

# CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ASSISTED LIVING

## Strategies for Building Successful Partnerships

Kelly Smith Papa, MSN, RN | Carol Marshall, MA



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Partnerships*

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Carol Marshall, MA**

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# Chapter 1 **Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success**

## **Introduction**

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The concept of customer service has become an important facet of assisted living as facilities seek to minimize the risk of litigation and ensure that their occupancy rate is high.

In the past, when the elderly became too ill to live alone, families turned to long-term care experts only to be frustrated by the lack of services. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in long-term care services: home health, assisted living, senior apartments, and continuing care retirement communities. Families have a variety of choices to make for the optimal care model for their loved ones. While price may be the consideration for many, service is the consideration for all.

Historically, customer service was something expected at hotels and restaurants. In today's world, customer service spans every industry. Consumers demand exceptional service with all services, from plumbing to cable installation, or they take their business elsewhere. With the wide use of the Internet, sites have cropped up that expose poor service for every type of company.

With the high level of competition for sales in assisted living, exceptional customer service is a requirement for a successful business model. Good customer service not only leads to increased business, a strong reputation, and improved standing in the community, but it also impacts the quality of care that an elder receives and the job satisfaction of employees.

Exceptional customer service has benefits for the assisted living setting. It:

1. Improves or sustains the community's good reputation
2. Increases the community's resident census
3. Decreases the community's risk for lawsuits
4. Increases employee engagement, retention, and satisfaction
5. Creates pride in employees
6. Welcomes community contributions
7. Creates a positive business image
8. Motivates medical and other industry professionals to refer patients and families

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9. Inspires confidence from families
10. Establishes the facility as the community of choice

Customer service is the foundation of all successful businesses. Customers' freedom of choice—their ability to choose where to conduct their business—is at the core of successful business. When consumers choose to be customers, business prospers.

The same holds true for senior living and healthcare consumers. All consumers have a choice about where they live and receive their healthcare. Consumers often select their physician and choose their hospital, and in every case they have a choice when choosing an assisted living community.

Physicians may be selected by insurance coverage, specialty, or location. But patients judge the quality of a physician's care by his or her bedside manner. Patients will state "I love my doctor" based on the way the physician treats them when they interact. The typical patient does not know whether the physician prescribed the right brand of medication, the right dose, or used the right suture weight when closing a wound. However, they do know how they feel when the physician has conversations with them, answers their questions, and listens to their complaints. It is that relationship that the patient uses when describing the physician to others. It is the same criteria when residents and families describe the services provided in an assisted living community.

### ***The time is right***

Now like never before, the concept of providing good customer service is paramount to succeeding in the assisted living industry. Not only is every community vying to maximize occupancy, but with escalating lawsuits and insurance claims, the assisted living industry is taking a hard look at the relationship between the community and the resident and the resident's family.

The old adage "friends don't sue friends" holds true in today's litigious long-term care environment. Even egregious acts pass without lawsuits when families feel as though the community had nothing to hide, supported the family during the crisis, and communicated openly.

Additionally, satisfied customers spread the good word. It is essential that facilities treat residents, families, and staff with the utmost respect and consideration in an effort to stave off the chance of litigation, an insurance claim, or poor reputation.

When community staff form a true partnership with residents and families, the concept of joining together to provide the best possible patient care must become the all-consuming mutual focus. By committing to these goals, the community lays the groundwork for lasting and trusting relationships that may prevent the satisfied customer from seeking legal counsel, complaining to state surveyors, or moving their loved one to a competing assisted living community.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

There couldn't be a more appropriate time for a book written specifically for assisted living communities that can benefit from developing a customer service program. It is the intention of this program to instill confidence, create trust, and build lasting relationships between community staff and residents. While there is no guarantee that strong relationships will result in successful state surveys, or reduced risk of claims or suits, it is certainly a necessary approach to achieving customer satisfaction, increased occupancy, and improved reputation.

Implement this program to initiate a culture change that becomes the lifeblood of the community. For a "customer first" program to work, it must become a way of life for every employee. No matter the employee's responsibility or job assignment, the primary job description is "customer first." It must be an ongoing, supported program that starts from the top. Buy-in from the director, managers, and supervisors is critical to the success of the program so that it becomes so well integrated that it becomes the "personality" of the community. It must be introduced at new-employee orientation and be part of every aspect of the community's culture.

