

by Stephen P. Wright

Mining for gold

Sales and marketing steps to survive in 2009

These three realities I know to be true for 2009: My 401k will look softer than Santa's belly; despite spending big bucks, the Yankees will still not make it to the World Series (thank goodness); and only the seriously focused sales and marketing professionals in long-term care (LTC) and seniors housing will maintain market share.

Enough talk about how the growing mature market will outstrip the supply for senior housing and LTC properties. Witness the automobile industry in Detroit that just kept building cars that they figured the market would buy. We were afforded a time when the going was easy for sales and marketing professions in the mature market—no more! A combination of a savvy new customer, new communication channels, and competition from community-based services like never before only adds fuel to this already five-alarm fire called our economy.

'Getting it'

But the smart and focused will get it. They will understand that sales happen one at a time, that every lead we get is worth its weight in gold (note gold at \$700 an ounce), and we need to stop following the other sheep when it comes to their strategies for advertising and communications—which are clearly now out of style.

There are five key things that providers need to shore up—or for many—start up as it relates to sales and marketing in order to survive in '09.

First, hire a person who understands that the job is sales, not marketing. Sounds easy, but the biggest weakness in a majority of communities is a lack of understanding the difference between the two. Hire for sales, expect sales, train for sales, and keep marketing out of the job description or duties. Period.

Second, to overcome the real estate market issues you must think like a real estate expert. We spend so much time fretting about our fellow competitors in LTC or senior housing communities, when, in fact, 90% of our opportunity are the prospects in the home. So what does it take to help them out of their homes?

- Sell value and lifestyle—two things you can sell against them staying in their home. (“Have you seen the prices of home healthcare? We are a deal in comparison!”)
- Be proactive in the sales of the home. Team with the best realtors who get it and understand elder issues and how to help them sell.
- Always bring new ideas to the prospects on staging, renting, or reassessing their home for resale.

Be prepared with stories and ideas that put this market in perspective with those success stories. Know how to deal with the objections “I can't sell my house,” or “I've lost 35% in value from a year ago!”

Third, have a community outreach plan. Sure, we all talk about how much outreach we do, but when the work out in the community doesn't correspond with lead generation, then it is time to rethink this process. Fifty to 60% of all leads for seniors housing communities, and 80 to 90% of skilled care communities need to come from influencers and referral sources. Are they?

