



Is Your Menu Costing You Move-Ins?

By Pam McDonald

The standard menu program in the senior living industry is a 4-, 5- or 6-week menu cycle . . . , which residents then live with forever!

“The menu is recycled and recycled and recycled,” says David C. Koelling, President of [Strategic Dining Services](#), an integrated, hospitality-based dining management company and Senior Housing Forum partner.

Most Common Complaints

In fact, based on national surveys, this lack of variety is the second most common complaint senior living residents have about the food in their community. The #1 complaint, in case you’re wondering, is food not being served at the proper temperature – either not hot or not cold.

Sometimes communities have separate menus for Spring and Fall. But staff can flounder in their execution and communities usually don’t take full advantage of the products that are available during those times of year. Nor do they avail themselves fully of the seasonable products in the local marketplace.

More likely, every few years, a community tosses its tired, old menu and starts from scratch, radically changing what it has led its residents to expect. “The result,” David says, “typically is upheaval. It confuses residents and throws them into a tizzy, the cook and line struggle to master all new recipes, and the servers take a lot of flak.”

An Evolutionary Approach

David suggests, instead of replacement, communities take an evolutionary approach to their menus – slow and gradual changes that are, nonetheless, continual. This approach satisfies the frequent request for variety in menu offerings. He recommends food service directors change 10% of the items (about 2 a week) at 5, 6 or whatever the menu cycle is.

“Focus on what isn’t working and eliminate it,” says David. “Take a look at food that is fresh, cheap, and available; then create menu items featuring that. The standards and favorites remain untouched. This type of change, while a big paradigm shift, is not destabilizing.”

David points out that residents are not going to like everything on the menu. He says, “That’s okay. It will trigger conversations, get them talking and engaged. You also can add “Residents’ Choices” to the menu, which can result in a bolstered sense of empowerment.”

Expectations Are Changing

David notes that expectations about dining services in senior living are changing. At the very base of the organization, if you are using terms like “dietary” and food service” consider changing to dining department, dining service, culinary team, etc. The words you chose set the expectations of the residents.

Would you like to have dinner prepared by the dietary department, or dine where the dining services or culinary team prepared your dinner? Current residents dined out more often than preceding generations and are likely to anticipate restaurant-style fare and service. They’re also not the only target audience sampling the community’s meals.

The Influencers of Move-In Decisions

David says, “Prospects include the future residents and their adult children – typically Baby Boomers. They are huge influencers of move-in decisions and they’ve dined out lots. They’re just not going to be impressed with All American meat and potatoes.”

David notes that once an evolutionary approach is adopted to menu changes, it’s time to take a look at menus posted around the community or included in marketing materials. “Nothing says ‘institutional’ food, like a generic calendar-style menu,” David says.

“Dining service directors should look for ways to use more contemporary and sophisticated verbiage on their menus, not fancy, but descriptive. A menu that says home-style meat loaf, buttermilk mashed potatoes and pan gravy ‘sets the table’ before the food even comes. We eat with our eyes first.”



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