It simply will not work to instruct staff to conduct themselves in a customer-friendly manner if leaders do not become a role model. Leaders will be most successful when treating staff in the manner with which they expect the staff to treat families and residents. Leaders can ensure success by being the model of exceptional customer service.

## A Brief History of Customer Service

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Customer service, which is also known as "guest relations" or "customer relations," originated in the hotel industry. As the hotel industry became more competitive, hotels began to look for ways to make their establishments more desirable than their competition. How could hotels compete for a limited number of guests and ensure that those customers were repeat visitors?

Innovative hotels began to focus on the need to make certain every guest was a satisfied customer and offer more "guest-friendly" services than the other businesses in town. Hotels rapidly realized that if guests thought they received exceptional value for their dollar, most likely they would return and, even more important, would share their experiences with others. The easiest and most cost-effective way to provide added value was by improving the way guests felt during their stay. Thus, the hotel industry gave birth to the concept of treating customers as guests.

Other industries began to model the concept of guest services. For instance, Disneyland®, and subsequently Walt Disney World®, took the idea of customer service to heart. The Disney "culture" puts park guests at the center of its business. "We create happiness" is Disney's service theme.

Upscale restaurants also jumped onto the customer service bandwagon. If many establishments in town offered good food and elegant surroundings, good customer service could be the one advantage

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that would set one restaurant apart from its competitors and bring people back again and again. A fine restaurant will discover quickly that excellent food does not overcome bad service.

### ***Healthcare catches on***

Another industry that soon took an interest in good customer service was acute care hospitals. Historically, when people became ill or injured or required surgery, they went to the hospital where their doctor sent them, rarely asking questions. In the case of an emergency, patients were rushed to the nearest hospital. Now, with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Hospital Compare website, consumers can access information about the hospital's ranking, infection rates, and overall competency. Savvy consumers now select their hospital based on information reported on the Internet. No longer do patients agree to go to the nearest hospital; more likely, they are apt to insist that the ambulance avoid hospitals with a poor reputation. When physicians began to obtain privileges and offer services at more than one hospital, patients realized they had a choice in healthcare decisions.

Healthcare in the acute hospital setting became a service industry, not too different from service industries such as the hotel industry. Competition for the consumer becomes the focal point of any industry that wants to survive in a competitive marketplace. Consider the effects of this in healthcare: Hospitals advertise special services for women in homelike units for maternity care, eliminate semiprivate rooms in favor of private rooms, decorate with bright colors and plan festive activities in pediatric units, and provide family dining for visitors. All of this creates a competitive edge for the healthcare dollar.

### ***Senior services get on board***

The senior services industry can learn a valuable lesson from the hotel industry: Treat residents as guests. Even though the community is technically their home, living with strangers and being cared for by strangers, the setting and restricted environment would be greatly improved if all residents were treated as valuable guests. Competitive nursing homes and assisted living communities are adopting a customer service philosophy based on the following tenets:

- Customer services has an impact on litigation. If “friends don’t sue friends,” satisfied residents and family members are less likely to take legal action against a community.
- Customer service touches every aspect of care.
- It makes or breaks the reputation of the community.
- It starts with management and flows through the entire staff.
- Customer service never ends.
- Exceptional customer service affects occupancy.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

- For long-term care, customer service will be reflected on the Five-Star Rating on CMS' Nursing Home Compare website.
- State surveyors will interview residents and families, and a strong customer service program will affect the responses to state surveyors.
- Physicians and care navigators are more or less likely to refer patients.
- Employees are more likely to remain loyal to the community.
- Recruitment is positively affected.

When residents and families are treated well, offered respect, and allowed to develop trust, residents become satisfied customers. Satisfied customers are more cooperative, are happier, file fewer complaints, refer other potential residents, and become excellent advocates in the community.

## Why Is Customer Service Important?

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Every business needs customers to succeed. Customers provide the money so the business can remain in business. Successful companies enjoy continued success because they develop and keep satisfied customers.

