Any business that fails to create realistic expectations for its customers, will have disappointed customers. If a four-star restaurant delivers mediocre service, even if the food is excellent, diners will be dissatisfied because their expectations of overall quality will not have been met.

Creating realistic customer expectations is especially important for assisted living providers. Stated simply, disappointed residents and family members will make your life miserable. They will make your life miserable by complaining to you and your staff, by complaining to other residents and family members, by complaining to DSS and the ombudsman or, worse yet, by complaining to a personal injury lawyer. In some cases, they will make all of our lives miserable by complaining to their legislators.

Unfortunately, as an industry, assisted living providers not only do not typically do a good job of creating realistic customer expectations, but often do a very good job of creating unrealistic expectations.

The following are some specific examples of problem areas, along with suggestions on how to create realistic expectations without undermining marketing efforts.

**Safety and Security**

Too often, assisted living providers make representations about safety and security that lead to unrealistic expectations. For example, a number of years ago I reviewed a resident handbook that stated “we provide an environment that insures your safety, security and peace of mind.” It would be bad enough to have a representation of this type in marketing materials. This statement was contained in the resident handbook which was incorporated into and made part of the admission agreement. Statements of this type inevitably wind up being blown up on a power point presentation in front of a jury in an ensuing personal injury claim. Assisted living providers also inadvertently mislead perspective residents and family members by touting their “fall prevention programs.” While many providers have excellent programs in place designed to reduce falls, you don’t want consumers to be misled into thinking that a loved one will stop falling just because they move to your community.

Obviously, safety and security issues are of paramount importance to prospective residents and their families. Therefore, you cannot avoid talking about these issues without seriously hampering marketing efforts. The way to reconcile the apparent tension between legal and marketing concerns is to stick to the facts. Rather than making broad representations about “insuring safety and security” list the safety and security features in your community.

Many providers have addressed the fall risk issue by including in their admission agreement language such as the following:

“We are licensed as a residential care facility for the elderly. Our licensing regulations do not permit us to use restraints on our residents, nor is the use of restraints consistent with our philosophy of care. We encourage our residents to participate in physical activities to the extent of their capabilities. As a result, falls and other injuries will occur from time to time. If you are not comfortable with this type of an environment, we suggest that you consider a higher level of care.”

**Quality of Services**

The rule of thumb here is to watch out for hyperbole. In reviewing marketing materials and resident handbooks, I frequently come across phrases such as “we provide the highest possible level of service to our residents.” No you don’t. No one can do that. Words like “unsurpassed,” “unparalleled,” “only the finest,” and similar phrases should be avoided. You can still convey excellence without resorting to hyperbole. There’s nothing wrong with saying that you have “a highly trained, professional staff,” or that “you offer delicious meals with a wide range of menu options,” or that you have a “state-of-the-art program for caring for persons with dementia.”

**Dementia Care**

On many occasions, we have seen families of dementia residents with unrealistic expectations about the degree of supervision that would be provided. Providers often emphasize high-staffing ratios in their dementia care programs. This is fine, but providers must be careful not to lead families to believe that someone will be watching their loved one every minute of every day. Too often, however, this is the impression family members have.

You may wish to consider including a written explanation of what family members can expect. For example, you might state, “While our dementia care program offers a much higher staffing ratio than our assisted living program, we do not provide one on one care. Residents in our dementia program are not under direct observation at all times. Rather, residents are free to spend time unsupervised in their apartments and in the common areas.”

In addition, those of you who have dementia programs may wish to consider disclosing to prospective residents’ families that they may observe, from time to time, behavior among other residents that seems unusual or inappropriate.
Emergency Response

Providers frequently tout, as they should, their state-of-the-art emergency call systems. The problem is that residents and family members are sometimes led to believe that someone will appear in their room the second they push their call button. With respect to emergency response, it is important not only to set realistic expectations, but also to be certain that you are able to meet the time frames that you represent.

Retention

It is important for your residents and their families to understand upfront what are your limits on retention of residents. Because assisted living providers vary widely in the levels of care they provide, prospective residents and families may believe that the resident can remain within your community despite having a condition for which you are not equipped to provide. If you do not retain residents with dementia, this should be clearly disclosed up front. If you do not retain residents who are bedridden or who require two person transfers, this too needs to be disclosed prior to admission, not when the condition manifests.

Costs

The cost of providing care can be a particularly sensitive subject. I have seen providers state that there may be "nominal" adjustments to monthly fees from time to time. The word nominal is defined as "insignificant, of little value, worthless," etc. Needless to say, this is not an accurate term to use. Many providers will advise prospective residents and families of the typical range of annual fee increases. However, this can be misleading if you do not also discuss that levels of care may increase over time. This is particularly true where a resident has a degenerative disease upon admission and are very likely to require increasingly higher (and more expensive) levels of care over time.

In sum, if we provide our clients with realistic expectations, we are far less likely to have disappointed clients. This in turn will not only reduce the risk of legal liability and licensing citations, but will enhance our marketing efforts because satisfied customers are the best selling point for any business.

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