

Making Dining Exceptional

PROVIDERS HAVE A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE WHEN IT COMES TO CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN DINING.

BOB PACANOVSKY

It is a typical Tuesday for Janet. She has been a resident of Stow-Glen Retirement Village in Stow, Ohio, for almost five years. As she heads to the Three Hearts Restaurant on the campus of Stow-Glen, she is thinking about the meal that she will be eating. Chicken Cordon Bleu, served with Noodles Romanoff and a Pacific medley of vegetables is one of her favorite meals.

The wait staff greet her by her first name, and they tell her how pretty she looks in her purple blouse, knowing that it is her favorite color. When she sits down, she notices that her iced tea with two lemon wedges is already at her place setting. Throughout the meal, the staff ask her about her two grandchildren and the school play they both acted in. She also gets a chance to have a friendly conversation with the three other ladies at her table. The big smile on Janet's face is evident. Is this a typical Tuesday for her? It is now.

Janet, along with the rest of the residents at Stow-Glen, eats three times a day, seven days a week. But how often are they given an exceptional dining experience while they are eating?

THE DIFFERENCE

Eating is the act of consuming food. This can be done anywhere, and often it involves no one else, even if there are other people present (like wait staff, for example).



Dining, on the other hand, is having an experience while eating. Dining involves one aspect that is often overlooked while eating: the power of hospitality. Hospitality can be defined as the art of making a personal connection with someone. By their structure alone, long term and post-acute care (LT/PAC) providers have a unique opportunity to provide these connections with the residents in their communities.

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Studies have shown that LT/PAC residents spend a number of hours each day thinking about their meals. For some, they are the highlights of the



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day. They get dressed for them, travel to and from their apartments or rooms to the dining areas, and spend their time partaking of the meals.

Both residents and their families have come to expect more from the dining experience. They remember what the dining experience was like for them when they were growing up and having their friends or families come over for dinner. Those dinners included wonderful food, but even more important, they included hospitality, conversation, and fun.

Who needs to take the lead in this kind of experience in an LT/PAC center? The food staff. They need to understand the importance of what hospitality and service can do to create the dining experience that residents and families know and love.

MAKING A NEW EXPERIENCE

The food service staff at the Three Hearts Restaurant, part of Stow-Glen Retirement Village, took this philosophy to heart, so to speak. The department wanted to create a better dining experience for its 300 residents.

"Our dining experience was nothing fancy," says Tammy Denton, chief executive officer (CEO) of Stow-Glen. "Sure, we met the basic criteria of serving a hot meal that met the recommended daily allowance for nutrition, but we wanted to do better. We wanted to be the best.

"I knew I could not attend another resident council meeting and hear complaints about the experience from some of our residents. Something had to change," she says.

That change was a dining training program. Stow-Glen brought in an outside consultant to focus on customer service and food service.

"We didn't have all the answers," says Denton. "It was great to bring in someone who had the fresh set of eyes and could ask great questions, as well as listen to us while providing some insightful recommendations on how to improve the experience," Denton says.

MAKING A NEW EXPERIENCE

How is a new and improved experience created? It requires both education and training.

Education involves teaching the staff the benefits of getting to know their residents, their customers. And here is the kicker. The staff in LT/PAC centers have the perfect opportunity to know many of these customers. Why? Because they are with them day in and day out.

Consider this. Most restaurants would fall head over heels if they were told that they were able to serve the same 100, 200, or 300 customers every day. This is a definition of loyal customers. The good news is that care centers already have loyal customers, so, why shouldn't dining staff know as much as they possibly can about the residents?

Through education, staff should be made aware of the benefits that come with knowing things like the dining habits of their guests. This includes their favorite beverages and meals, and details such as the number of lemon wedges they like in their ice tea. Knowing these facts means that the dining staff are listening to their customers and valuing their business.



DETAILS MATTER

But it goes even further. Details about loyal customers matter. Knowing people's favorite colors, names of family members, and meals they like also goes a long way. And how do staff go about learning these things? They ask.

That is exactly what the staff at Three Hearts Restaurants did. "We wanted to connect our staff to our residents," says Dawn Skidmore, general manager of Three Hearts.

"We created an information piece that not only captured this information, but we also took a photo of the residents so that our staff could put a face with all this information. Then it was up to the staff to get to know these details," she says.

"This education has made a major difference in how our staff treat our residents. And it makes the residents feel great knowing that we are listening."

Training is the second part of this equation and is just as important, if not more. Fine dining training focuses on the protocol involved in creating the dining experience. It includes how to properly set a table, how and when to properly serve and clear plates, what to say to residents, and how to create better systems to make sure guests receive their food in a timely manner. Something special prevails when staff are able to anticipate the needs of the residents while at the same time serving them their meals in a timely and professional way.

This type of fine dining training is crucial to operational success. It is an experiential and hands-on training program during which staff get to practice all the skills needed to provide an over-the-top, exceptional dining experience. It gives staff more confidence to do their jobs better and more efficiently.

SATISFACTION PARAMOUNT

At Stow-Glen, residents have noticed the positive changes. "They enjoy their meals more now because they are treated better," says Skidmore. "They have told me on more than one occasion that they can see the changes we are making in the dining room. It has been very positive."

The return on investment on the training aspect of the program has been noticed as well. Wait staff feel much more confident in serving their residents because now there is a better-structured operation.



And the numbers back it up. Resident satisfaction surveys showed an average of a 14.5 percent increase in satisfaction with the front-of-house staff—those working in communal areas—based on the qualities of professionalism, knowledge of menus, and friendliness.

For residents who have given up the responsibilities of cooking on a daily basis, being served meals is a major change for them. But with the proper staff education and training, residents don't need to worry about what experience they are going to have. They will be waited on and served with the utmost respect and professionalism. And that typical Tuesday dinner can change from just eating in to an exceptional dining experience. ■

BOB PACANOVSKY is a keynote speaker, trainer, and consultant with the Black Tie Dining Experience. He works with health care organizations to develop the Black Tie Dining Experience, a comprehensive program designed to improve both front-of-house and back-of-house operations in senior care and long term care communities. He can be reached at 330-352-6084 or Bob@BobPacanovsky.com.

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