Sitting and Waiting to Ruin Your Community

By Susan Saldibar

Never let a negative review go unanswered.

Okay, that's my own quote as a consumer. Because, when I see a negative review, whether it's a hotel, a restaurant or a retirement community (I look at those a lot), I always scroll down to see what management has to say about it. No comment? Must be true. Or maybe they think if they ignore it, it'll just go away. Either way, it turns me off. I'll bet others too.

Sean Ochester, VP of Operations and Debra Gawet, Social and Digital Content Strategist for Sage Age Strategies (a Senior Housing Forum partner) both agree. "It seems that some senior living providers believe that replying to the comment may be bad PR, but on the opposite side, ignoring a comment can also do harm," Sean tells me. "However, if handled properly, a negative review can serve as a great opportunity to demonstrate excellent customer service."

I could end the article here, with hopes that communities check their reviews and start responding to them. But what tends to happen, according to Sean and Debra, is at the mere mention of negative review, heads go into the sand. No one wants to talk about them, think about them or do anything about them.

Resist the temptation to remove negative reviews.

When people do take action, the knee jerk reaction is to try to remove negative comments. That's a mistake according to Debra. For one thing, it's not always easy to do. Some sites, such as Facebook, require that you go through a process involving a moderator who may not allow removal. Even if you can remove a bad review, however, she recommends that you resist the temptation to do so. Why?

"Consumers expect a few negative reviews," says Debra. "A perfect 10 isn't always as effective as a realistic 9. Removing all your negative reviews may relieve some anxiety, but it does little to resolve any issues." And she believes that responding in a positive way to a negative review may have a more profound impact, by demonstrating that you care.

Of course, for senior living community reviews are essential. And, if you've had any of them, you know that negative reviews can pack a punch. That's why it's so important to keep up with reviews and respond quickly. Here are some suggestions from Sean and Debra.

1. Own it. Apologize and show authentic concern. This is essential to your response. Take responsibility.
2. Invite them to contact you directly. In some cases, especially when the negative comment names a specific individual or is personal in nature, it makes sense to ask them to contact you directly to resolve.
3. Vow to follow up and make sure you do. Lack of follow through can lend even more credence to the complaint. Check it out thoroughly and take steps to resolve.
4. Publish what you have done to correct the issue. Of course, this depends on the issue. If it involves an improvement you make to a program, a menu, an activity or policy, make sure you publish your results. "We've listened and here is what we did."
5. Work to gain more positive reviews. Nothing does more to neutralize a negative review than more positive reviews. Make it easy for residents and their families to post reviews. Encourage those who you know are happy to post reviews.

Yes, you can turn a bad review to your advantage.

Most successful organizations will tell you that some of their best clients were those who started off with a gripe. Some of them even took dramatic actions, such as posting the negative review on their website with a blow-by-blow account of how they turned the customer around. Others went the extra mile to right a wrong and invited the complainer to come and personally put them to the test. Their reward? A loyal customer for life. And some unexpectedly great PR.

The truth is that nothing speaks more to a complaint than an authentic desire to make things right again. As Sean says, "If you respond with sincerity, pledge to correct the issue and publicize it when you do, you will have not only neutralized the complaint, you may score points in the process."