



Wow Dining Experiences To Keep Your Community Full

By Pam McDonald

“When your community has a well-trained culinary team, a hospitality culture, and a dining program focused on excellence, you have a substantial competitive advantage,” says RonnDa Peters, Vice President of Marketing and Sales for [Strategic Dining Services](#) (SDS).

SDS is an integrated, hospitality-based dining management company and Senior Housing Forum partner. RonnDa notes, “We work with the community’s existing dining team to transform ho-hum experiences into wow moments and encourage other departments to surprise and delight the residents as well. This hospitality mentality is an engaging activity for the team.

“Every department can contribute in some way to delighting residents, family members, and guests. We ask them to list all the things they’re doing to demonstrate their commitment to hospitality. Then we urge them to come up with new ideas, experiment, and share results at stand-up meetings. We often see a competitive environment develop between departments as they try to top the latest idea to demonstrate hospitality.”

Small Tokens Make A Big Impact

RonnDa is quick to point out that these ideas don’t have to be grand gestures, nor do they have to cost much at all. Small tokens can just as effectively demonstrate a commitment to excellence and signal that staff is paying attention to details. For example:

- Serving a resident tea before she asks because you know she prefers it to coffee
- Adding a flower to tray service when a resident is under the weather
- Having housekeepers carry a basket of bottled water to offer to residents
- Dropping a hand-written note by a resident’s apartment
- Serving warm scones during a morning meeting with prospects and family
- Having the Chef or Dining Services Director make tableside visits to a few residents and guests during each meal

The Essential Component

What is the essential component for gaining a hospitality differentiator you can promote? Communications, communications, communications . . . internally and to residents. RonnDa says, “All departments should be letting each other know what they’re doing, but dining services and sales and marketing can take the lead. For example, Dining can suggest phrases to be used during tours; such as the following:

- Our menu features meals with fresh, seasonal, locally sourced ingredients . . .
- Our soups and sauces are made from scratch . . . therefore, sodium free . . .
- We consult with residents to create signature dishes, for example . . .”

RonnDa believes something such as the following should be printed on the menu: “Our Dining Services team is committed to creating excellence during your dining experiences.”

When creating surprise and delight, explain what you are doing and how your team developed the item or idea. Without the step of explaining, the meaning of the gesture can easily get lost and not have the impact that was intended.

Making A Bigger Splash

RonnDa also shared some suggestions for making a bigger splash. She says:

- Freshly baked bread can delight residents, families, and visitors with a low-cost treat of taste and aroma! Hold surprise Fresh Bread Nights. Think focaccia, herb bread, boules (French-style bread bowls), to name a few. Serve it warm, carved tableside.
- Create, name and package a salad dressing or signature dessert to give prospects following a tour. Feature a local ingredient like citrus in Florida or pecans from Texas. Be sure to note that this is an exclusive item, created by the culinary team and available only at your community.
- Occasionally set up cooking stations in the dining room to toss a special salad or flambe a homegrown vegetable. Have your non-dining department managers run the cooking stations
- Hold a “favorite soup” contest featuring residents’ recipes; feature the winner on the menu.
- Use your communities’ space to host 2-5 chefs from local restaurants for a fundraiser to benefit the local food bank or another food-related program.
- Distribute a recipe press release four times a year; for example, How We Prepare Our Jumbo Sticky Buns.

And, she highly recommends sharing photos and videos on social media, highlighting special menus, desserts, events with beautiful food displays, etc. Create some excitement about your dining program. Here’s a chart showing the percentage of users age 65 and older in order of their favorite channels:

Facebook: 62% predominantly women

LinkedIn: 20% slightly more men than women

Pinterest: 16% a majority women

Twitter: 10% almost evenly split among men and women

Instagram: 8% majority women



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