Many employees in the assisted living industry believe they are in the “housing with services” business. But that is only partly correct—they are in the people business. Providing housing, care and safety is the vehicle that brings people together, but assisted living is more than a housing service: It is the business of serving all the people who enter the community. Those customers include families, companions, delivery people, physicians, therapists, visitors, contractors, and staff.

Assisted living communities do not just provide housing and services. Customers expect staff to answer their questions, solve their problems, and do it cheerfully. Satisfied customers have their needs met, but loyal customers see staff exceed their expectations. Assisted living communities must focus on giving customers superior service to succeed.

### ***Customer loyalty***

Businesses rely on customer loyalty for continued success, so it is important to understand what keeps customers satisfied. Staff should answer the following questions:

#### **Would you go to your favorite restaurant if the wait staff were rude every time?**

- Would you complain, or just never return?
- Would you tell your family and friends?
- Did someone else get service before you, even if he or she came in after you?
- Have you ever waited too long for your meal to arrive?

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Now convert those questions through the eyes of the residents in the community when meals are served in the dining room:

### **How would you feel if the servers were rude every day, but you had no option but to tolerate their rude behavior?**

- Would you complain, even if you were afraid of retaliation?
- Would you tell your family and friends?
- Did another resident get his or her food before you, even though you were in the dining room first?
- Do others at your table get their meal before you?
- Does your food arrive hot? If not, can you send it back?
- How long do you have to sit in the dining room before your meal arrives?

### **What was the most outstanding service you ever received at a hotel?**

- Were you there on vacation?
- Were you there on business?
- Did hotel staff call you by name?
- Did they answer your questions?
- Did staff make you feel special?

Now convert those questions through the eyes of the residents in the community:

### **What was the most outstanding service you have received at the community?**

- Were you planning on a short respite stay?
- Do staff call you by your name, or by terms like “sweetie,” “honey,” or “darling”?
- Do staff answer your questions?
- Do staff make you feel special?
- Do staff offer to help you, or do you have to ask?

### **Remember the worst service you ever received at a store?**

- Did someone ignore you?
- Was the clerk waiting on someone else?
- Were all the clerks too busy to wait on you?
- Were the clerks visiting with each other instead of helping customers?

Now convert those questions through the eyes of the residents in the community:

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

### **Do staff ignore you, especially when you need help?**

- Do staff help others and forget about you?
- Are staff too busy to ask you if you are okay?
- Do staff visit with each other in front of you, leaving you out of the conversation?
- Do staff speak in a language you do not understand?

### **Have you ever waited for a repairperson or service technician to arrive?**

- Did you have to be home between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.?
- Did you ever have to wait for another visit because the service wasn't done correctly the first time?

Now convert those questions through the eyes of the residents in the community:

### **Have you ever waited for staff to assist you to find something that was missing?**

- Have you ever wished your room could be cleaner?
- Have you ever waited all day for an appointment?
- Have staff ever had to redo something that wasn't done properly the first time?
- Have you ever lost items that are important to you, and nothing could be done to help you find them?

### **Have you ever been overcharged for items you have purchased?**

- Did the company apologize?
- Have you ever sent a payment, only to receive a late notice because the company did not post the payment?

Now convert those questions through the eyes of the residents in the community:

### **Have you ever been charged for services to which you did not agree?**

- Have you ever been charged for poor service, and had no choice but to pay for it?
- Did the company apologize?
- Have you ever been told your payment was late because the company did not post the payment?
- Do you receive monthly statements about your trust account?

Poor customer service is fraught with emotions. Staff must realize that when they encounter poor service as customers, they have the advantage to take their money and their business elsewhere. In the assisted living setting, residents are “captive customers” who must endure the service staff provide with little or no on-the-spot recourse.

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However, customer loyalty in the assisted living industry cannot be assumed—someone currently residing in the community will not necessarily remain there. What would happen if the residents in your community had an opportunity to move to a community with a better reputation that suddenly had a vacancy? What if family members research facilities on the Internet and identify a local community with better services and reputation? It is not safe to assume that once the resident moves in to your community that he or she will stay.

Loyalty to a community is based on the way staff make the resident and family feel about their care.

### How Customer Service Affects Litigation

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One factor that threatens the entire long-term care industry is the mountain of lawsuits filed against nursing homes and assisted living facilities. While some states such as Texas have passed strong tort reform, others are in the center of a lawsuit firestorm. Lawyers have built a mountain of litigation against long-term care facilities based on the complaints of disgruntled family members and residents. Experts agree that the spate of lawsuits against assisted living and long-term care facilities are here to stay.

