



# Residents Have Some Advice: Will You Take It?

*By Susan Saldibar*

I had a really great conversation recently with Suzanne Viox, Executive Director of Link-Age Connect (a Senior Housing Forum partner). Suzanne has been conducting focus groups for Link-Age Connect with the same group of senior adults for over four years. So, as you can imagine, she's grown close to them (they even invite her into their homes).

That exposure to the unfiltered voices of older Americans has made Suzanne what I would call a true "evangelist". She's the kind of person who, when someone asks her about what an older adult might think, responds with "'Ask them!' That's the whole point of what I do for a living," she tells me. "You must get to know them. Speak to them!"

Suzanne covered a lot of ground and offered some great insight, so I could go on and on with this. But a few points really stood out. Here they are. (Note: the "we" refers to the industry as a whole.)

1. **We need to dive deeper and get personal.** "Senior living does a phenomenal job of making the community look great, with great food, transportation, and so on," Suzanne says. "But the key to residents living a vibrant and fulfilling life is truly knowing what THEY want. Asking them, how they want to live, what aspirations they have, those things that have always been important to them throughout their lives."
2. **We make assumptions.** "It happens everywhere," Suzanne says. "You'll be sitting in a Panera Bread and see older adults having coffee. If we perceive older adults to be struggling with anything -- getting up, going out the door -- we make assumptions that they need help, even though they didn't ask for it," she adds. So, in effect, what we're really saying (well-intended as it might be) is, "What can we do for you so that you don't have to do anything?"

Understanding that at least in their minds, they may not be struggling at all is so important. None of us want people to tell us that we need to be “fixed” or something is wrong with us, Suzanne explains. As we age, we learn to adapt to alternate methods of doing those things that are important to us. She is quick to point out that this DOES NOT mean that it is true for everyone. Some older adults would like better or easier solutions. We just should not assume that how we see it, is how they see it. Points well made.

Another assumption is that when you get older you become a different person. That’s not necessarily true, according to Suzanne. Overall, we do not change as we age. We are the person we’ve always been. “So, if I don’t like the latest and greatest technology, it is highly likely that I have never liked it,” Suzanne says.

3. **Don’t be afraid to change the status quo.** The “older” adult today is much different from just five to ten years ago. They are much more engaged and active in their later years. Social media, technology, and other factors have contributed to this. Many want to be involved in their communities in different ways than in the past. “It’s important to involve your residents as much as you possibly can,” Suzanne says. “It is their home, they want to be a part of the decision making, they want to feel as if they have a purpose there, and contribute to the success of the community.”

### **Assuming you agree with these points, where do you start?**

Even if you agree with all this, these kinds of changes can’t happen overnight. I asked Suzanne how communities can take steps to find new and exciting ways of interacting with older adults. “First, do a self-assessment,” she says. “How many authentically personal things do you know about each resident? To provide what they need in order to thrive, we need to know them on a very deep and personal level.” And these questions should be asked of everyone in the community, from the ED to the kitchen staff and so on.

She also recommends that you consider allowing your residents to take the lead in functions or activities that traditionally staff or management lead. For example, a monthly resident meeting can be facilitated by the resident council and they introduce the staff members for updates.

Suzanne sees many communities starting to tap into the life-long experience and expertise of their residents as well. “For example, here in Cincinnati, we have many large corporations and their retired executives are living in many of the greater Cincinnati area senior living communities,” she tells me. “The expansive knowledge of marketing could be utilized in creating and launching personal campaigns for your community.”

She also sees those who are tech-savvy conducting classes for others to learn about technology and devices as well as how to use it. “The possibilities are endless if you know your residents’ life expertise and who is eager to share that with others,” she says.

Deep personal relationships are meaningful in all our lives, but even more so in the lives of our older adults. To hear the words, “Nobody has asked my opinion about something like that in years,” should never come from the mouth of anyone.

“Authentic and meaningful personal relationships with the residents in our community gives us the opportunity to care for them better, opens the door to more effective marketing of our communities, allows our residents to be more involved in the community, and allows them to be a driving force of our business decisions,” Suzanne says.

And, ultimately, it gives our residents what we all want in life, a sense of belonging and purpose.