



Extra caring times? Marketing social value in your offer to older people

Many organisations think of marketing in terms of those activities which are related to advertising, PR and personal selling.

This paper invites the reader to take a step back from this traditional view to recognise its wider role in terms of understanding and responding to customers/service users.

From the articulation of its values, to managing physical evidence, to recruiting and engaging the right staff, marketing oriented organisations embrace a customer-focused approach which is an integral part of its culture.

Understanding how this works in marketing extra care/assisted living will help organisations to identify areas of focus that will improve levels of engagement with prospective residents/service users and stimulate demand for services.

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May 2014

Introduction

Moving into assisted living or specialist accommodation such as extra care housing is not necessarily deemed an aspirational choice. At best it offers a sense of security for future years. For many it signifies a major marker in declining health and mobility. It is propelled by negative drivers. The prospect is confusing, emotional and complicated.

It is hard for people to judge the quality of a service in advance or the levels of control that they will have over their lives once they move in, particularly as health needs increase. You can't try it on and you can't return it if you don't like it. For these reasons, it brings with it a significant element of risk.

With several family members often part of the decision-making process, people are looking for evidence of compassionate care, competence and consistency (the new 4 Cs of 'best value'). They will use what they see and understand to determine which organisations deliver these values with integrity and naturally gravitate towards market leaders.

This is why charities (and providers of extra care housing) must actively manage every aspect of their existence to help build trust and allow potential clients and their families, as well as trusted third parties such as GPs and social workers to more easily and confidently evaluate service providers' offering in advance.

This paper examines the specific characteristics of services in terms of intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability, looking at how this impacts on perceptions of quality and levels of satisfaction. It will also explore how an extended marketing mix can be utilised to counter these issues and create a strong customer-oriented culture as well as stimulating word of mouth recommendations where service users and their families act as positive ambassadors in the organisation.

A leap of faith

Moving into assisted living or specialist housing is, for many, a risky decision. That risk can be experienced in a number of different ways. People are concerned about financial arrangements and their ability to pay or access funding. Others will be anxious that their physical environment will remain homely, comfortable and safe. Many will also feel uncertain about the opportunities for social interaction or having to live amongst individuals with whom they otherwise might not choose to mix. There is also an underlying issue that may be the biggest risk of all: the psychological implications of giving up their current home and acknowledging that a move is necessary at all.

The vague concept of assisted living does nothing to help the situation. The features on offer vary from provider to provider, making it difficult for people to clearly understand the choices on offer. The fact that there are so many different terms and phrases associated with specialist housing for older people adds further complexity to the whole idea. What's more, it is often confused with the more traditional concept of an 'old people's home' which many rightly regard as a step too far for their personal circumstances. The emotional benefits of making the most of growing older and living life to the full can be difficult to reconcile and conflict with prevention and loss avoidance.

It is for these reasons that gathering the right information is fraught with difficulties for customers (or service users, residents, clients, beneficiaries, whichever term you choose, the principles are the same). For the sake of simplicity, the phrase customer will be used in this discussion

and is taken to refer to prospective occupants and others who guide the decision-making process.

Even when they do begin to grasp the 'model' of housing with care, evaluation of the options that are available to them remains elusive. Only certain service attributes can be assessed prior to take-up. Others (the experience and credibility of a service) are difficult, if not impossible, to appraise before a service has been delivered, and even then, it may still be difficult to assess with any confidence. This is because there are four unique characteristics of the service environment in this sector. They are as follows:

Intangibility

Services cannot be easily displayed, communicated or experienced prior to consumption, which makes judgements about quality and value for money difficult for customers. For customers in assisted living environments, the consequences of poor quality services are high and, as a result, levels of perceived risk are increased. What's more, there is little or nothing in the way of physical material that a customer takes away as a result of the transaction as evidence of the quality and value of their experience.

Inseparability

Many of our services require customers to be part of the process: often customers are involved in the delivery of the service at the time it is provided. This could be when they are receiving personal care, having their home cleaned or enjoying a meal in the restaurant. It is here where the customer's perceptions of quality are particularly sensitive and where a customer's ability (or inability) to participate can have the most impact.

