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Digital Marketing Strategies in the Senior Housing Industry: New Ways to Reach Prospective Residents

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A billboard won't get you very far in engaging today's senior housing consumers. Unlike traditional marketing, which has been a one-way conversation in terms of advertising to motivate a group of potential customers, digital marketing – a relatively new concept – fosters direct interaction between a senior housing operator and an older adult or their children, allowing for dynamic, tailored, and targeted communication to individual future customers.

Digital marketing is the process of creating and communicating offerings that have value for customers using the internet and online-based digital technologies to increase sales or promote awareness for a company's products and services. Within the last decade, personal electronic devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones have revolutionized how people interact with each other and with businesses, and have even become prevalent with the least likely demographic: seniors.

Understanding the Senior Housing Audience

Senior housing providers have long relied on traditional marketing and advertising to communicate to older adults and their family members. Tactics such as paid advertising in newspapers, printed brochures, and flyers provided to community organizations such as churches and senior centers, ads in the yellow pages, and open houses were all effective ways to reach the senior living audience. However, in recent years, older adults (persons aged 65 or older) have become increasingly tech-savvy.

Recent Pew Research Center surveys found that internet and smartphone use among the cohort 65 years of age and older has grown significantly. In the early 2000s, fewer than one in five seniors used the internet. Now, three-quarters do. Reflecting growing confidence in their ability to use digital technology, three-quarters of older adults go online every day. With their widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets, older adults interact with their family and friends online, read online reviews before making purchase decisions, research products and services in real-time, and often make purchases online.

In addition to marketing to prospective residents, the senior housing industry finds that adult children of seniors are an especially important target market since they often have input in deciding where their parents live. This significant influencer is typically the oldest daughter, aged 45-64. Seniors and their adult children have accepted online platforms that younger age cohorts have historically embraced.

With increased online presence and interactive websites, senior housing providers now push and pull information to maximize reach to their target audience. Through digital marketing, senior living communities can offer potential customers a lot more information than in the past. This was further accelerated during the pandemic when open houses and on-site tours were halted for safety reasons, prompting rapid growth in the use of virtual technologies and content marketing to connect senior housing operators with prospective residents and their family members. Before the pandemic, many communities relied on advertising that pushed people to their digital content, offering picture galleries (and less commonly rental rates) on their websites, similar to a digital brochure. The pandemic boosted interactive communication platforms such as Zoom for nurturing existing leads and educating new prospects through virtual open house tours and video sales seminars.

Gone are the days of only pushing customers to communities through newsprint, glossy magazine pages, radio jingles, daytime TV advertising, and the yellow pages. Senior housing sales offices have not been replaced, but rather augmented by websites to activate prospects. It can be as straightforward and relatively simple as email and website advertising as well as blogging educational content or quickly gain in complexity

with search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and conversion rate optimization (CRO).

What Makes Senior Housing Special?

Besides housing, including providing both shelter and amenities, senior housing, and care properties offer residents a range of services:

- Hospitality services: meals, transportation, housekeeping, entertainment, and concierge services
- Care services: assistance with bathing, grooming, dressing, eating, medication management, and other activities of daily living (ADLs)
- Medical services: skilled nursing, rehab therapy, and chronic care

The combination of care and medical services at each property varies according to residents' needs. Typically, independent living serves the ablest residents and primarily offers hospitality services. On the other hand, nursing care serves residents with the greatest care needs by providing the most intensive services.

For a commercial real estate category as diverse as senior housing with various levels of care in an assortment of living settings, digital marketers must pick and choose the components needed at different points in the marketing process that funnels prospects to become leads and then into residents. The senior housing marketing process can be years long. While the funnel may begin with younger retirees (starting around age 65 as a general rule of thumb), residents often enter senior housing over the age of 80 – after an adverse health or life event. An individual may have very different desires and needs at different points in the funnel.

Senior living marketers' primary goals are increasing brand awareness, lead generation, and, ultimately, sales. According to a 2016 benchmark survey on digital marketing trends in senior living, commissioned by LeadingAge and the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA), senior housing marketers [reported](#) that website and search engine marketing are highly effective messaging conduits. After performing their initial search engine queries, prospective customers will dive deeper into website content to learn about a community's services and amenities, dining, healthcare, and wellness offerings, as well as review residence floor plans, and increasingly, pricing. Additionally, the use of video marketing provides a powerful and personable way of engaging prospects to promote a property's unique features. At its most basic, a high-quality website can generate senior housing leads by offering downloadable content that is relevant and shows what life is like in the community.