What may be an acceptable policy, care protocol, or process can be fodder for plaintiff's attorneys who convince juries of "egregious" acts of neglect and abuse. Attorneys search for staff who will testify that they "work short" often. Attorneys advertise for clients and family members who will file complaints of neglect and violation of resident's rights assured under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1987. Every day, seemingly normal encounters can initiate customer dissatisfaction, which may ultimately lead to lawsuits.

The overall care, policies and procedures, or protocols in the community may meet the standards enforced by state and federal government regulations, but they may fall short when it comes to the satisfaction of the most important person in the assisted living industry: the customer. It is the customer who ultimately determines whether the quality of the care provided is satisfactory, negligent, or abusive. The measure of quality care is not in the technical aspects of the implementation of procedures or policies, but in the method and perceived logic of the delivery of services. The perception by families that their loved one's needs are not being met, especially in the evening or on weekends, can turn into perceptions of neglect and poor care. The next step families could take is to call their attorney.

#### ***Friends don't sue friends***

Creating a trusting partnership with residents and families may help protect communities from lawsuits and complaints to the state. Remember the concept that "friends don't sue friends," and then keep in mind that the majority of all claims against assisted living communities are filed by disgruntled family members of residents.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

Consider these two true scenarios that demonstrate the reasons family members chose not to file lawsuits:

1. A resident at a nursing community suffered fatal injuries from a fire that ignited while he was smoking unsupervised. The resident demonstrated the ability to independently manage his smoking materials on every smoking assessment instrument administered quarterly, but the fire occurred despite his skills. The family would have had good cause to sue the community, and in fact the community was at fault for not supervising the resident.

However, the family did not sue, because the daughter stated, “He loved each and every one of you. He would be so angry if he knew I was upset with any of you. I could never sue people we all love so dearly.”

2. A resident suffered a stroke and as a result was unable to eat without severe risk of aspiration. The speech pathologist was working diligently to teach the resident to take food safely. Despite the best efforts of staff, the resident aspirated and suffered a severe bout of aspiration pneumonia and nearly died. Subsequently, the resident was unable to take any food or beverage by mouth. While the community staff failed to follow the specific approaches outlined by the speech pathologist, and that failure caused the resident to aspirate, the husband believes that the care provided in the community is top notch. In fact, the resident’s husband celebrates special occasions in the community with staff and contributes to the festivities with food, beverages, and a heart-felt speech of appreciation.

In both of these scenarios, family members established a continuing relationship with staff who clearly could have prevented the injuries. It is the perception of quality care and the caring behaviors of staff that make a difference between a lawsuit and care partner.

## How Consumers Measure Quality Healthcare

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“Quality” is a term heard often in the assisted living environment. This concept has been addressed in many forms:

- Indicators derived from the organization’s Quality Improvement Committee.
- Scope and severity citations on the state survey.
- Posting community information and data on the Internet. Newspaper and television reports when one community has a crisis.
- Experiences that family or friends have had with the assisted living community.

State regulators try to measure it, families demand it, physicians expect it, and residents require it. Knowing how the community and staff provide and measure quality is another matter.

How does the consumer measure “quality” in the assisted living community? The majority of senior living consumers do not have the industry or clinical knowledge to determine whether the care and

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services provided by staff are the highest possible quality. The average consumer is not able to determine whether the medical care prescribed and delivered is the accurate medical model that is best for the resident.

The average consumer measures the quality of care and services by the tangible measurement of the way the community's staff treat them. Residents and their family members measure quality by determining indicators such as:

- Is my loved one involved in activities that they enjoy?
- Is my loved one well groomed?
- Was the nurse nice to me?
- How well does the doctor explain the problem?
- Are there food and dining options that my loved one enjoys?
- Was the room clean?
- How does the community smell?
- How long does it take for staff to respond in an emergency?
- Is the evening and weekend care equal to the weekday care?
- Are the linens clean and in good condition?
- Is the paint current and free from chips and scratches?
- Is the furniture in good condition?
- Is my loved one able to access safe and friendly transportation to appointments and trips?
- Is the food flavorful, and do I have choices in what to eat?

