independence, and sense of satisfaction. Exercise classes, musical events starring local talent, book reviews, craft shows, Internet classes, and pet therapy sessions have all been shown to engage the interest of residents. Schools, clubs, and church and community groups are often willing to help put on such programs. Try to design programs that will meet individual residents' needs.

Be Inventive Try to think "outside the box" in creating programs. Camps for handicapped younger people are today welcoming senior campers, for example. The Wishing Well program at Ridgewood Care Center, Racine, WI, uses a wishing well built by volunteers to make residents' "dreams come true."² Each month a resident's wish is granted. Among the wishes granted have been taking a train ride to visit a family member and flying in an airplane for the first time.

Encourage Visitors Visitors enliven any facility for seniors. Encourage visits by volunteers, family members, creators and maintainers of websites, marketers, event coordinators, and others. When my Uncle Saul was in a retirement community, I'd go to visit not only him but other residents as well. ■

NOTES

1. AARP, *The Costs of Long-Term Care: Public Perceptions versus Reality*, Washington, DC, December 2001, available at http://research.aarp.org/health/ltc_costs.pdf.
2. Leis Peterson and Candy Brown, "A Well of Wishes," *Contemporary Long Term Care*, February 2002, p. 13.

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