Marketing Housing to Older Adults Can Be Tricky

When marketing to the senior housing audience, it is essential to develop advertising and messaging content that complies with HUD's Fair Housing Act which includes the Housing for Older Persons Act ([HOPA](#)). Senior housing communities advertising on social media have access to tools that allow them to customize their ads based on user-provided information such as gender and location. Companies such as Facebook have published guidelines for allowable content.

Additionally, the customer and product are complex. Senior housing marketing and sales teams must build personal relationships with the customer and meet them where they are in terms of housing, health, wellness, support with daily activities of living, spirituality, and socialization. The product is often considered the last household move one makes in life making it an emotional decision. Often the customers are vulnerable, having experienced a triggering event like the death of a spouse or health incident that drives them to the community's doorstep. Family members need to be educated. Health and financial considerations are additional sensitivities to navigate.

For these reasons and more, senior housing sales and marketing teams need to work in tandem. Marketing messaging should align with sales activities to make the experience a smooth and rewarding process for the customer and to be effective in building a sales pipeline for the senior living property.

- **Hospitality and healthcare are combined.** Unlike the hospitality industry, an intake review must also take place with the potential new resident to ensure that the property can properly accommodate their needs. Notably, unlike the multifamily and hospitality sectors, websites in senior housing typically do not list rates, making it challenging to shop by price for a potential property. Also, unlike the multifamily or hospitality sectors, the move to senior housing is typically made only once or twice, making the decision tree more complex than that for apartments and hotels.
- **Language is important.** Senior housing marketers should use vernacular that the general public uses. Identifying common keywords that prospects would use aids in search engine optimization. For example, consumers may search "nursing home" or "old-age home" rather than "skilled nursing facility" or "nursing care."
- **Content must be relevant, fed by localized search terms.** With senior housing, a challenge is figuring out what content attracts people for what purpose. Keyword research, using tools such as SEM Rush or Moz can help

identify common searches by which to write and optimize content that will appeal to prospective residents throughout their buyer journey.

Digital Marketing in Senior Housing is Evolving

According to an AARP survey published in 2020, three-quarters of adults ages 50 and older use social media regularly. Reliance on online reviews like Yelp and Google has become prevalent in all aspects of consumer decision-making. Reputation management is increasingly viewed as an essential component of senior housing's digital marketing strategy. Most engage a third-party provider, but many use a reputation management platform to help them respond to online reviews and comments and mine prospect information.

With growing sophistication, marketers can combine Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and marketing automation tools to consolidate prospect generation and lead retention activities. Digital marketing strategies provide greater access to more people than traditional advertising/marketing media. As a result, sales teams are getting more leads than ever before. They often get so many leads that their attention has turned to vetting them for qualification. Marketing automation and AI virtual marketing assistants can help marketing teams big and small hone in on qualifying leads. Marketing automation tools also aid in the (digital) distribution of informational blogs and their promotion via email and social media to entice prospects to view a community's website. Once a prospect has visited the website, marketing automation can schedule and deploy follow-up emails at specified times and intervals and serve up re-marketing advertisements that follow prospects on unrelated websites.

Marketing and sales teams will increasingly find it necessary to work together strategically to generate messaging that supports the sales process to mitigate rising costs of operations and shrinking budgets. Using multiple digital platforms and data mining tools, they can share buyer behavior data with greater ease and efficiency.

Senior housing has slowly embraced digital sales and marketing activities over the past decade and a half, on pace with the adoption of personal internet technologies by older adults. Senior housing is a highly local business. Geo-targeting is being increasingly used by marketers to deliver location-specific advertisements to neighborhood prospects. Highly targeted marketing messages can be customized to individuals and groups using Google Ads, Facebook, and Twitter.

Marketing senior housing to older adults has always been about nurturing connections and building rapport. Going forward, the industry will be more flexible and adaptable in implementing digital marketing practices that were employed with growing success prior to the pandemic and evolved quickly out of necessity during the pandemic. The industry will continue to use digital tools to develop one-on-one solid consumer relationships established through marketing automation activities, online reputation management, and CRM integration for better customer engagement and increased marketing and sales opportunities.

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