



## Editing the Dirty Words Out of Your Senior Housing Vocabulary

By Pam McDonald

Paul Flowers knows the power of words. He's President of [Circa 46](#), an advertising agency with a speciality in senior living and a Senior Housing Forum partner. With over 4 decades as a communications expert and consultant, he is fully aware that simple word choices can determine if someone accepts or denies your message.

### The Power of Words

The words you use influence how people see you and what they decide about you. They also can build or erode a relationship. In senior living, there are certain words Paul would assign to the junk heap. He shares his thoughts below.

Recently, a senior housing operator shared with me his frustration over the word "senior," feeling the label is an insult to older adults. While I wouldn't go to that extreme, we all understand the potential for ageism in our speech. Over the past few years I have been collecting a glossary of words and phrases that should be avoided in marketing to older adults. I call them "dirty words" – words that can be a turn-off to our target prospect.

To begin, it is always best to use a neutral and flexible general term to describe those later in life, such as "older" – i.e., older adults, older individuals, older Americans, etc. Age-specific references, such as "those over 50" or "people 65 and up," also seem to be acceptable.

Other suitable terms include: elders (but not "elderly"), mature, and even Boomer – but not "Baby Boomer."

In addition to elderly and Baby Boomer, there are other words and phrases that are generally disliked by the senior cohort. You can add these to the list: senior citizen, feisty, spry, sweet, little, feeble, eccentric, senile and grandmotherly.

And stay away from the word "still" as a modifier – as in "still driving," "still jogging," and so on. All of these are ageist and, consequently, offensive to an older audience.

### The Dirty Words of Senior Housing

As this issue relates specifically to senior housing, probably the first thing I learned in this industry was to never say "facility" – I was told it is the *F-word*. Instead, more universal terms like community, campus, neighborhood, establishment and property are more acceptable. Other terms to be avoided and replaced when marketing senior housing include:

DIRTY WORD	BETTER ALTERNATIVE
Unit	4 Home, Residence, Apartment Home
Bed	4 Accommodations, Residence
Patient	4 Resident, Person, Individual, Member
Semi-Private	4 Shared Accommodation
Alzheimer's Unit	4 Memory Support Area, Memory Care
Dining Room	4 Restaurant, Café, Bistro
Arts & Crafts Room	4 Art Studio, Artists' Workshop, Creative Art Center
Fitness Center	4 Health Club, Gym
Bus	4 Transportation Service, Coach, Shuttle, Chauffeur Service
Beauty Shop	4 Hair Salon
Environment	4 Atmosphere, Ambience
Appointment	4 Presentation, Tour, Visit, Meeting

There are other types of words that seem to work well with older adults:

- Words that are related to *new experiences*. Examples of these kinds of words include: learn, grow, experience, and explore.
- Words that recognize a senior's *value*, like: contribution, personal best, and freedom.
- Words that relate to *healthy living*, such as: energy, healthier, younger, improve, and enjoy.
- Words that suggest a *credible value*: free, VIP pricing, limited offers.

### **Keep It Positive**

Another tip along these lines is to always frame your communication in the *positive*, and be careful about using words that can have negative connotations, such as “forget”, “until” or “unless.” Whether you mean to do it or not, these words can imply weakness and, therefore, be perceived as derogatory.

Finally, when possible, tap into the life experience and knowledge base of the older adults with whom you are dialoging, recognizing they have a wealth of knowledge and experience to draw from – probably a lot more than you have. Understand that their attitudes and filters may be different from yours culturally. But that doesn't mean their perspectives are wrong – just different.

The main point is this: if we are not careful, we let ageism creep into our vocabulary through inadvertent use of words and phrases that might be offensive to older adults. Those words and phrases suggest to older adults what our opinions are about them – whether it is valid or not.

Purge those “dirty words” from your vocabulary.



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