What's more, the role of other customers is often an additional dynamic. Extra care environments by their very nature involve interaction between residents in a community setting and these exchanges will also affect residents' enjoyment in different ways, both positively and negatively. Friendly neighbours who look out for each other and provide informal networks of support can significantly increase customer satisfaction. On the other hand, some customer's behaviour can result in negative experiences for fellow residents.

Variability

Consistency of service encounters is almost impossible for service organisations to guarantee. Despite training, induction programmes and appraisals, service provision does vary between staff and interactions with each individual customer will not be exactly the same. This can lead to perceptions of variability that can often be a significant source of anxiety for people when they are considering assisted living.

Perishability

Since services cannot be stored, peaks and troughs in demand have to be catered for effectively and your ability to do so will influence the customer's experience. Furthermore, bad experiences cannot be exchanged for good ones and the effort required to rescue such situations is much greater and therefore more costly than it would be in a transaction relating to a physical product. Putting things right is time-consuming and twice as many people tell others about bad service than good.

The decision-making process

All of this is particularly relevant in view of the process that people usually follow when making decisions, which begins with the recognition of a need and problem awareness.

Having navigated this hurdle, which for many is a difficult process in itself, people then embark on a search for information, which is followed by the evaluation of alternatives prior to making a purchase decision. The issues of intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability present a significant barrier to an individual's ability to gather information which they can trust and make judgements about the choices available upon which to base their decision.

Despite government support to improve the availability of information and advice for older people through initiatives such as FirstStopAdvice¹, it is no surprise that countless older people spend much of their time struggling to understand and evaluate their options, and that procrastination is a common result. There are, however, ways in which developers and providers operating in this market can improve the situation by creating more tangible proof of the quality and consistency of their services.

Broadening the boundaries of marketing

As service providers we are naturally disposed towards customer focus and outcomes-based measures of care and support. Within our care and support environments, we are skilled at building relationships with our customers.

Yet we have been less astute at recognising the role that the philosophy of marketing as a concept can play in setting out vital clues throughout our relationships with our customers.

As Ian Bruce, author of *Charity Marketing: meeting need through customer focus* says: 'marketing' has negative associations, describing a process for selling people things they do not need. He goes on to argue, however, that this is not the case:

"Essentially, marketing is a way of fitting together the planning and implementation of goods, services or ideas in a practical but sophisticated way, and in a way that emphasises the needs of the customer, client or person in need rather than simply trying to improve the efficiency of existing processes or ways of doing things".

In order to truly exploit the power of marketing within our organisations, we need to recognise that the domain of the discipline is not restricted to advertising or PR or communications. Marketing is a cycle of activity that when integrated within the DNA of an organisation can usefully inform the analysis, planning and implementation of an organisation's strategy and objectives. It can do this by helping to identify and respond to the real and changing needs of our customers. It can also provide vital intelligence in understanding and responding to the wider market, to customer behaviours and competitor activity. This means that attracting and retaining customers is only part of a bigger role for marketing, which should also include helping to evaluate and improve service provision.

Services marketing in our industry

Whilst our product offering encompasses the physical aspects of bricks and mortar, the service element of our offering (our care, our support, our facilities) is the major driver for take-up by our customers. The dynamics around the care and support in terms of how our customers'

¹ www.firststopcareadvice.org.uk

emotions are affected and how this influences perceptions of quality are more subtle and varied. This is exacerbated by the negative drivers behind take-up of our services and the fact that, for many, there is a realisation that this may be their last move in life, particularly if continuing care and end of life support is available as part of the offering.

This is why tangible clues are important. People will judge the approach and attitude of staff, the cleanliness of the reception area and the upkeep of the buildings and vehicles as indicators of the quality of the care and support that will be provided. They will rely on personal sources of information, word of mouth recommendations and the dialogue they have with staff who describe services to them and it is this evidence upon which they will judge the quality and value of a service.

When customers and staff are satisfied it is easily noticeable. Their experiences and the ways they demonstrate this within the service and to the wider world constitute the most believable evidence you can offer to prospective customers and their families.

