



Is Your Receptionist Costing You Move-Ins?

By Wendy D'Alessandro

Through a condescending smile, the assisted living community's receptionist crooned a half-hearted 'hello there' to my mother. Then, she made a series of blunders:

- She barely made eye contact with my mom and kept her hands folded close to her waist; no handshake was offered.
- She wasn't interested in what my mom had to say even though she was the decision maker.
- She insisted on focusing on my sister and me and even offered us a handshake and a pleasant smile.
- She disappeared for a really long time, leaving us to wonder if she had forgotten we were there. Other staff came and went but no one acknowledged us.

My mom's tired brown eyes communicated to me what I had sensed within 15 seconds of arriving: "There's no way we're moving your grandfather here."

And yet, this particular community had earned a place on my mom's list of top 3 assisted living communities. What happened?

I shared this story with Debra Draves, co-founder and CEO of LookingforCare.com.

She says sometimes people forget how these initial conversations can be the prospect's very first time sharing his/her family's story or their first introduction to the senior living industry.

"Prospects are fragile, emotional . . . likely worried about costs, afraid of making a wrong choice, and could be dealing with treacherous icebergs of family dysfunction lurking below the

waterline,” Debra says. “The last thing your community wants to do is make that person feel processed or not heard.”

Debra was right. My mom was fragile and stressed. I was feeling protective of her and doing the delicate dance of being supportive but not overbearing. Only a trained, experienced receptionist or sales rep could have observed and managed the dynamics. Regardless, I felt the receptionist was careless with my mom, not only as a stressed out adult child but as a coveted quality lead.

When quality leads come knocking, is your team prepared?

True aggregator sites like LookingforCare.com allow consumers like my mom to do their due diligence by researching their options, comparing costs and amenities, and contacting those communities directly when they’re ready to take the next step. “But it’s up to our subscribers – providers – to take the baton from there,” Debra says.

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Every Touchpoint Counts

Prospects consider three elements in the decision funnel: location, price, and how a community makes them feel, says Debra. “The person greeting family members and answering the phone is as critical to your marketing as your community’s branding, messaging, and online presence.”

“If you feel comfortable with your receptionist tackling the follow-up on one of your referral-agent leads, then you have a superstar and by all means have that person be the point-of-first contact for your inquiries,” she says. “But if you’re at all unsure, then don’t relegate your next move-in to your receptionist.”

Sometimes, the reception desk experiences high-turnover or the demands of the job make it impossible to give special attention to each caller or visitor. A simple solution is to route call inquiries to the sales rep’s direct line or cell phone or immediately connect the visitor with the sales rep.

Better yet, set receptionists up to succeed by providing consistent training and a clear procedure to follow on overflow calls and greeting prospects. Develop best practices for receptionists to “receive” callers and visitors far beyond “standard greetings.”

For example, this may be the receptionist’s 27th time answering the phone this morning, but this is the first time the caller is reaching out. With every call, the receptionist needs to be authentic, positive, genuine, sincere and prepared to serve as a good resource. This is true for engaging with in-person prospects too.

“This is an extremely powerful connection to make. One that, even if it turns out that the community isn’t the best match, the sales team gets to be a consultant and provide resources . . . that’s how word-of-mouth is developed,” Debra says.

Debra, alongside her customer engagement team, listens to subscribers’ calls and offers guidance as needed. She says most receptionists do a phenomenal job engaging prospects but she suggests receptionists and sales teams keep in mind the following:

- Speak clearly and loudly enough for the caller to hear, but be mindful of “baby-talk” or sounding condescending
- Respond to callers with empathy, kindness, and patience, and if your desk is too busy for this, then re-route calls to a team member capable of engaging
- ASK PERMISSION -- Politely ask callers if it’s okay to place them on a brief hold before transferring the call
- Politely ask the caller for a name and number in case they get disconnected before transferring the call
- Announce to the caller that you are transferring them to (insert person’s name). Don’t say “the salesman” or “the marketing guy”
- Be prepared to answer basic questions, such as where the community is located and the types of care offered
- Inquire about the callers’ interest in the community and invite them to lunch

Bad Habits are Hard to Break

Debra points out that focusing on chasing referral-agent-driven inquiries can lull communities into some dangerous habits.

“If sales teams are used to calling out, it doesn’t take much to lose the critical customer-service vigilance that is honed during repeated in-person and verbal interactions. “Our platform drives inquiries, but only teams prepared, and trained team members, can move a prospect through the sales process.”

Eventually, my mom and I visited an assisted living community and were greeted by one of those phenomenal receptionists who connected us with the sales director who then picked up right where the receptionist left off. We left the community feeling like the weight of the world had been lifted from our shoulders. Two weeks later, my grandfather had moved into his new home.

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