



Want all the Dirt on Your Competitors: Here it is and it's Free

By Susan Saldibar

One of the things I used to do, back in my software marketing days, was to organize focus groups. What a hassle! Our customers were scattered all over the world. So we'd have to come up with juicy incentives just to get the decision makers to travel to join us. As much as I loathed getting these events together, I admit the results were like gold to us. We'd use their input for months afterwards. And, we found out, as the saying goes, the customer was "always right".

Senior living community operators are lucky. Your customers live with you!

Maybe you are one of those senior living operators who conscientiously gathers input from your residents and their families. If so, good for you. However, after reading an article published by [Sage Age Strategies](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner), I was surprised to learn that many operators continue to suffer from what some call "4-wall syndrome"--- decisions based on input from a few high ranking sources gathered around a table in the CEO's office.

Which leads to a good question. When was the last time you got a group of residents and their families together in a focus group format and really took a deep dive into what you're doing right, wrong, and what the other guys out there are doing?

Stop ignoring the research and insight walking (and wheeling) down your halls.

Here are a few things I learned about focus groups from the article . . .

Focus groups give you insight from two valuable sources:

- Residents: They live and breathe your community from the inside, every day.
- Families: The best researchers you have; they already know all your competitors.

The formal focus group format is great because:

- It provides an organized way to gather input.
- It causes everyone to bring their “A game” and they are better prepared.
- It leads to more creative discussion.

What are the best topics?

- Your programs (therapy, care, activities, outings).
- The dining experience.
- What they think of your facility (layout, furnishings, amenities).
- Current trends in senior living.
- What they hear about other senior care providers in the area.

What are best practices?

- Keep them small, from 6-10 participants. Too many and you will have some whose insight never gets on the table. Too small and participants may feel cornered or on the spot.
- Always use a third party to conduct the focus group. They know how to keep the meeting going and participants are much more at ease and likely to be honest and forthcoming.
- Have a solid follow up plan to collect, process and use the collected information. What good is all the input if you don't have a plan to put it to good use?

And you thought you knew everything about your community!

The really great thing about focus groups is finding out things you didn't know before.

Malissa Illiano, senior consultant and director of market research for Sage Age states in the article about hosting a focus group, “And it reveals things you never thought were true or directions you may not have considered. In my own experience in doing research with senior living leaders, I've seen many instances where the information that came out of customers' mouths was very different than what was expected and significantly changed the organization's strategic approach.”

There is a good reason we continue to conduct focus groups. They are the most effective way to get great insight into what you're doing well and where you could improve. Of course, the latter can be hard to take. But isn't it better to hear it from people you trust, when you have time to make adjustments, rather than finding out after your occupancy continues to shrink?

The Sage Age article has a lot of tips and added insight and you can read it [here](#).



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