People are already anxious about moving, giving up their independence, leaving the familiar surroundings of the family home. By making sure that prospective customers encounter the same quality of service from everyone with whom they have contact (including the gardeners, the reception staff as well as the care team), it is possible to eradicate concerns about the consistency of the service that they can expect from the organisation as a whole.

Customers will focus on your ability to handle their demands for information at different times of the day as an indication of how well you are likely to respond to them when they become residents. Failure to return their call or follow up on their enquiry within what they consider to be a reasonable timeframe will affect this.

How can the marketing mix help?

For many years, the traditional marketing mix focused on what were considered the key ingredients of the four Ps of *product*, *price*, *promotion*, and *place*. Although these components originate from a tangible product-oriented approach to marketing, they still have valuable application within the context of marketing housing with care, but in line with services marketing in general, four further Ps have been added to the mix by various authors: *people*, *physical evidence*, *process* and *philosophy*.

Thinking about the marketing mix in the context of this debate can provide useful methods for identifying ways in which to tackle the issues of intangibility, inseparability, perishability and variability. Organisations can tap into this list to examine different aspects of their work – and see how it isn't just consigned to the activities of the marketing team but needs a cross-team and whole organisation approach, championed by the chief executive and trustees with strong buy-in from the entire workforce.

Your product offering - what business are you really in?

People don't buy assisted living or extra care housing. They buy peace of mind, a reduction in loss of independence, the chance to maximise their enjoyment of life for longer, the opportunity to live with like-minded people, the avoidance of becoming a burden on their children. These are the benefits that matter to your customers.

It seems obvious, but this 'marketing myopia' can affect the way an organisation and its staff articulate their offering to the point where it can knock their strategy so far off course that they

are no longer seen as relevant to their customers, particularly if there are other organisations that are seen to better hit the spot.

If your organisation is consciously aware that assisted living or extra care housing is only the **means by which** you provide the benefits of your offering and you truly grasp the extent and meaning of the real features and benefits of your offering to your customers, they will be able to see this clearly in everything that you do. Arising from this extends heightened levels of trust as customers feel assured that you see the world from their point of view and as a consequence intangibles become more tolerable.

There are other advantages too. For example, organisations can deliver a better service and a competitive advantage by responding quickly to customers' needs and aspirations and flexing their services to accommodate. This can often present the opportunity for organisations to move into new ways of working and building a reputation for responding to customer need can be a major point of differentiation from the competition.

Defining what business you are actually in doesn't stop at a once-only assessment, however. This issue needs to be part of a constant cycle of review and renewal so that an organisation's offering remains relevant in a shifting market.

A major consideration is the new cohort of 'Baby Boomers' (born between 1946 and 1964) that is now entering the scene. The expectations and buying behaviour of this group of people are fundamentally different from the preceding 'Silent' generation. 'Silents', also known as 'Traditionalists' are more conservative in their characteristics. They tend to look for financial security, are focused on comfort and more readily conform to social norms.

Baby boomers, on the other hand, are experimental and individualistic. They expect choice and tailored services. Crucially, they are more demanding in terms of value for money. How this is likely to translate in terms of their expectations of care and support in their older age will, to some extent, only become apparent as they continue to age. What we can all be sure of is that our services will need to change and keeping in touch with their perspectives will play a fundamental role in that process.

Making your values and philosophy explicit

It is appropriate at this stage to turn our attention to one of the more recently added components of the marketing mix, that of *philosophy* or values.

An organisation's philosophy – the guiding principles of behaviour – underpins its product offering in that these values will determine an organisation's attitudes and approach to customers, staff and the services it provides. To some extent, your values are fundamentally tied into your product offering because customers will consider your philosophy as part of what they are contemplating buying into.

Most organisations can now boast a set of corporate values, but in order for them to have impact in an organisation they need to be able to carry their own weight. Not only must they be recognised by your staff group, they should also feel able to identify with them, so that the whole organisation 'lives and breathes' those values.

Values should permeate every aspect of your activities, from the strategic direction that is led by the senior team and/or trustees, right through to the minute detail of how you go about delivering your services on a daily basis. The result is a consistent approach that, when experienced by customers, delivers reassurances against concerns of variability.

