



These Communities Will Get All the Leads in 2018

By Susan Saldibar

When you look back over 2017, what is your immediate “take” on how your community did? Was this the year you really turned some things around? Or were you left with more boxes unchecked than checked? Hopefully, you’ve decided that 2018 is going to be a watershed year for your community. But, for that to happen, you may have to rethink the “who”, “what” and “where” of how you generate leads.

I sat down recently with Bob Wilgus, Director of Marketing and Strategic Digital Communications for [LeadingResponse](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner) and asked him six questions that were on my mind about the coming year and, basically, what senior living communities are doing right and wrong when it comes to lead generation.

Some of his answers were surprising, yet all of them make a lot of sense. Bob is careful with his claims and numbers, always backing them up with data. Here’s what he had to say.

- 1. What do you see as the biggest change in the way we generate and cultivate leads over the last few years?**

In my opinion, there hasn’t been any real change over the last 5 years. Senior Living communities continue to rely on digital leads and onsite community events to generate sales activity. With occupancy rates continuing to trend downward, I’m surprised that so many community marketing and sales executives have been so slow to test and adapt their marketing and lead generation strategies to address this troubling trend. That said, the offsite community event marketing model has been producing amazing results – so there are options available for those communities ready to break the, “We’ve always done it this way” mindset.

- 2. Who will be the winners over the next 5 years as the competitive playing field heats up?**

That’s easy to answer. The communities that instill and embrace a “consumer mindset” when marketing for new residents will be the big winners. So much of the industry’s focus is on consumers (potential residents, their family members and caregiver) with an urgent need. I’m not saying we should abandon having a marketing strategy to capture and follow-up on these leads, however, too few communities have a strategy to reach prospects that will be making a move-in decision in 6-12 months. Having a constant flow of prospective residents is the key to solving occupancy challenges. If you can identify and nurture leads earlier in the decision process, you set in place a true marketing funnel that consumers have and will respond to.

3. What can senior living community operators learn from 2017 to put into play in 2018?

Don't be afraid to test new ways to prospect for new residents. When we first approached our senior living community clients this year and told them that the offsite community event model would generate more attendees than all their onsite events from last year COMBINED, they were both shocked and dubious. Yet, the forward-thinking decision makers at these communities took the risk, and now are true believers. Not only are they getting urgent-need move-ins from these events, they also have 50-60 pre-qualified and motivated prospects that are looking to choose a community 60-, 90-, 120+ days out. Better yet, these are EXCLUSIVE leads – not like the digital leads they are getting from the two, big online web-lead providers.

4. What have you learned about today's senior living prospects from your research and observations? How do they want to be marketed to?

Bottom line: today's senior living prospects want information and education on their options before they tour a community. They don't want to be sold – they want help and support in making a very difficult life-stage decision for themselves or their loved one. The numbers back this up. When given the option to attend an offsite community event at a local restaurant versus an onsite community event – prospects choose offsite events by more than a 10-to-1 margin! The neutral site location (such as a local restaurant) gives senior living prospects (including family members and caregivers) the assurance that they aren't going to be sold and they can gain important information about their senior living options.

5. What marketing tactics still work today and what tactics do operators need to let go of?

Believe it or not, direct mail has, and still, works – when done correctly. Direct mail has been elevated to a marketing art form. The days of just buying a list and sending out a postcard inviting people to tour a community are OVER. To really maximize the ROI on direct marketing – senior living communities need to learn how to, or work with an experienced senior living marketing partner that knows how to, accurately target the ideal prospect and get them to respond.

What do they need to let go of? Two things: One, their overdependence on digital leads and two, onsite community events. If you've ever filled out an online form from one of the two big senior living online lead providers, you'll see why consumers are pushing back hard. Prospects don't want to be bombarded by calls from 3-9 community sales people after they send a request for information. They're already filled with stress about making an important life cycle decision – being hounded by phone only exacerbates this feeling. As I said early, consumers have spoken. And they prefer to learn about their senior living options at offsite community events held at a neutral site location – like a restaurant.

6. What are the biggest misconceptions about hosting a live event?

Return on investment. While the cost to host a community event offsite is a bit higher than onsite, the ROI on marketing dollars spent using the Seminar Success Offsite Community Event Model is 17-to-1. Here are two more facts to consider: The average percent increase in attendance at offsite events vs. onsite events is 83%. And here's the big one: The average savings on cost-per-move in using this model is \$1,000. The consumers have spoken.

Normally I edit responses when I do a Q&A with a subject matter expert. I decided to leave Bob's responses alone because they exude his experience, energy and his enthusiasm for what he believes and what he does.

And he makes a lot of great points. As we gear up for 2018, new lead generation programs, such as off-site events, may be worth checking into. One thing is for sure --- continuing to do the same things over and over again, with hopes of a different outcome didn't work this year. And it won't work in 2018.



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