

# Why You Can't Dispense Food Like Medicine

How Intentional Staff Relationships  
Shape Well-Being In Senior Living



Cindy Heilman, MS, NDTR, FAND

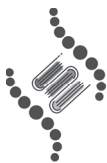
*Creator of Kind Dining<sup>®</sup> Training*

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**HEALTH  
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ISBN 13: 978-1-966168-74-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026907290

Designed by Melissa Farr, Back Porch Creative, LLC

HEALTH AUTHORITY BOOKS

2511 WOODLANDS WAY

OCEANSIDE, CA 92054

[www.healthauthoritybooks.com](http://www.healthauthoritybooks.com)

Health Authority Books is an imprint of Indie Books International, Inc.

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## Six Truths About Dining’s Role In Community Marketplace Success Or Failure

**T**he role of dining has become increasingly important in senior living and post-acute care communities. Residents consider their community their home, and they not only demand respect but have earned it.

These six truths about dining and the role they play in the community’s success or failure are not new, yet they are worth repeating.<sup>6</sup>

### **Truth #1: Mealtimes Market Your Community**

There are a few things that residents and their families can review and compare when choosing a senior living or post-acute care community. They expect the staff and quality of care to be excellent. They expect the housing to be comfortable and safe.

One aspect where a community can shine is with the experience of the meal. In fact, studies have shown that both the food service and their

impression of the staff factor significantly into their decision to choose a senior living or post-acute care community.<sup>7</sup>

I'm not talking about the marketing department's showcase of lunches or dinners for potential clients. I'm talking about the marketing that happens every time one of your staff members interacts with a resident while serving a meal. In each venue, every meal, every day. There are a thousand touchpoints daily.

The question then becomes, are you investing in positive marketing or inadvertently investing in negative marketing?

A positive experience in this area goes far beyond better resident health outcomes. Families will show up more to dine with their family members. And they will share that dining experience with others, regardless of whether those individuals are actively searching for senior living and post-acute care options.

Many times, the marketing department will upsell the food quality and availability to the end user. A marketing department may say, "You can have filet mignon." They might inadvertently oversell the menu without checking with the food service department. These teams end up practicing self-sabotage instead of clearly communicating facts versus aspirations. The reality has to match the presentation and what's possible.

Every marketing team member and HR staff member should be trained on the menu and what is possible in the dining room. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. This is where well-trained food servers can step in and make the service and hospitality more in alignment with expectations. This helps bridge the possible expectation gap in the dining experience. However, having all staff understand the dining experience in your community is paramount, so the servers are not constantly put in that position.

As I shared earlier, research shows residents who are happy eating in your community also enjoy living there more.<sup>8</sup> While the marketing department needs to fully understand the menu and manage expectations, employees need to be on the same page on the value of a positive dining experience and the impact this experience has on marketing the overall community success.

How do you know this is not happening in your community?

One of the first things that can easily be taught and will improve the quality of the food and the experience is to train staff on how to support your current menu and food quality offered. Do you have a policy that states that your staff cannot talk badly about the food, especially in front of your residents?

At the very least, they can taste the food to see what items they enjoy. Sadly, they don't often get that option without management support. In the most successful communities, the food servers and ancillary staff are trained to sample the menu so they can talk about it accurately. In doing so, they can make small modifications or offer reasonable alternatives to ensure the resident enjoys every meal. This empowers the staff to be more hands-on and have both the ability and the opportunity to provide a stellar experience.

Communities fall short when they think that serving meals is equivalent to meal delivery and not a hospitality experience every single time. It is a hospitality experience in each venue and level of care, no matter which department oversees the dining service. Each organization has the opportunity to succeed and excel when it aligns its business strategy with an intentional focus on the one area its clients universally value: mealtimes.

## **Truth #2: Residents Can Spend 60 Percent Of Their Day Focused On Meals**

Consequently, so do many of your staff. The dining room is more than where residents sit down to consume a meal. This is also where they have the opportunity to socialize and meet new people. For some, this is one of the few times during the day that they leave their apartment.

While I was doing my graduate research, residents shared with me that mealtime was when they found out who was now streaking their hair with the color pink, who went to the doctor's, anxious to tell us the result, and who was ready to entertain us with their fish stories. These are the moments when people bond. Family visits can be sparse in this busy world, so other residents fill the daily space that families once filled. Coming from different backgrounds, cultures, and places is now a point of interest, not a separating factor.

Interplay with the staff is vital. It is the staff members who take the place of family, in that they can draw out new residents who are too shy to be on their own by personally introducing them to others. The staff may think they are too busy to interact with residents because they have other duties throughout the day, but the mealtime block is an important nurturing role they should embrace.