Organisations that have brought their values to life recruit staff whose personal beliefs are congruent with those of the organisation. They look for candidates who express these values, often giving more weight to this than that of technical or clinical skill. Corporate communications, tone of voice, brand and other images offer clear markers of their values so that they also attract customers whose principles are compatible with the organisation.

They describe in detail what this means so that no one is in any doubt as to what the organisation stands for and what they can expect. The subsequent clues that are given off are exactly those that are intended, and they combine to present a consistently compelling story of the organisation on a daily basis.

Price – what is the real cost to the customer?

Price does not solely relate to the financial costs associated with an organisation's offering, although financial considerations are often the most dominant factor for many in the decision-making process. Even though customers will add other elements of 'sacrifice' (e.g. giving up the family home) to their consideration of 'cost', many will use price as an indicator of the quality of the offering.

Since paying for a negatively-driven service is an unwanted expense, it could be argued that individuals will choose the cheapest option available to them. This isn't necessarily the case. Studies of consumer behaviour have shown that when people have a choice, they tend not to buy the cheapest option, mainly because of concerns that the quality will be inferior. This is even more important in respect of services because of the issue of intangibility. Even though asking for money often sits awkwardly with providers in our industry, organisations that choose to compete solely on price may therefore be doing themselves a disservice unless they provide clear guidance about the rationale behind their pricing structures and can demonstrate the ways in which consistent quality is maintained.

Expanding upon the idea of 'sacrifice', cost equates to a trade-off between the perceived benefits of the service and what the customer must give up in order to have it. It involves consideration of many factors that might include leaving the family home, giving up the garden, losing the car, saying farewell to a local community, reducing one's possessions to fit into a smaller space, or giving up one's independence and/or privacy. For many, the sense of 'sacrifice' is more keenly felt if negative circumstances such as changing care needs is the main driver. This is why articulating the right benefits of your offering is so important in giving assurances of a collaborative, inclusive approach (inseparability) and consistent high quality delivery (variability) so that the true value of what you provide can be fully understood.

Promotion – getting the right message across

In their book *Services Marketing*, Hoffman and Bateson provide a useful list of practical ideas to help organisations use promotion effectively in marketing their services. After segmenting an audience into appropriate groups, messages can be targeted more effectively so that they reach the right audiences at the right time via the right media. For example:

Develop a word of mouth communications network

Word of mouth is the most powerful source of new enquiries in our industry. Given the high-risk nature of choosing our services, people will look to others for assurances that they are making the right decision and that the organisation they have chosen can be trusted. Asking residents

to talk to individuals who are starting the process of investigating their options provides a convincing endorsement that is seen as more credible than one given by a member of a sales team. The same goes for testimonials or on-line ratings given by real service users. This is especially powerful if the individual commending the service provider is known and respected and has much more impact when compared to advertising or PR.

A satisfied staff group also presents a persuasive case in favour of your organisation; it is a well-known fact that high staff morale is directly linked to high resident satisfaction. People who are proud of their organisation will make more effort to deliver high quality services and will talk positively about where they work. Organisations which have fostered a culture of excellence as a habit persistently show their best side so that those referrals over which they have no control are invariably positive.

Promise what is possible

Customer satisfaction is based on a comparison between what was expected and perceptions of what was actually delivered. When a customer's experience falls short of their expectations, they become dissatisfied. The larger the gap is between the two, the higher the levels of disappointment.

It is tempting for marketers to overpromise, which, aside from leaving customers feeling frustrated, also results in a significant loss of trust. Furthermore, unhappy customers will tell other people about their experiences. This can have a sizeable effect on an organisation's reputation.

Employees will also feel the effects, particularly front-line colleagues who will bear the brunt of customer discontent. Taking into account the direct link between staff satisfaction and that of your customers, organisations need to take care that what is being promoted is actually what the organisation delivers. Once more we return to the idea that everyone should thoroughly understand the true benefits of what you do and how you go about it.

Tangibilise the intangible

This is about making your services feel more concrete. Use pictures and stories that bring the service to life based on the features and benefits that you know are important to your customers. Make it more authentic by telling stories and sharing testimonials about people's experiences. We are all aware that offering people the chance to come and see what you do is a powerful means of tangibilising your offering and many organisations do this to good effect by offering the opportunity to try the services before making a commitment.