The impression made by these factors will determine for consumers whether the community provides high-quality care and services. And it is quality care and services that will determine the community's reputation in the community.

### ***Who are customers?***

In assisted living, there are many customers, including:

- Residents
- Contractors
- Vendors
- Companions
- Surveyors
- Volunteers

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

- Delivery staff
- Visitors
- Prospective residents
- Discharge planners
- The community
- Every person who enters the community
- **All staff:** Especially the people who are the closest to the residents and those who residents visit with daily. Housekeepers, maintenance workers, dining staff, activity professionals, and receptionists have very close relationships with residents. By treating each staff member as a customer, it is likely job satisfaction will increase, cooperative working relationships will bloom, and job-related stress will diminish.

**Corporate services:** Although people from corporate services are not in the community on a daily basis, they are an important customer. The corporate services are the driving force behind the success and progress of a community. And who would dream of being rude to a member of the corporate services team? Members of the corporate services team view themselves as members of the community team. The corporate services team is ultimately responsible for the success of the community and has a responsibility to ensure that litigation and substandard care are controlled or eliminated. They are customers and team members; even if they do not have a daily presence in the community, their work supports the community's needs.

**Director:** The director is the customer who decides who will provide services, gives raises and promotions, and purchases new equipment for the community. More than a boss, the director is the person who makes decisions regarding the method, frequency, style, and “personality” of everything that occurs in the community.

**Supervisor of assisted living services (SALSA):** The SALSA is the customer who is contacted on every care issue. This person has a direct effect on and gives input on programs, planning, and coordination of everything that transpires in the community. By treating the SALSA as a customer, it is likely job satisfaction will increase, cooperative working relationships will bloom, and job-related stress will diminish.

**Nursing staff:** Nursing staff interact on a daily basis with other key customers: the residents and their families. Their role is to ensure excellent clinical care, observe and report resident conditions, and interact with physicians. If all employees treat staff nurses as guests, the cooperative working environment may become less hectic and stressful.

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**Resident care assistants (RCA):** One of the most visible customers is the RCA. This is the person who contacts the resident in the most intimate and consistent manner. This staff member also has the closest and most frequent contact with the residents' families.

Too often, however, these employees are perceived as the lowest paid, and therefore are the least respected. However, the RCA is the single most important family contact in the community. By treating RCAs as guests, it is more likely that the RCA will treat others as guests. Try an experiment: Instruct other staff to treat RCAs as though they were a member of the resident's family for three weeks. Measure the difference in job performance and interpersonal relationships with coworkers, residents, and families. Observe body language, eye contact, and facial expressions. Without giving specific instructions to make changes, changes will occur.

RCAs are the frontline staff who must have very strong customer service skills. The staff who have the most resident and family contact are the staff who must exercise exceptional customer service skills. RCAs must be able to make decisions and know that the community will stand behind them. Give RCAs the customer service skills they need to be successful and models of the community's philosophy and vision.

**Physicians:** The relationship with the physician as a customer will determine the security, frequency, and nature of referrals. Decisions regarding resident care, therapy, prescriptions, and treatments are the sole responsibility of the attending physician. When the physician feels like a guest who is welcome, respected, and part of the team, the relationship with the community staff will grow in trust and respect.

**Therapists:** The relationship between therapists and nursing staff has been a unique one in most facilities. When facilities do business with a therapy provision company, the community is actually the therapy company's customer. As a result, the therapists are instructed to treat community team members as customers. It is necessary to train therapists that their customers are residents, families, physicians, and all staff. In most therapy relationships, therapists develop an in-depth and intimate relationship with residents who are on their caseload. Therapists have the opportunity to spend lengthy uninterrupted one-to-one time with residents. One of the strongest opportunities for strong customer relationships rests with the therapists.

**Residents' family members:** Residents' family members are critical customers. Their approval and disapproval often determines whether the resident will remain in the community or transfer to a competitor's community. The family member is the one who decides whether to sue, who shares information with family and friends, and/or complains to the state. Family members bring a host of emotions that may lead to accusations and discontentment. When family members are allowed to feel comfortable and still receive guest treatment despite their frustrations and fears, the relationship with the community is strengthened.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

Everyone who enters the community is a customer. The state surveyor, mail carrier, vendor, food service delivery staff, entertainers, students, and even salespeople are customers. Everyone can use an impression made by a brief encounter to influence the community's reputation in the community.

