

The difference was like night and day. The last marketing director struggled to keep her head above water. There was too much to do, too many demands. Her performance showed, too. Two moves per month became the norm, and her administrator wasn't much help either. "It's a very competitive environment right now. Two hundred have opened new assisted-living units in our market area in the last 12 months," she exclaimed.

But like turning on a switch, the new marketing director knew just what to do. Her call-backs produced results, her selling strategies led to new deposits and the revival of old leads long forgotten. The biggest difference was the fact that the second marketing director had formal sales training, and a sales strategy.

Companies old and new in the assisted-living industry show me day in and day out that the dollars won't be spared when it comes to the right image. They pay for nice collateral materials, fancy advertising and a great logo design, but when it comes to funding a good sales program, there's little money and even less understanding of what it takes to make the most important cog in the marketing wheel work.

The Seven Deadly Sins of Sales

Assisted-living companies are looking for corporate and regional marketing people all the time. Just recently, a recruiter told me of five regional sales positions needing to be filled by five different companies. It wasn't the first time those positions have been open, nor will it be the last. Why? Because the first deadly sin is that these companies and many others are **hiring product trainers, not sales trainers.**

Sales trainers know how to ask for the sale, and how to train people to do the same. Unfortunately, when you ask someone who

The Seven Deadly Sins of Selling Assisted Living

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knows advertising or public relations to become a sales trainer or a salesperson, they invariably end up selling products—"sticks and bricks" as we say in the business. You know you've got a real sales trainer when you hear them talking about sales technique, selling strategies and relationship selling.

The **One-Shot Course on Selling** is another deadly sin that companies make: "Take a course, learn some of this stuff and impart it to our people." The first 15 years I was in this business, I thought I knew something about selling. It wasn't until I started learning from some of the pros, inside and outside this business, that I really

started to understand selling. Stop the one-time-a-year sales-training program. It doesn't work at the corporate level or the community level. When was the last time you committed to having an outsider audit your internal sales efforts at the corporate level and audited the sales efforts at the community level? How about course training on just selling?

"I can't do it, but I sure can teach it." Because our industry is so young and buildings have filled at a relatively fast clip, sales has been a secondary thought process. However, not for Peg Thompson and her Alabama-based assisted-living company. In my opinion, Thompson is the best in the business at conveying the sales process to her people. She knows it, demonstrates it and is successful at it. Selling isn't a dirty word in her company, and it is successful as a result.

I couldn't believe my ears one day when I heard the retirement counselor at a soon-to-be-opened community tell the prospect, "You'd better make up your mind about this decision to move in." I could hear the prospect reply, "Well, yes, I do need to make up my mind, but your old-fashioned way of selling is a real turn off." **Outdated sales techniques** get more people in trouble when it comes to selling. It's like wearing plaid pants—everyone sees you coming, and your less than sincere style is a real loser. We all know how smart the prospect and her family is. They have heard it all. Don't let your sales people put our industry one step above the proverbial used-car image. Teach them today's selling strategies.

"I'll take you just as you are." Don't be like me, be yourself—that's some of the best advice you can give a sales person. Let them create their own style and personality. Too often I see seasoned sales people attempting to mold new sales people into a certain style.

It can't be done and shouldn't be. Live with a salesperson's imperfections; some of the best in the business have a level of confidence that borders on arrogance. I can deal with certain personalities when results are there—so should you.

The quick-fix sales people are usually short-timers. Too often, you will have high-energy sales people come in and literally burn themselves—and you—out. They try to do too much, too fast. A good salesperson is like a bottle of wine—he gets better with time. Give him the time to establish himself and build confidence in what he does, and your community will reap rewards for years ahead. The time taken to train, orient and nurture a successful salesperson along will pay dividends like you've never seen. I have seen good salespeople increase the census by two to three people a month. That can easily mean \$70,000 to \$80,000 more a year in revenues.

A Look at What's Working in Assisted-Living Sales Today

As a consultant in the assisted-living industry, I have the fortune (and sometimes the ill fortune) to experience a whole range of selling situations. Some of the best

strategies and observations I have picked up on include:

- **It's the re-tour, stupid!** Sure we may get a deposit on the first tour, but the real work and reward comes from that re-tour. Take a look at the success or lack of re-tour numbers of your sales people. If they are good, it is likely that so, too, is your move-in traffic. If not, here is a good place to dissect.
- **Please, please, please sell the benefits.** I still hear all of the great points about the building look, how unique your company is, why you are different. Show me with those intangibles, those soft, warm and fuzzy points. Tell me what's in it for me.
- **Use those testimonials.** Better yet, make sure to introduce some of those great residents who love your place. Have three or four resident apartments available to show. Having that resident show guests around the property is a great testimonial. When closing the sale, use examples and testimonials from actual residents and families, showing how they overcame key objections.
- **Just ask for the sale.** Many people want to perfect that closing technique. How do I say it just right? What close do I use in certain cases? Don't worry; just

get comfortable with asking. My favorite close is simply, "Mrs. Stephens, let's just give it a try." That's all. Then shut up and listen.

So often I hear people tell me that many of their prospects were just looking. I say that's hogwash. How many people do you know who go out to assisted-living communities in order to plan for a move two years from now? Everyone who walks in that door is looking to move themselves or their mom in—it's just a matter of time. If you think of it that way, figure out how to work with each prospect individually, and put a strategic sales plan together for each prospect. You will avoid many of the seven deadly sins and your success in selling will jump. Happy selling! ♦

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