



Are You a Dining Hypocrite?

By Susan Saldibar

This industry needs food critics. Seriously. Wouldn't it be great if some of our most respected critics would just start dropping in, unannounced, to check out the cuisine and dining ambiance of their local senior living communities? They could even give star ratings, just like for regular restaurants.

I can think of at least two people who would probably agree with me: David Koelling, President of Strategic Dining Services, and RonnDa Peters, VP of Marketing and Sales there. They are well aware of the disconnect between the importance of the dining experience to residents and the resources communities allocate to it. And the industry isn't helping.

Case in point: Strategic Dining (a Senior Housing Forum partner) hosted a session at a recent senior living conference in California. Out of 35 sessions, only 1 was on dining. During that session, David asked his audience to raise their hands if they thought dining was the most important driver in resident satisfaction. "Every hand went up," he told me in a recent conversation. "But they aren't dedicating the resources," he adds.

And yet, survey after survey continues to point to the importance of the dining experience to residents and families. RonnDa noted a recent Argentum report, "Amenities Adult Children Seek in Communities", that lists quality of dining as the number one amenity adult children want for their parents entering assisted living communities. They prefer dining with a restaurant-style atmosphere and menu options. "Resident satisfaction surveys almost always

show dining at the top of the list of what's important to residents and family members," she says.

But here's the reality, according to David and RonnDa:

- The industry provides little to no opportunities for continuing education for culinary skills and dining services. David found in a local college catalog 22 classes on compliance to state/fed regulations and only 1 on dining services!
- Management cuts dining budgets but still expect the culinary team to deliver a quality dining experience. The support just isn't there.
- Improper staffing. Many don't provide dedicated dining service employees. Instead, they have care staff provide service, without offering proper service training.
- There's a wage gap. The average pay for a cook in a restaurant is \$15-\$20+ per hour. The average pay for a cook in senior living is \$8.50-\$11 per hour. "When you pay 20-30% below market for a cook and yet you say, 'we want great food', resources don't match the rhetoric," David says.

The Obvious Question . . .

Why aren't operators allocating more resources to dining? Here are some reasons that bear noting:

- The benefits are hard to quantify. Fair enough. Both RonnDa and David acknowledge that it takes time to realize the benefits of improving dining. People say, "Show me the 10% increase in move-ins, but it's not that simple," says David. "It takes time to develop a reputation as having a great dining experience. That's what will turn into move-ins. You need to execute at a higher level and show the commitment to dining excellence to build your reputation and set yourself apart in the marketplace. And you need the resources to connect those dots."
- Leadership still uses industry "standards" as their investment benchmark. But that's a low watermark, according to David. It makes everything look like overspend. "You collect all this data from NIC that shows the average spend per resident, and if you're coming in over that, you're going to hear, 'Hey, what's going on?' What's going on is that the 'average' is just too low. Existing expense standards don't cut it. Don't dumb down to average standards," David says.
- There's a disconnect between leadership and the team. There is a general lack of involvement by leadership in their own dining experience. "We ask operators, 'What do you think when you dine at a fine restaurant, and the food and service are poor?'" asks

RonnDa. “Relate your own dining experiences to the experiences of your residents. Focus on hospitality and delivering great food.”

So, where do we go with all this? Is there any hope on the horizon? “Leadership needs to take the lead,” RonnDa says. “It’s the corporate team that makes those decisions and hands them down,” RonnDa says. “There is little to no incentive for dining teams. Many feel they just do what they can with what they are given. They are not part of the planning, budgeting, and solution process. If they’re not part of the whole process of creating the best dining program, their engagement is limited. Leadership can educate themselves to understand what it takes to create excellence in dining, on a daily basis, then get the resources the community team needs to accomplish that excellence.” she adds.

For those who take serious steps to turn their dining experience around, the upside is potentially huge, according to David. “We have worked with EDs who say, ‘If I had the best restaurant in town right here, I wouldn’t need a sales team’,” says David. “If they really mean that we can work with them to acquire the skillsets and resources to turn it into something that really moves the dial.”

And don’t forget the idea of food critics. How fast would operators click into action mode to improve their dining if they knew a nationally recognized food critic was going to rate their community in his/her next column?