### Three Distinctions of Quality

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Whether dining at a restaurant, staying at a beach resort, or trying to choose an assisted living community, consumers are looking for quality. There are three distinctions when measuring quality.

Features or characteristics that:

1. Must be present
2. Add value
3. Are pleasant surprises

#### ***Essential services***

**First, consider what must be present:** If certain features or characteristics that must be present are absent, the customer will be frustrated or angry. Without these features, the resident or family has no reason to consider the long-term care community. Essential services involve those things to make the resident feel safe. For instance, to provide adequate care and services in an assisted living facility, there must be the ability to offer prompt response to emergencies.

The absence of a “must” feature will disappoint or anger the customer, but the presence of it brings the service up to average, where there is common ground with competitors. The level of care provided as a “must” is considered an expected level of service, and when questioned, customers will describe service as “below average.” Providing only “must” services will leave customers wanting more and does not allow them to feel special or welcome. Not-for-profit companies have the reputation of providing better care. The fact is that exceptional customer service is free: No matter the staff member's working patterns, the principles of exceptional customer service are an essential service.

The following are examples of some “must” services for an assisted living community:

- Competent billing and bookkeeping
- Clinical policy and procedure manuals
- Experienced staff
- Answers to questions
- Appetizing meals
- Clean environment
- Therapy program with a solid track record and a good reputation
- Prompt response to emergencies

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- Security
- Safe environment

### ***Added-value services***

**Second, consider what is added value:** Customers view other features and advantages as “more is better.” The customer doesn’t plan on these features being part of the service but greatly appreciates them and finds that the more they get, the better they like it. For instance, a guest might be disappointed by a skimpy towel in a hotel room, while a larger, luxurious towel might be a bonus. In the assisted living setting, personal visits from the director, fresh flowers on tables, shiny floors, clutter-free environments, meaningful activities, high-quality dementia care programming, and beautiful carpets are “extras” not seen in every community. The added-value features will increase customers’ satisfaction levels, and as a result, that community gains an edge over its competition.

The following are examples of some added-value services for the assisted living community:

- Interdisciplinary approach during team meetings that includes family input
- Every resident is assessed for healthcare, nutrition, and social needs
- Frequent phone calls to families are made or notes sent with updates on the resident
- Questions are explained clearly
- Greeting cards are mailed to families from residents for special occasions
- Guests are offered refreshments during visits
- Environment offers private visiting areas and outdoor space
- Vases are available for flowers brought by visitors
- Soft music selections are played in the dining room
- Staff are educated on approaches needed to care for people affected by dementia

### ***Pleasant surprises***

**Third, consider what are called “delighters”:** These are special features or characteristics that the customer does not expect but finds valuable when present. They exceed the typical customer service program. The more unexpected and more useful a feature in the program, the more likely it is to create true delight. Mints on a pillow, ice in the ice bucket, and a turndown service are all delighters in hotels. In the assisted living setting, paper doilies under desserts, fresh flowers in rooms, commemorative decorations, entertainment, and unexpected outings are considered “delighters” when the community provides them outside of the expected service model. People seldom inform the service provider what will delight them; it is up to the provider to offer the extras, almost with an element of surprise.

## **Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success**

At one community in Wallingford, CT, two college students moved into an assisted living facility for the year. The students lived free of charge and in return for their room, they spent time with the residents. From dining together, enjoying music, and talking about life experiences, this intergenerational program built relationships that provided learning and joy for both the residents and the students.

The following are examples of some delighters for an assisted living community:

- A special community outing program to plays, art shows, and concerts
- In-house instruction for activities such as oil painting, chess lessons, bridge club, cooking, knitting, gardening, or other activities that the residents are interested in
- Parties specifically for families, especially children, and organized by the activities director
- Periodic phone calls from staff to families with updates, especially with good news, such as when a resident meets a therapy goal or weight goal, or participates in activities
- Meals served by staff wearing festive attire
- Tables with tablecloths, cloth napkins, and fresh flowers

Obviously, the more added-value services and delighters provided by the community, the greater the span between average providers and superior providers.

