



Your Most Important Amenity is a Liability

By Susan Saldibar

To me it seems like there's a lot of "talking the talk" going on as far as the dining experience goes in senior living, but not a lot of "walking the walk", so to speak. In other words, a disconnect between what you say is great about your dining and what actually is being produced in your kitchen.

Well, now I find out that many senior living communities don't even do a good job of talking the talk! RonnDa Peters, VP of Marketing and Sales for [Strategic Dining Services](#) (a Senior Housing Forum partner) recently pointed out to me multiple websites that make their dining experiences sound more like something Nurse Ratched would dole out in the Cuckoo's Nest. Here's a real-life example:

Dietary Services

Residents at all our facilities have the ability to partake of our dietary services – offering healthy and delicious meals three times per day. Private dining services for family gatherings can be accommodated.

Eeew. First, whose idea was it to replace "dining" with "dietary services"? Then we have the word "facilities"; a big no-no when you are a hospitality-based community. Then, we are invited to "partake of our dietary services", which sounds like something you wouldn't want to "partake" of. The word "delicious" floats out there suspiciously, then "gatherings accommodated". Wow. Let me out!

RonnDa agrees. It's about both the experience itself as well as how it's marketed. "I've spoken to many senior living community CEOs who will talk about how good their food is only to admit sheepishly that they, themselves, seldom have a meal at their own community."

Is your food really an “amenity”?

So, the first problem is that not enough CEOs have actually done a personal audit of the dining experience in their communities. “At conferences I share a picture of a beautiful serving of salmon, garnished with fresh fruit salsa and ask CEOs ‘What are you having for dinner tonight?’,” RonnDa says. “Then I’ll ask, ‘What are your residents eating tonight?’ They need reminding that many of their residents used to be business people, like them, dining out at great restaurants. Now they are, in effect, taking that experience away from them.”

She urges senior living leadership to do their own audit of their dining experience. Evaluate the environment. What is the ambience? How is the food served? How is it presented on the plate? Is it fresh or pre-packaged? And, finally, how does it taste? The answers to those questions will help you determine if your food deserves to be called an “amenity”, rather than a liability.

And, in today’s world, it had better be an amenity. RonnDa points to a recent article in Senior Living Executive Magazine - 10 Amenities Adult Children Seek in a Senior Living Community. The first amenity listed? Food and beverage!

So, what if you have a great dining experience. Now what?

So, assuming a community is going the extra mile to prepare and present delicious meals from fresh ingredients, what are they missing in terms of marketing?

“I always look at websites to see what they say about dining,” RonnDa tells me. Makes sense, since that’s where family members will go to evaluate and compare communities. According to a recent study by BIA/Kelsey, 97% of consumers go online to research products and services before they make a buying decision. So, the question is: What will they see when they get to your website? “I’ve visited countless websites and I see the same stale phrases describing their dining services,” says RonnDa. “No differentiation. And they want to set themselves apart in a competitive marketplace?”

Instead of popping in generic phrases to describe your dining experience, RonnDa suggests communities use more emotionally engaging words and phrases. Here are a few examples:

- *Celebrate made-from-scratch cooking; freshly baked breads and naturally healthy dining options*
- *Our own Chef Benjamin prepares each meal from scratch, using fresh spices to bring out the best flavors as well as keeping them naturally low in fat and sodium.*
- *Working with local farmers, our culinary team prepares fresh seasonal dishes that our residents have enjoyed for years*
- *We offer a variety of dining options, featuring casual bistro cafe and bar, formal restaurant dining and coffee shop*

“I could get even more creative with these examples. But the point is, words matter,” says RonnDa. “Everyone talks about how fresh and delicious their food is, but operators need to ask themselves two questions: Is your food really an amenity? And, if so, how are you describing it? Remember, it’s the powerful adjectives and metaphors you use that open your doors and bring people in,” she adds. I agree.

So, what delicious food is in your kitchen? And what delicious words are on your website?



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