

Six Mealtime Truths

You Can't Ignore for Success

They finally get it. The word is out. It's *not* satisfactory to plop down a dry cheese sandwich for lunch at any senior living community. This is their home. All seniors deserve the best mealtimes, and the dining room is where a community shines. The glow happens with well-trained staff. And a positive experience for residents translates to a favorable bottom line for the company.

These principles are reflected in my *6 Truths About Your Business That Cannot Be Ignored*. I'll briefly outline them below, saving perhaps the biggest truth for last.

TRUTH #2

Residents focus on mealtimes.

Evaluations show that residents spend 60 percent of their day focused on mealtimes. Remember, the dining room is not just a place to fill their hungry bellies, it's also a place to socialize, to meet new people and, for many, mealtime is the only time they leave their rooms.

When I was doing my graduate research, residents shared with me that mealtime was when they found out who was now streaking their hair with the color pink, who went to the doctor and was nervously awaiting test results, and who was ready to entertain us with their fish stories. These are the moments when people bond. Family visits can be sparse in this busy world, so other residents help fill the daily space that family once occupied. Coming from different backgrounds, cultures, and places is now a point of interest, not a separating factor among residents.

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Cindy Heilman, MS, NDTR, FAND is CEO of Higher Standards, LLC and is the creator of Kind Dining training. Learn more and subscribe to their newsletter at www.HigherStandards.org



Interplay with the staff is vital. It is the staff members who take the place of family in the sense that they can draw out shy new residents by personally introducing them to others. Although the staff has various duties throughout the day and may think they are too busy to interact with residents, the block of time when they are serving meals is an important nurturing role for them to embrace.

A caregiver who sat next to me during a flight shared this story:

“My client moved into an assisted living facility,” she said. “For the next 20 years she ate alone in her room. This resulted from the first day she arrived in the dining room. She went to sit at one table and was told, ‘you can’t sit here, I am holding it for a friend.’ She walked over to another table with empty chairs and was told the same thing. My client felt so embarrassed and rejected, that she went to her room and never stepped foot in the dining room again.”

A well-trained staff member could have prevented this painful situation. He would have known the key person to introduce her to, and would have saved the facility time and money by not needing staff to bring meals to her room. Unfortunately, the unhappy resident could not leave this community, but I’ll bet she didn’t recommend that company to anyone else.

Happy residents *don’t* leave to go to another community. They *do* spread the good word, as do their families. This can save up to \$15,000 a month in lost revenue. In surveys taken, 98 percent of respondents said that food service was

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Cindy Heilman will deliver two breakout sessions at ANFP’s Annual Conference & Expo (ACE) in Las Vegas this June. Her sessions will address ‘Mealtimes: Your Most Effective 60 Minutes’ and ‘3 Hospitality Secrets That Attract Residents, Retain Staff, and Drive Positive Results.’ For details and to register, visit www.ANFPonline.org/ACE17

very important in their final selection of a community, and 91 percent revealed the attitude of the staff mattered.¹

My knowledge comes from both formal education and hands-on experience, learning quickly that management is a major factor in working with the staff and residents. It's a team effort. Every thought, word, and deed is vital in creating a balance.

TRUTH #3

Recognize the gap between expectations and service.

It's time to dissolve the gap between the residents expecting to receive high quality service and the serving staff unwilling or untrained to provide it. Staff often does not realize how important their service is to the future success of a community. Service is an area of competition that will show the success in one community and the failure in another one. A well-trained team will enhance resident happiness and staff satisfaction. Everyone wins. A good team does this with pride.

TRUTH #4

Individuals today demand and deserve higher quality.

The CMS Final Rule for Food and Nutrition Services stresses the person-centered approach in long-term care communities. These requirements focus on responding to a dining room full of *individuals*, many with fascinating stories to tell, rather than a collective group of seniors. Many people moving into communities today have traveled around the world. They've been exposed to an assortment of cultures. Residents today want the option of selecting the foods that reflect these cultures. Their palates are comfortable from years of patronizing ethnic restaurants. They have celebrated and shared countless special events at the table and wish to continue this habit.

