

Memory Care Marketing:

The Gift of Listening

By Janis Ehlers

It is never easy for the family of a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease to make the decision to move their loved one to a memory care community. With patience and understanding, a community's sales staff can help to ease the stress surrounding this decision and make the transition as smooth as possible for new residents and their families.

When family members come for an initial meeting, compassion and patience are the keys to good communication. Sales staff must begin by listening, not selling. By asking open-ended questions and learning about the family and the resident — the person's history, interests and capabilities — the sales-

person helps the family become more comfortable with the conversation and the community. Knowing the resident's history, whether they were a judge, secretary or teacher can also be helpful to the staff in creating a familiar routine for him or her.

The sales staff's attitude is also important. Mary Jo Pompeo, HealthTrust America's vice president of operations, says, "I encourage people involved with admissions and leasing to get enthusiastic about our Alzheimer's programs, rather than being low-keyed." Noemi Petrovics, director of marketing with Donnelly Place, the memory care community of Lakeside Village, a Classic Residence by Hyatt, also emphasizes that the person handling the marketing should be universally appealing and a very good listener.

Pompeo stresses the importance of talking directly about Alzheimer's with the family and being realistic about what they can expect. Lisa James, MHA, NHA, administrator of HCR-ManorCare, also encourages sales staff to be actively supportive of the families. "They appreciate that someone recognizes the sacrifice they've made for their loved one, and they need the sympathy and understanding that they, too, need a respite from the stress and worry," she says.

While the meeting should have the uninterrupted attention of the salesperson, he or she should also keep the session from becoming too intense by providing comfortable seating, offering lunch or breaking for coffee.

Barry Gar director of marketing at the Sterling Aventura, expects to spend about an hour and a half in an initial meeting about an Alzheimer's resident. He reports that often, one family member will come alone, then return with others before making a decision. Sometimes a family will bring the prospective resident to the first meeting. This individual should be included in the discussion and treated respectfully. A tour and additional meeting without the resident may also need to be scheduled. "It may take

one visit or many," says Petrovics. "It's important that a family gain a realistic view of the situation."

Making the decision to move a loved one to a memory care community can cause tremendous guilt for family members who may already be stressed by the demands of caregiving. It is important to emphasize to them that the environment is nurturing, safe and will make a positive difference in the resident's life by helping them stay physically and mentally active. Specifics of staff expertise and detailed activity information can be reassuring. "We make a point of discussing socialization, privacy and dignity for residents. We emphasize our staff's qualifications and the extensiveness of our social activities — including our residents' participation in a local roller skating club," says Rose Rager, care center administrator at Lakeside Village.

Before the Visit

When family members begin to investigate options for memory care, they may learn about a community through referrals, advertisements in publications and yellow pages or the community's Web site. If the community offers independent living, those residents are excellent referral sources because people turn to them for their knowledge and insights, according to Petrovics. Other referral sources can include physicians, home healthcare providers and staffs of communities that do not offer memory care services. Building relationships with these sources and keeping them informed about the community's activities and philosophy will help them share information with family members of prospective residents.

It is also very valuable to develop connections with the community at large through Alzheimer's-specific outreach and involvement. "Whether hosting Alzheimer's meetings or participating in the annual Alzheimer's memory walks, we're visible and committed to being involved," says Petrovics.

Be aware that families are likely to come to an initial meeting already well informed about the community and others they are considering, and may have visited other memory care communities. Sales staff should have a sense of what competing communities offer and be ready to help the family members make useful comparisons.

Communication between staff and the family of a resident will continue to be important as long as the resident lives at the community. But the gift of listening in the initial meeting can establish a positive staff-family relationship that will benefit the resident, the family and the community's sales.

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