Feature the working relationship between customer and provider

Considering the issue of inseparability and the fact that customers play a part in the actual delivery of services, it makes sense that your marketing materials should show customers and colleagues working together to achieve a desired outcome. This works not only for the customer, but also in fostering a collaborative approach amongst your staff group.

Reduce consumer fears about variations in performance

People will be looking for clues about consistency: things which reduce fears about variability. Provide information that reassures customers – either through consistent results in satisfaction surveys or through qualitative testimonials that commend your service.

Determine and focus on relevant service quality dimensions

Returning again to understanding what features and benefits are most important to your customers, it is important to remember that some will be more salient than others and these should be the areas of focus in your marketing messages.

Differentiate the service product from service delivery

This is a really important point. There is a big difference between what your service provides and how it is provided. If you are able to convey something about the way in which you go about delivering your services that sets you apart from others, you will find that customers are better able to connect with your organisation and what it has to offer (see philosophy, above).

Lastly, make sure you measure your promotional efforts. This will help you understand what works and what doesn't, and why. Remember that it's not just about how many enquiries you get, but also which ones are the richest sources of conversion into actual customers.

A sense of place

This element of the marketing mix is about the physical locations in which you deliver your services and requires organisations to think about their sphere of influence (how far will people move to live in your facility). This can be affected by regional demographics and the extent of local infrastructure: proximity to the motorway network or the location of a key family member.

Different localities will have different spheres of influence, which depend on a whole host of factors. These can include urban/rural location, the socio-economic structure of the surrounding area, reputation of the organisation, or size and price of accommodation, to name just a few.

In the JRF study *Living at Hartrigg Oaks: residents' views of the UK's first continuing care retirement community*, (2003), participants noted that the location of the village within the city of York and all that this had to offer was a key part of the location. Being close to the city centre, but also a local suburb and the outer ring-road were also given as reasons for choosing to live there. Finally, the "well-maintained turn of the century redbrick terraced homes with gardens and green areas, with adjoining fields on one side" was also offered as a rationale.

There's a hint in this last point that a sense of place goes beyond the rational benefits of a location. Where people live says something about who they are and an individual's connection with a place can be a significant part of their sense of identity. The perceptions of others about where they live and the environment around them can also be a factor for those for whom social status is a deciding factor.

It is important, therefore, to be mindful of these issues when putting your offerings into their locational context within your communications. It should also help you to think about the kinds of people you will need to target as well as how far you might need to cast your net to reach prospective residents.

Clues in people

One cannot underestimate the role of the people who work in all parts of your service on delivery of consistent quality and demonstrating the values of the organisation to the wider world. Anyone who comes into contact with your customers will make an impression: it's

important to make sure that all employees and volunteers across the organisation understand the experience of your customers and their part in the co-production of that experience.

This is even more important when one considers that the source of dissatisfaction for many customers comes about as a result of a failure on the part of the organisation (its people) to meet expectation. When customers are grappling with the risks associated with moving into extra care housing, you are unlikely to be given a second chance should things not go well the first time they make contact with you.

Excellent organisations use recruitment methods that identify staff who will genuinely embrace the organisation's values, which is just as important (if not more) than technical or clinical expertise. For example, some organisations choose to appoint individuals who talk about a sense of achievement from helping others rather than those who talk about their own advancement.

A keen eye on promoting a customer-first mentality amongst colleagues is vital to ensure that they adopt a flexible and responsive attitude that can be seen and understood by all. The positive impact this will have on reputation and word of mouth recommendations is inestimable and will go much further than many other forms of promotion or personal selling that you employ within your marketing programmes.

Creating a positive attitude towards customers amongst those individuals who will deal with initial enquiries is obviously important here and most of us will consider ourselves to do this well. It is worth taking the time, however, to review and challenge this perception. Do calls really get answered as quickly as they should? Did we respond to their enquiry in the way they would have liked? How do people experience us when they call or visit at the weekend or in the evenings? Did we provide full and accurate advice at the right level and volume for that individual at that time? Did the customer feel that their enquiry was the most important thing to the employee with whom they were dealing at that time?