In my early years as a dietary manager, remembering a favorite dessert for a Greatest Generation resident was exceptional and meant to impress. More recently, the healthier, wealthier, and higher educated residents have come into the picture. One of my favorite Italian proverbs is "It's around the table that friends understand best

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RESIDENTS' PALATES

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1. *Future of Foodservice in Long-Term Care, Nutrition & Foodservice Education Foundation (NFEF 2013)*

the warmth of being together.” Think of any holiday dinner table to which you pulled up your chair. It’s an instant remembrance of happy times that stays with you forever. That essence can be created in all levels of senior dining. This is the most significant service desired and demanded today by consumers, industry initiatives, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

TRUTH #5

You’re most dependent on your lowest paid, least trained staff.

Servers and other ancillary staff are on the mealtime frontline, responsible for the relationships that are so critical to resident and family satisfaction. These employees are the conduit between the management, kitchen, and customers. They are the most visible employees of the community and are challenged with making the residents content, to make the organization complete. They are the central figures in dining quality.

Physical changes, fancying up the décor, and adding cafes and Happy Hours to the residence will not replace endearing dining service. Someone once told me in reference to poorly trained servers, “It’s like building a Formula One race car and putting the Little Old Lady from Pasadena behind the wheel.”

TRUTH #6

Investing in your employees is the most effective way to accomplish culture change.

Professional training of your employees creates a team spirit, one where certified nursing assistants (CNAs), and attendant servers, kitchen staff, and management each respect the others’ work for a collective goal. It creates trust and consistency that fosters maximum potential, reflecting in that most important place: the dining room. Employees who believe in their worth are part of a team effort, are more committed, look forward to coming to work, and carry a positive attitude that overflows on everyone. They stay.

A well-known adage to remember is this, “Good service can save a bad meal, but a good meal cannot save bad service.” Think of your own experience when spending a lavish amount for dinner and you receive unexpected bad service. Now think of your residents who are “out” to dinner (or breakfast or lunch) each day.

TRUTH #1

Mealtimes market your community.

I saved a very important truth for last. Your dining room speaks louder than any expensive advertising on which you may depend. We know instinctively, and executives admit this with enthusiasm, that mealtimes are the highlight of a resident’s day. This reality can unlock the powerful potential for tremendous success in marketing at every residential community.

Actual mealtimes are the power outshining formal showcase lunches. Your servers are key figures in creating this important attribute. Communities that value time spent in the dining environment as a marketing tool help their entire staff learn new skills and accept new responsibilities around mealtime. Very often only minor physical changes need to be applied. Changing the menu to fit resident preferences and expanding service hours may be two major adjustments.

Managers and ancillary staff need to be included in the training. Your marketing department should be informed of culinary goals to attract new residents and the need to support servers’ daily marketing efforts. This will create a tighter bond between all departments. Servers will actually enjoy personalizing the dining experience for seniors. They will view their role in a larger context when they see the results blooming before them, knowing they are part of making their community grow and prosper.

Professional training will boost the guest revenue from family members and local citizens. Good news travels fast. Staff will be proud that their efforts will increase the number of meals served, thanks to their personal input of serving. By supporting more socialization in the dining room, a better clinical outcome will be achieved. Every senior living community can embrace higher standards in dining service and succeed. It takes intentional focus on shifting attitudes throughout the entire organization.

A 2010 study published in *Seniors Housing & Care Journal* reported facilities that best exemplified sustained culture change for two years or more outperformed facilities that did not. This end result will show extra revenue coming from increased incomes, more private pay occupancy, better clinical outcomes, reduced food costs, less staff turnover, a stronger position in the local market, and greater resident satisfaction.

Each organization has the opportunity to succeed and profit when it aligns its business strategy with an intentional focus on the one area their clients universally value: mealtime. ■