

Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

It's Time to Rebrand Senior Living

By Cindy Hale, Senior Vice President,
Chief Marketing and Experience Officer,
Seniorlink

Senior Living - June 2022

About the Author



Cindy Hale is currently the SVP, Chief Marketing and Experience Officer for Seniorlink. Seniorlink is the largest structured family caregiver and caregiver technology company in the United States today. Prior to joining Seniorlink, Cindy served as the Vice President of Marketing, Sales Enablement, and Revenue Management for AlerisLife (formally, Five Star Senior Living), and the VP, Chief Marketing officer for Walden Behavioral Care. [LinkedIn](#)

It's Time to Rebrand Senior Living



<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/group-retired-seniors-attending-art-class-1380516614>

Few industries have been as rocked by misperception and misrepresentation as the senior living industry.

Even before Covid, the senior living industry was suffering from an identity crisis. In the past and still today, the media continually clusters all types of senior living for aged adults into a large abyss often referred to as nursing homes. Look no further than last year's Netflix hit, "[*I Care a Lot*](#)" as just one example of how today's media continues to negatively influence people, showcasing industry misperceptions. The lack of informed education and realistic representations of the senior living industry today prevents individuals from making the life-enhancing decisions that can come with senior community living.

Blending the perception of your grandmother's nursing home of yesterday with today's media perceptions, we can achieve an industry that will benefit from authentic representation to more realistically portray the benefits of senior living.

Senior Living: Facts Versus Fiction

There are stunning statistics that support the need for a new and honest narrative around what senior living truly provides aged adults today.

[More than 40 percent](#) of seniors regularly experience loneliness, according to a University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) study. This feeling of separation and disconnection from others can predict serious health problems and even death. Researchers at UCSF found that loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26%, and lacking social connections is as damaging to health as smoking [15 cigarettes a day](#). While 27% of older adults reported feeling isolated from others in October 2018, that number more than doubled to 56% between March and June of 2020, during the start of Covid lockdowns.

Yet, while today's senior living communities offer a very real antidote to loneliness, older adults tend to shy away because current notions of what senior living is – a place where “old” people go when they lose their relevance and independence – scares them away. In truth, senior living is the opposite; it provides vibrant social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual activities that help older adults stay active and engaged. When seniors tour our communities, they're often surprised at how different the reality is from their original perception. The comment shared most often: *I wish I had moved sooner.*

Below are some comments that represent the positive feedback on this transition to senior living:

"I feel like I found a new family when I moved. Things have never been better than they are at this time."

—Elaine M.

"My father lived at the community for three years. He volunteered in the library, took classes in poetry and short story writing, and since he loved to sing, joined a chorus. He felt surrounded by smart, interesting people with which to form friendships."

—Kathryn D.

These anecdotes are just some of the overwhelming reasons that the senior living industry must take ownership of the industry brand, and by extension their own brands,

and deliver a truly authentic view of the joy and fulfillment senior living can bring to aged adults who are seeking to live their best lives.

To be clear, senior living marketing and branding must play a pivotal role in changing the mindset of what senior living looks like and delivers today.

Using Authenticity to Rebrand Senior Living

“Committing to an authentic marketing strategy, intentionally co-creating marketing campaigns with the customers, has been a winning approach for its honesty and effectiveness,” according to Zehra Abid Wood, AlerisLife, Senior Vice President of Strategy and Transformation. “In place of bland commentary and stock images, the content team meets directly with older adult customers to build blogs, ads, social content, videos, and more that reflect their true lifestyle and aspirations. Older adults share their past and present stories, provide snippets from their day-to-day lives, and describe their reasons for choosing community living. They participate in photo and video shoots that bring to life their experiences.”

Beth Huck, Vice President of Sales and Marketing at Omega Senior Living speaks to the power of video as an important addition to bringing senior living today to life for people in the decision-making process. “When we share videos of real life within our communities, people are able to appreciate the benefits of life in a senior community today. It is a very powerful approach to senior living marketing today.”