Shortcomings in this area can and will result in lost leads, never mind the potential for reputational damage should they choose to share any negative experiences with other people.

Physical evidence

In an article in the *Harvard Business Review* called *Clueing In Customers* (February 2003), Leonard Berry talks about 'evidence management'. He describes it as the "explicit approach to presenting customers with coherent, honest evidence of your abilities. Evidence management is a lot like advertising, except that it turns a company into a living, breathing advertisement for itself".

The point that Berry makes is extremely important in that the physical evidence should echo the values of your organisation. Customers often place reliance on physical evidence because other substantiation of the quality of your service is not readily available. It provides the backcloth for judgement of all other aspects of what you do. Physical evidence can be extremely influential in establishing customer expectations before take-up, and can continue to be influential during take-up.

Physical evidence encompasses a considerable array of clues including the quality of the print and images in your marketing brochures and on your website. Making sure that your organisation is consistent with its branding by using (and adhering to) corporate style guidelines and tone of voice as well as the look and feel of your photography will work wonders in providing assurances of an organisation that is consistent in its operations.

It goes further than this, however, to the cleanliness of the reception area. The gardens and outside of the buildings, liveries on your organisation's vehicles, their age and how clean they are kept, the signage in your sites and buildings, the standard of the uniforms worn by your staff are all physical indicators of what people can expect from your services.

Creating opportunities for prospective residents to engage with the organisation before making a decision gives you the chance to remove some of the intangibility of your offering. To touch and feel that organisation through volunteering, a 'try before you buy', or accessing some services such as activities, or care in their own homes, will bring some of the features and benefits to life.

A good way of looking at physical evidence is to consider it as your packaging. It is all those things that give a customer an impression of your offering and your brand that they can touch, see or feel. If it isn't consistent, there's a distinct possibility that your customers will become suspicious of the authenticity of your other messages.

Process - effort and involvement

There's an important idea here around customer effort. How easy (or difficult) is it for someone to access your services? Consideration of your process and customers' levels of involvement in that process can present valuable opportunities to ensure that you maintain their interest. How well you engage them before they arrive will give them an indication of how well you will engage with them after they've moved in. From a psychological standpoint, being unresponsive or having complicated processes for application and assessment will put people off. If you aren't able to handle their enquiry with efficiency and the right level of care, how will you treat them as a resident?

Standardised processes will reduce perceptions of variability and offer prospective residents more confidence in the consistency of your services across the board. This advice comes with a word of caution, however, in that organisations also need to demonstrate the capacity to tailor their services to meet the needs of the individual so that standardised processes are a method by which to ensure consistency in quality but colleagues are able to adapt their approaches within these parameters as necessary.

When dealing with prospective residents, colleagues need to give the impression that they know the answers, or can easily find out if they don't – and this includes staff who might be dealing with out of hours enquiries for whom this isn't their principal job. Ensuring that all employees treat every enquiry as the most important thing to them at the time is particularly crucial in ensuring that people don't have an excuse to walk away.

Many organisations are now making use of customer journey maps to identify the key touch-points they have with their customers. It is an extremely useful process in understanding the experience of people as they navigate their way through the process of choosing extra care housing. Crucially, a customer experience map will identify the nature of the various touch-points together with points of pain and pleasure. This information can be used to alleviate points of pain and use points of pleasure to create a more positive experience for customers.

Conclusion

For many older people, choosing to move into assisted living is a risky decision, not helped by the fact that services cannot be easily assessed prior to consumption. Concerns about variability in quality and an organisation's capacity to provide support are key issues in the decision-making process.

Marketing has so much more to offer an organisation than merely placing adverts or generating PR. It has a key role to play in effectively engaging with its current and prospective customers and in generating and driving revenue. Taking a wider perspective of the purpose of marketing in an organisation to include identifying and responding to the real and changing needs of customers, providing intelligence and insights into customer behaviour and competitive activity as well as attracting and retaining customers will help an organisation to deliver its strategy and objectives.