A caregiver who happened to sit next to me during a flight shared a story with me.

“My client moved into an assisted living facility,” she said. “For the next twenty years, she ate alone in her room. This resulted from the first day she arrived in the dining room. She went to sit at one table and was told, ‘You can't sit here, I am holding it for a friend.’ She walked over to another table with empty chairs and was told the same thing. My client was so embarrassed,

feeling rejected, that she went to her room and never set foot in the dining room again.”

A well-trained staff member would have avoided this painful situation, would have known the key person to introduce her to, and would have saved time and money by not having to send staff to deliver meals to her room. Unfortunately, the unhappy resident could not leave this community, but I'll bet she didn't recommend it to anyone else either.

In truth #1, I mentioned that dining is very important when people decide whether to move into your community. I'll mention here that it is even more critical in determining whether or not to stay. Research shows that once residents move in and get settled, *dining becomes the second most important factor* in their overall satisfaction.

Vital Research polled assisted living communities.<sup>9</sup> In the residents' eyes, only administration is considered more important than dining—not competence, activities, or even the environment they live in.

I had a conversation with Vivian Tellis-Nayak, a respected expert in customer service research in LTC communities, who shared that “high satisfaction with the dining experience wins over residents and family members. They, in turn, are more likely to recommend a community.”

Validating higher satisfaction with the dining experience leads to more referrals and move-in opportunities.

Have you ever had a resident or two leave because they were frustrated by poor service, whether in dining or housekeeping, or a new community opened down the street?

When a resident leaves, you're paying to refurbish their apartment, adding marketing costs, advertising, and administrative expenses. Current research<sup>10</sup> shows that the average monthly cost for rent in a senior care community is around \$5,000. In some instances, it could take up to

sixty days to redo the apartment and have a new resident come in. All in, the revenue loss could reach \$15,000 per resident lost.

In today's competitive marketplace, losing a resident to another community is an expense you can't afford. Happy residents don't move out. Happy residents brag about their community and invite friends to come for lunch.

And let's face it: When residents move in, they are not grading your community on your kitchen or dining room makeover.

My question to you is: How many of your direct care servers or frontline foodservice staff, full- and part-time, understand that poor service affects so many aspects of a resident's quality of life?

Knowledge comes from combining formal education and hands-on experience, and from learning quickly that management is a significant factor in working with staff and residents. It is a team effort. Every thought, word, and deed is vital in creating a balance.

Traditionally, our concentration on meals and food service has been more about the quality of the food. In the future, it will be about the quality of hospitality and service.

### **Truth #3: There Is A Gap Between Expectations And Service Delivery**

As customers, we make many assumptions about how we are being treated (it may not be the intention of the server or anyone delivering a service). However, our perceptions are our reality.

How about your resident expectations?

I have always believed the interactions between staff and residents in senior living and post-acute care communities are service encounters, whether it is in dining, housekeeping, or having a shower.

Throughout my career, I have often been critiqued for this very thinking. I have never understood the logic behind not treating residents as customers.

Part of my rationale could be that I never worked within the medical model mindset of service delivery, which is quite a different way of thinking.

Residents are having higher expectations for the service and hospitality they receive at mealtimes in post-acute and senior living communities across the board. Staff members can no longer be left untrained and ignorant. Service quality can make the difference between whether a resident moves in, stays, or leaves, and what they say about your community.

Staff often do not realize how important their service is to the future success of the company. Many staff serving meals told me during my research that they believe they don't have time to provide "service." They often say that when they feel under pressure, they will "sacrifice polite, courteous behavior." *Do you ever see that happen?*

When a new potential resident visits the community with their family, they will often linger in the dining room. They wish to see how the staff interacts with the residents, as well as see what types of food are being served. And believe me, those visitors can tell very quickly what kind of service is being provided.

The gap may not happen so obviously in the independent dining room, but it can and does happen in the assisted living and memory care environments. More staff are required when there is a greater need for eating assistance. And having a keen eye for individual residents plays a large role.

I remember one instance where a caregiver was cueing a resident to eat. The registered dietitian happened to be in the dining room and commented to the server, "This resident is left-handed, and you are asking her to eat with her right hand. That might be why she is struggling." Details matter.

Also, with everything being digital at this point, a visitor could capture a less-than-stellar moment, and that bad press could spread like wildfire. Unwilling or uneducated staff is no longer an excuse for not meeting higher expectations.

It's time to dissolve the gap between the residents expecting to receive high-quality service and the staff unwilling or untrained to provide it.