### ***Consumers create reputations***

Every consumer has an opinion of how a business treated him or her and of its products, services, or outcomes. People share opinions openly between family members and friends. Consider the following:

- Reputations are easy to make and difficult to change
- Reputations of nursing homes and assisted living facilities are readily linked to negative images
- The reputation of an assisted living community will determine its occupancy rate
- A good reputation creates an edge over the competition
- Successful facilities have successful reputations
- How a crisis is handled will impact the community's reputation
- If a discharge planner or a care navigator believes the community does not provide optimal service, he or she will not refer new admissions

Keep in mind a phenomenon called the “four-eleven rule”: If something good happens, customers tell four people; if something bad happens, customers tell 11 people. Customers are part of the community every day, and every day the community's reputation is developed and shared.

# Reputations Are Earned

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Reputations are word-of-mouth advertising every community needs to create an ongoing flow of business. Reputations are difficult to establish and easy to lose, but how are they created?

## **Residents**

Residents will always talk about their environment, the food, fellow residents, activities, and the treatment they receive. What the resident says sets the record for what others say about the community. Statements like the ones below made by a resident will cement the concept of a low-quality organization; when the residents share these concepts with relatives and visitors, the visitors will echo what is said to them:

- “It always takes a long time for the nurse to answer my questions.”
- “The food is always the same.”
- “It is always cold in here.”
- “Don’t say anything; I don’t want them to be mad at me.”
- “I hate to ask for help. They don’t have enough people working here.”
- “I never go to activities; they don’t do anything except play bingo.”

## **Family members and visitors**

Visitors will draw conclusions about the entire community based on a brief encounter. The fable of three blind people describing an elephant is an illustration of what families may encounter:

*Three blind people were taken to the circus to “see” an elephant. Since they were blind it was necessary for them to use their hands to explore this creature called an elephant.*

*The first person felt the trunk and declared, “An elephant is just like a snake: It wiggles and wrapped itself around my hand.”*

*The second person disagreed, “No, an elephant is big and round and has bumps like fingernails. An elephant is shaped like a barrel.” This person had felt the elephant’s leg.*

*The third person disagreed even more, “No, an elephant is not like a snake or a barrel. An elephant is rough like a paintbrush and sways back and forth.” The third person had felt the elephant’s tail.*

When visitors and family members come to a community and observe the actions of staff, they conclude that what they observe occurs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Families who visit only on weekends and evenings believe staffing is bare bones, the person in charge isn’t working to solve problems, meals are casual, and activities are not planned. If families and visitors believe they are observing business as usual, they will rightfully believe the service model is less than adequate.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

Family members and visitors will share their observations with anyone who will listen, and thus a reputation is created.

### ***Employees***

There are numerous statements employees make without thinking that can quickly spread a negative impression of a community:

- “I hate working here.”
- “We are always expected to work short.”
- “This place is dirty. Why don’t they clean it better?”
- “The director is lazy; he never comes out of his office.”
- “They always want me to work overtime.”
- “If my mother needed a place to live, I wouldn’t bring her here.”

Employees are a beacon for the reputation of the community. There is a clear link between what the employees think of the community and the reputation they build with potential customers. Disgruntled employees drive customers away and may persuade current customers to look for a better community.

### ***Establish a good reputation, the life of the community***

1. Determine what the reputation of the community actually is. Conduct surveys with:
  - Current residents
  - Former residents
  - Families
  - Discharge planners
  - Care navigators
  - Employees
  - Former employees
  - People who came to tour
  - Physicians
  - Contractors
  - Vendors
  - Therapists
2. Train staff on how reputations are made, kept, and changed. Use inservices, reinforce appropriate behaviors, and include customer service as part of the annual performance appraisal.

## Chapter 1

Share satisfaction surveys and ask staff how they can change systems to improve customer service.