Eric Varin, Vice President of Client Success at One Day, a video company whose goal is to empower senior living companies to become storytellers through video, shared that “people retain 95% of a message when they watch it in a video, compared to 10% when reading it in the text.” Clearly, video is an important channel to help build authenticity of senior living today.

According to Linda Watts, Senior Director of Content Strategy for Five Star Senior Living, a division of AlerisLife, “We have learned the nuance of language and how important it is to speak directly and respectfully to the seniors themselves, not around them to their family members. Seniors’ biggest fear is losing independence, and terms like being ‘put in a home’ or ‘facility’ immediately push them away. Instead, we co-create content with residents – their stories and language and images – to shine a light on what senior living today truly embodies for today’s more savvy older adults.”

Senior Living Provides Community and So Much More

The pandemic didn't just exacerbate the social isolation and loneliness older adults often feel – it also contributed to other health complications, such as memory deficits and muscle loss for seniors living on their own. Interestingly, older adults living in senior living communities showed lesser degrees of loss in each of these areas because programming changed but didn't stop.

Seniors were offered activities through community television or Zoom channels or in safe outdoor settings. Even just the walk to the dining room to pick up food meant some degree of daily movement, but most senior living residents had opportunities and assistance to do much more.

Yet the image in the media looked much different. The media beating focused on complications that occurred in communities. It ignored the very real potential dangers of living alone and without activity. It failed to highlight the very real and much-needed benefits of a community setting.

Meanwhile, senior living marketing has largely focused on the real estate features of properties – the beautiful lobby or courtyard pool. And while those can certainly inspire interest in a community, the real benefits are in the activities and vibrant lifestyle older adults will find within its walls.

Although the amenities and experiences offered at senior living communities vary widely from location to location, region to region, across the board, older adults can find plenty to do. Most independent and assisted-living communities host happy hours and curated cocktails at in-house pubs. They arrange trips to theater, shows, museums, and sporting events. They provide college programming, travel adventures, and chef-inspired cuisine. There are concierges, memberships to speaker series, spa activities, athletic trainers, hiking clubs, craft groups, art societies, and so much more.

With a New Image, Senior Living is Poised for Growth

The senior living industry is poised for explosive growth based on demographics alone. Today, 75 million Baby Boomers in the United States are contemplating their future – that's a giant audience ready to see something different in lifestyle options for older adults. Further, the current senior living targeted demographic of age 85+ is also projected to grow over 30% in the next five years. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "2014 National Population Projections")

Both the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers are financially stable. What's more, Boomers control 70% of the disposable income and 80% of personal financial assets in the U.S.

With financial flexibility, longer life spans, and the mindset of aging adults today to keep living life as fully as possible, senior living has much to gain by focusing on bringing today's senior living experience in all its authenticity to life. Just as important is the need to highlight that the best voices to communicate this message are the aging adults who are relishing their life in the here and now.

The Imperative: Change the Narrative

Senior living communities are not your grandmother's nursing home. It's time for the industry to take hold of its perception and reputation and invest in sharing the multitude of benefits of senior living today.

Senior Living needs to change the conversation. It starts with all of us. Older adults want and deserve better, and they're willing to open their pocketbooks to get it.

References

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review*. C. Brayne (Ed.), *PLoS Medicine* (Vol. 7, Issue 7, p. e1000316). Public Library of Science (PLoS).

I Care a Lot. (2022, 27 March). In *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Care_a_Lot

Leland, K. (2012, June 18). *Loneliness Linked to Serious Health Problems and Death Among Elderly*. UCSF.
<https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2012/06/98644/loneliness-linked-serious-health-problems-and-death-among-elderly>

U.S. Census Bureau (2014). National Population Projections. Retrieved from
<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2014/demo/popproj/2014-summary-tables.html>