Creating a range of activities within your marketing mix encourages the organisation to become more customer focused and tuned into the needs of the people for whom you provide your services. Customers look for tangible clues as evidence of the quality and consistency of what you do and by making sure that every aspect of your activities reflects a passion for care and quality, the evidence given off by your organisation will speak for itself.

This starts with understanding and articulating the real benefits and features of your offering so that you know what it is your customers are actually seeking to gain. Combined with this is the need for a vocalisation of your philosophy – the values of your organisation which forms part of your offering to customers. These values must resonate across the organisation so that employees in all parts of the business demonstrate them on a daily basis.

The sacrifice that is made by customers who avail themselves of your service relates not just to the financial cost. Although many customers will judge the quality of your services on price, they will also consider other things they must 'give up' in order to move. They need assurances that the benefits will be worth the effort and that they can rely on and trust in your organisation.

Your promotional activity should seek to develop a word of mouth communications network and promise what is possible. Communications and personal experiences that tangibilise the intangible and which feature the working relationship between the customer and the provider will help to deflect some of the issues of intangibility. Concerns about variability can be overcome by focusing on the **relevant** service quality dimensions and by differentiating the service product (the what) from the service delivery (the how).

Thinking about location in terms of how far people will move can be useful in informing how widely you will need to promote your facility, but there is also a need to understand how a sense of place can affect a person's identity which will also influence the ways in which you advertise your offering. Added to this is the recognition that proximity to a family member, usually children, can influence an individual's choice of location. It is important, therefore, to engage this audience in your promotional activities too.

Employees in all parts of your organisation can impact on the experience of your customers and are a major source of clues about the quality of your services. Creating a customer focused culture in which service quality is a habit for everyone will ensure that every touch point gives off the right message day in, day out. Customers will also look to various sources of physical evidence for assurances about your organisation. The condition of your buildings, the quality

of your printed and other written materials, the upkeep of the gardens, the standard of the uniforms are amongst the tangible indicators of what people can expect.

Finally, the ease with which they are able to deal with your organisation and the quality of the processes that you have in place will be used by customers to rate your organisation against others. They are looking for assurances of consistency through standardised processes, balanced with agility in being able to respond to them as an individual.

Organisations that truly understand these issues will have created a culture that puts the customer at the forefront of why and how the values of the organisation support the delivery of compassionate care, competence and consistency. They are destined to be successful because they build trust, they meet expectations and they habitually provide tangible clues that make it easy for customers to evaluate their services. The result is an organisation that can rely on word-of-mouth recommendations which carry infinitely more weight than regular promotional activity alone.

Top ten tips

1. Invest time in understanding the real features and benefits of your offering to customers so that the whole organisation is oriented to meet those needs.
2. Embed your organisation's philosophy and values across the whole business so that your values are consistently presented.
3. Create communications that tangibilise your offering and balance the benefits with the sacrifices that customers consider they have to make in order to access your services.
4. Employ people who buy into your values so that their behaviour is customer-focused and the expectations of customers are met.
5. Consciously manage physical evidence so that the tangible aspects of your facilities are consistent.
6. Develop a word-of-mouth recommendation network to add credibility to your offering.
7. Map the customer journey and touch points so that you can review and refine customer experiences at all stages of the process.
8. Make it easy for customers to interact with you to show that it will be easy when they move in to your facility.
9. Create a culture of agility so that your organisation can quickly respond to the needs of individuals and the changing expectations of your wider customer base.
10. Ensure that these activities are a continuous cycle of activity that requires regular review and measurement.

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Other useful information

To access a range of other resources on marketing extra care housing, visit the Housing LIN pages at:

www.housinglin.org.uk/siteSearch/index.cfm?page=doSearch&keywords=marketing

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the author

Rachel is Head of Marketing and Communications for Bristol-based charity, St Monica Trust. She has been in the not-for-profit sector for 15 years, principally marketing older people's services. During her career, Rachel has also been involved in social research into ageing and support for the elderly. In 2011, Rachel completed an MSc in Marketing and is a Member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing and a Chartered Marketer. She is also chair of the National Care Forum marketing group.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement opportunities, including 'discovery' visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

Published by

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