#### **Truth #4: There Is A Continued Focus On Higher Quality Of Service And Care**

How are you delivering? With the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services federal guidelines stressing a person-centered approach to senior care,<sup>11</sup> those aging into a senior-living community also want a much higher standard of service.

You can have fewer staff if they are adequately trained. They instinctively know what needs to be done and work together as a cohesive unit to accomplish those tasks. And they understand the uniqueness of each resident.

This is a room full of individuals with experiences and stories that make each of them unique and an important part of the community. Residents want much more say in their dining experience. They want to select the food that reminds them of past experiences, including travel and visits to a variety of restaurants. They also want to continue to celebrate events around the table. Even though they are now living in a senior community, they still want that personalization and freedom of choice.

#### **Truth #5: You're Dependent On Your Lowest-Paid, Least-Trained Staff To Manage Your Most Important Experience**

Let that sink in for a second. You are handing off one of the most significant opportunities for experience and word-of-mouth marketing to some of

your least trained staff. These employees are being held responsible for creating relationships that are so critical to resident and family satisfaction. They, in essence, are the conduit between management, the kitchen, and the customer (i.e., the resident and families).

Just because they are lower-paid does not mean they are not vital to the community's success. As we've mentioned, they are central figures to dining quality. Investment in their education on social skills and how to build lasting interpersonal relationships is rarely provided in senior care communities. When it is, and coupled with the creation of clear and concise service standards, it instructs staff members how best to interact with residents and one another. Their success becomes vital to the success of your community and can provide substantial return on investment and a competitive edge.

Some communities focus on investing instead on remarking the dining room, adding a happy hour, or another quick fix. Those gimmicks cannot replace a strong dining experience. Someone once told me in reference to poorly trained servers, "It's like building a Formula 1 race car and putting the Little Old Lady from Pasadena behind the wheel."

You may think I am referring to the kitchen staff. What I am really talking about is any person in any department who serves a meal and is part of this equation. Generally, the caregiving staff do not receive customer service/hospitality training. And these are the staff members who benefit the most from this type of training.

Some may say, "I was not hired to be a waitress." I am not asking them to become a waitress. What I am asking, and what you should also be asking, is for them to take the dining experience and make it a powerful tool for connection, community, and caring.

Caregivers are often not told they will spend half their day serving food. But this is part of providing care and service to the residents. They, and

their direct supervisors, need to truly understand how important the dining environment is, and how they play a critical role as well.

### **Truth #6: This Last Truth Is The Culmination Of The Other Truths—You Must Invest In Your People**

What are you missing out on if you choose not to? Professional training and development create camaraderie between employees. It aligns the different departments together and helps them work toward a collective goal.

It also fosters trust and consistency, where employees believe in their worth and feel they can positively impact the community and its residents. *They stay*. And we learn from *The Calling: Why Healthcare Is So Special*<sup>12</sup> by author Quint Studer that people are drawn to post-acute care and senior living because they have a heart for helping and being useful.

According to a study published in *Harvard Business Review*,<sup>13</sup> a thriving workforce is one where employees are not just satisfied and productive but also engaged in creating both their future and the future of the company. And thriving employees have a bit of an edge. They actually care.

A well-known adage is that good service can save a bad meal, but a good meal cannot save bad service. When you go out to eat and you spend money, you also expect great service to be part of that equation. You want high value for your dollar. Your residents are going “out” to eat, sometimes every single day. Do you think they are any different?

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but a good meal cannot save bad service.

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## **How Training Impacts The Value Chain**

The value chain is the revenue of the community, where you have a customer (the resident) who pays money. They continue to pay money and even invite other people to become customers because they're satisfied with the service.

Some people may think that residents are real estate customers, but they are not. The vast majority are investing in a life experience, which includes the staff, the other residents, and an important conduit: food. It is a universal language of love, satisfaction, and belonging.

What makes residents satisfied with the service is when the staff who serve them are also happy and satisfied. And what makes them happy and satisfied? They are most happy with their job when they have a good relationship with their immediate supervisor and with the people they work with daily. Finally, if they feel that the work they do is important, they think that they matter.

Investment in consistent professional training helps to make the six truths work for the community and elevate the dining experience. It provides the foundation for more pride in the work we do serving older adults, for better relationships with our colleagues and our customers (again, the residents), and for making what we do, even something as small as making sure ketchup comes with the hot fries, impactful.

Training matters if you are serious about positively impacting your residents' nutritional health and well-being and your business's bottom line.<sup>14</sup> What does that missed opportunity between connection and community look like?