3. Request that staff report all information they have heard about the community's reputation. Positive and negative statements are essential for forming and maintaining a reputation. Read thank-you cards aloud to staff during staff meetings, post them on staff bulletin boards, and praise staff mentioned specifically in cards.
4. Implement approaches to maintain a good reputation or change a bad or mediocre one:
  - Build positive relationships with discharge planners, physicians, and referral sources
  - Teach staff the power of their statements to others
5. Participate in community events that may garner positive publicity:
  - Plant a tree at a local elementary school
  - Build relationships with local universities and colleges to bring students in for experiential learning opportunities
  - Donate a bench at a playground
  - Join and participate in civic organizations such as Rotary or Lions
  - Use stories of residents' lives as human interest stories in the local paper
  - Make a knitting group from able residents and donate knitted items to the local hospital for needy babies
  - Become a drop-off location for school supplies, toys, coats, or food for the needy
6. Ensure a great reputation with residents. Staff should address residents by their names and avoid terms of endearment such as "honey," "sweetheart," or "dear." Residents can interpret such nicknames as demeaning, unprofessional, or patronizing. Some residents were distinguished citizens before moving into the community; no one would ever consider calling an attorney or bank president "honey" or "sweetie," regardless of their illness or age.

Employees must keep promises. The community can shape the expectations of residents through education. The staff member needs to know the scope of services available so they don't ask for the impossible—and staff must never promise to deliver that which is not possible. For example, just because the resident wants the employee to go to the local fast-food restaurant to pick up a special meal, the employee does not have to agree to go. However, if the employee promises to go to the kitchen for an extra meal item, he or she must keep the promise.

Knowing what is possible and providing it is the key to making and keeping promises.

Provide prompt and courteous service. Residents who spend a large part of their day alone, often have a poor concept of time. Seconds can seem like minutes, and minutes can seem like hours. Prompt service to busy staff may mean 10 or 15 minutes after the request was made by the resident, while to a resident prompt service means immediately.

## Why Customer Service Is the Key to Success

There is a saying, “Do you know the difference between minor surgery and major surgery? Minor surgery is what happens to the other guy.” The same concept can be applied to prompt service. To the requester, time spent waiting is always longer than the time measured by the staff providing the service. Courtesy is measured by words, body language, and expressions. It is defined not by the person providing the courtesy, but by the recipient.

7. Keep families informed about a resident’s condition. Answering machine messages must be handled with the utmost attention to customer service. Confusing or alarming messages can disrupt a community-family relationship. To eliminate the risk of an unfortunate message being left on a family’s machine, create a message that every staff member must use when leaving a message on an answering machine, such as:

“This message is for Mrs. Anderson. Please call Happy Hills Community for a message regarding your loved one. Please call and ask for Nancy Nurse. If I am not available, please speak with Sally Nurse.”

By using a consistent message, all staff know to keep information restricted and to the point. No misunderstandings can occur, and fewer alarmed family members will expect poor treatment.

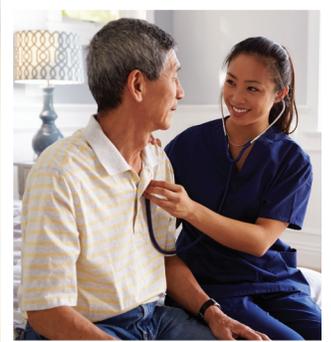
Report changes in condition, including any declines or improvements. The only surprise a family needs is the one that delights—surprises that disappoint cause distress and lead to distrustful customers.

Families need to know that unplanned does not mean unexpected. Disease processes advance with residents, and those advancements are expected. Even slight changes are important to families. Keep families informed as changes occur.

# CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ASSISTED LIVING

## Strategies for Building Successful Partnerships

Kelly Smith Papa, MSN, RN | Carol Marshall, MA



Take action and boost your facility's reputation with ***Customer Service in Assisted Living: Strategies for Building Successful Partnerships***, a guide to cultivate strong customer service skills in your nurses, frontline staff, and other staff members who interact with residents and families. This book provides insight into building partnerships between residents, families, staff, and the media to manage risk and avoid litigation.

Authors Kelly Smith Papa, MSN, RN, and Carol Marshall, MA, offer a fun, innovative approach to learning with instant access to everything you need to conduct training, including customized PowerPoint presentations, in-services, and templates to meet the needs of your organization.

Developing an effective customer service program is the first and most essential step in protecting your organization's reputation and showcasing what it has to offer. By providing proper family education and handling adverse events in a straightforward manner, you can reduce the likelihood of legal action being taken.

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