



If You Want BETTER Than 90% Occupancy, Try Plan B

By Susan Saldibar

So, what's wrong with Plan A you may ask? Maybe only the fact that you have been doing Plan A for too long. Budgets, like so many other things, can become habitual. But if your numbers aren't moving in the right direction, that habit may be keeping your community sidelined against your competitors. Even if the occupancy numbers are moving in the right direction... at what cost? Meaning, how is your cost per lead, tour, and move in? This is something Valerie Whitman, VP of Senior Living for [LeadingResponse](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner), sees all too often - marketers who keep their dollars glued to programs that are not proving themselves to be effective or they are effective but more costly than necessary.

"Part of the problem is not taking the time or having the means to gauge things like ROI," says Valerie. "That's why operators often times end up with budgets that they feel will be very difficult to achieve, so they have to increase the occupancy line item to cover expenses," she adds.

What Valerie suggests is that senior living communities pull out their budgets for the last few years and take a good hard look at them, especially the distribution of marketing dollars. Where is the bulk of your marketing dollars being spent? What return are you getting for those dollars, and at what cost? Here are some areas to look at:

- **SEO and SEM.** These are a given in today's world. "You need to make sure you are coordinating your search efforts and that your SEO and SEM are properly targeted to get the attention of those you want to engage with," says Valerie. She recommends that clients work with digital professionals who keep current on all the latest trends and guidelines. They should also be able to demonstrate an ongoing ROI and make adjustments to keep it strong.

- **IP remarketing.** This is the process of identifying who has been on your site and left it. They are still viable leads. LeadingResponse uses their IP Match Back tool, which provides more than just a name and address. They are able to provide deep profiles of everyone who has visited your site. “You may spend thousands of dollars to drive people to your website,” says Valerie. “Don’t let those bounced leads fall through the cracks. You can continue to engage with them and turn them into a warmer lead.”
- **Digital aggregators.** Most communities will put some portion of their marketing budget into Caring.com, A Place For Mom or another digital aggregator. Valerie is not one to throw digital aggregators under the bus. However, she does recommend that operators take a look at the ROI on those dollars spent. “Digital aggregators are expensive, and not the easiest leads for sales teams to work given the consumer’s experience with it,” says Valerie. “While I’m not advocating abandoning them, I do recommend that you take a good hard look at the cost to move-in. What you find may be surprising.”
- **Event marketing.** Most operators, according to Valerie, are not getting the ROI from their events that they should be getting. Although she sees that starting to change. “More and more communities are realizing that holding ‘wine and cheese receptions’ or ‘luau’ onsite isn’t effective in terms of getting in high quality residents,” says Valerie. “They are finding that approaching this differently by hyper-targeting consumers well beyond basic demographics, incorporating consumer behaviors, and hosting at a neutral site with an educational call to action is driving highly qualified leads with stronger conversion rates,” she explains. “The ROI numbers we see from the events we produce for our clients are proof of that.”

As you may know, LeadingResponse produces off-site dinner events on educational topics for senior living communities. What’s cool about what they do is that they are able to produce an audience for these events based on analysis of consumer behavior. The result is a highly qualified group of people sitting at your dinner seminar. And these are leads exclusive to the community, not shared with anyone else. Valerie recommends that communities who are heavily invested in digital aggregators consider taking 10% of that budget and explore off-site educational dinner events.

I have to admit this makes a lot of sense. If you can get quality face time with your most desired prospects over a relaxing dinner event, it gives you access to build rapport, trust and engage with these folks and keep the momentum going even after they leave.

But what I really like about Valerie’s insight is the idea of taking your last few budgets and asking some tough questions. What’s working? What’s not working?

“The decision to change up the numbers and distribution in your next budget can have a positive ripple effect,” says Valerie. “It refreshes your approach and helps your team re-allocate monies to where a more positive ROI may be found.” “Those communities who decide to take a ‘Plan B’ approach to their budgets and fold in a few offsite seminar events, are always glad they did,” Valerie says. “It gets the results.”



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