

## Fresh Ideas on Making a Great First Impression - By Gary Pelton

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As a hotel manager turned assisted living administrator, I have a unique perspective on what it takes to make a good first impression in both the assisted living and hotel industries.

When I joined The Hamister Group, Inc. in 2006 as an assisted living administrator, I had 24 years of hospitality experience, most of which was spent in management positions at full- and select-service hotels across the country. My recently acquired assisted living experience has given me a fresh perspective on making a good impression in hotel sales.

### **Staff Involvement Increases Credibility**

Positive encounters with staff other than the administrator or sales person are crucial in assisted living. We ask all staff to acknowledge both touring customers and the tour guide, and to say a few kind words if possible. If the input of certain department managers—such as the Director of Nursing or the Food Service Director—is of special significance to the touring family, we may ask them to participate in a sit-down discussion. Although staff involvement in sales is not always possible in hotels, where most customers are unlikely to visit before making a decision, the technique can be used with great success in attaining group business. Duane Rankin, one of my hotel colleagues, regularly involves other staff members in hotel visits when appropriate. Duane recently had a group of gamers stay at his hotel. The group was concerned about electricity problems because their equipment drew more power than most hotels could provide. Duane asked Ed Horn, his maintenance director, to join the tour, Ed spoke with the customer, assessed his needs, and guaranteed that he could provide a solution. The technique proved effective: Duane booked the group and received a letter from the customer commending his extra effort.

### **Customers Sell**

In assisted living, it is fatal to forget that present customers contribute to the first impression. It's not enough for staff to be well-dressed and friendly. Residents are also selling, whether they realize it or not. If your customers look unhappy or disheveled, prospective customers will notice and fear that their family member will not receive proper attention in your residence.

I ask residents to speak to new customers on our behalf. We have residents that have been with us for 15 years. When I see these long-term residents during a tour, I ask them to tell the new customers what they think of their home and their care. Customer comments are priceless: they carry more weight with new customers than anything my staff or I can say.

Again, one might think that involving present customers is not feasible in hotel sales. Let's think more creatively: hotels may not be able to involve present customers in the sales process orally, but they can certainly ask for written comments. Testimonials can be posted on websites, used in advertisements, or distributed by sales people.

### **Creating Comfort**

In hospitality, we all know about the importance of creating a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere. Comfort, however, is not just about upgraded linens and fluffy pillows. In assisted living, we are always reminded that comfort is also about personal attention: little things like using a customer's name during a discussion, showing that you know the names of other customers as well, and listening to customer needs instead of guessing. It's about being down-to-earth and showing people that you can solve their problems because you have successfully handled situations similar to their own in the past. Comfort is an important contributor to a good first impression.

### **Less Is More**

Finally, I would like to emphasize the following: while it is necessary to be warm and empathetic, one should never be too bubbly in sales. I see this very clearly in assisted living: overly extroverted people come across as insincere and have trouble closing the sale. People who listen with understanding, do everything they can to meet the specific needs of a customer, and follow through on promises are highly successful in both industries. Creating a good first impression is often less about what we say and more about listening and fulfilling commitments.

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