

Intro:

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Lucas:

Welcome to Bridge The Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. Exciting program on today. We want to welcome our guest, DeAnne Clune. She's the managing director of Seniors Better Together. Welcome to the show.

DeAnne:

Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Lucas:

Very good to have you too. You're over on the West coast. It's a little bit earlier there than where we are, so we're glad that you're up and Adam and on the program. You know, one of the big things that Josh and I talk about a lot is changing perceptions. A lot of people have, you know, very different perceptions of what senior living is. And we've often said, you know, Josh, that a common thread of the stories of the people that work in this business, either from an operator standpoint, or even from a vendor partner standpoint like myself, is that, you're really pleasantly surprised by the people that are really in the business doing the work, how well seniors are taken care of and what a great, you know, doing well by doing good in the industry. And so changing perceptions has always been really key. And so today with DeAnne we're going to go over some, misconceptions, some fears, in the marketplace, you know, validating those, but really talking about what is the data behind that and what is really playing out. Talking about some issues with PR and media and then some of the benefits of senior living. But before we do that, tell us what Seniors Better Together is. What's your mission?

DeAnne:

Yes. Seniors Better Together is a newly formed entity. Technically it's a cooperative of senior living communities, but our mission is really to be a positive voice for senior living across the country. We feel, you know, all of the initial adopters of this program, we all feel that we're not adequately represented in the media. If there is any stories about senior living communities, it's very one-sided and generally not positive. So we want to do our part to unify everybody and bringing about the positive voice that we, in which we can promote publicly the benefits of senior living communities.

Josh:

Well, we love that mission. When we were initially speaking with you, that was one of the things that, you know, triggered us to want to have a more formal conversation with you, but let's set the stage a little bit. You know, that's an awesome mission, but I think there are a lot of misconceptions around senior living. And one of the things that we talked a little bit about prior to the show and Lucas, and I have talked a lot about this with other people is I think when we're in senior living those of us that live here, work here, we take for granted that people outside might know how to navigate it and understand it like we do. But even the term senior living for a lot of meat people means a lot of different things and it's not a one size fits all, and you had some talking points around that about the various types of this industry that we call senior living. You want to elaborate at that about that for a little bit?

DeAnne:

Sure. And I think maybe one of the things to define for people is there is a lot of difference. There, there is a wide spectrum and scale of options within this large thing that we call senior living, right? Or substitute the word retirement community or any other general term people use. And you know, it kind of internally we talk about independent living, assisted living, things like that. And there, it really kind of comes down to, there are a lot of want based, lifestyle community options for people. And there are more needs based community options where, you know, someone is needing a helping hand and assisted living or someone is needing some specialized, programming care, such as memory support. But, also, you know, skilled nursing kind of comes into that. And, I am not at all, you know, here to say anything against skilled nursing, I would just say I wouldn't categorize that as senior living. It is well, a couple of ways it's really different. Skilled nursing is not age qualified, right? So anybody who needs skilled nursing support can receive that at a skilled nursing or rehab center. You don't have to be an older adult. It's not intended for living and residing. Long-term, it's intended to be temporary, get someone through a medical crisis and get them out. So what we're talking about are those, actual residential, congregate living environments that people choose to reside in long-term for a variety of reasons. Usually lifestyle related.

Josh:

And so that's a great explanation and kind of sets the stage. You know, even there's so many other complexities that add to a potential consumer or someone just outside of the industry lacking understanding, or having some confusion. Because even in what you just mentioned, there's this overlay of even regulatory authorities that help to define those different things. And unlike many of the skilled nursing type communities or facilities that are more federally regulated. When we talk about the senior living industry, you're looking at a predominantly state regulated, which can vary greatly, from state to state. And so it's really easy, you know, if we think about it, to see how a consumer or someone, a family member, just outside of the industry that hasn't been working in the industry, or hasn't already navigated and learned how confusing it could be, right?

DeAnne:

Oh, absolutely. It is. Yeah. And many times I'm based in the Pacific Northwest, the communities that I work with, in over a dozen States, you know, we often get inquiries from other parts of the country and there's, they come in with their own preconceived notions because say a continuing care retirement community in Pennsylvania is a lot different than one in California. So, and then just, I mean, that category alone of kind of the continuing care or life plan or whatever term you want to use on that. So many varieties of, contracts, you know, residential agreements and the way they do the entrance fees. And if they're refundable or helmets is refundable. So yeah, I mean, it does require a lot of education. But kind of back to your point of being, you know, so many great people in this industry, everyone I've ever worked with, every company I've worked with, there's always this, overriding sense for the sales and marketing personnel that they, you know, yeah, they're trying to sell their community, but they want to be a resource. They understand that people coming in never having experienced this before, looking for the first time, trying to understand all these definitions and such, they really want to help educate them and explain what the options are and how they're different in their particular market. So there's a lot of, a lot of help out there for folks.

Josh:

So to that point, talking about all the resources that are available in senior housing and us being read educational sources at the community level for these consumers, you know, there's some misconceptions out there and I think over the last year and several months with a spotlight being really cast down on our industry and oftentimes unfortunately in a negative way, we've heard some things pop up that maybe it's better to be at home than it is in a senior community during pandemic and things like that. But I think those are potentially some misconceptions. Could you speak to that a little bit and why, you know, senior living actually does offer a great resource and quality of care in times like this.

DeAnne:

Sure. And, you know, I think perhaps rightly so, you know, in the pandemic, and the messages that we get in terms of, you know, older adults are at higher risk or being in large groups of people is a higher risk, you would naturally feel like, you know, wow, I don't know if this is a great option for me right now. And so that is definitely something that I feel like I want to give people permission to, you know, even consider this right now, because from the other side of it, from the community side and working with all these places across the country, it is the opposite. We are overwhelmed with support of appreciation and gratitude from residents, their family members. They are so grateful to have been in a place where they're not on their own dealing with all these changing rules and whatever state they're in and trying to navigate kind of, the outside world of how do I get groceries?

DeAnne:

How do I get, you know, if I have to have a medical appointment, how do I get there? How do I, you know, do I even leave my house? And so one of the things, one of the approaches that we're using, with Seniors Better Together is really the peer to peer communication. So rather than a lot of marketing speak, if you will, or, you know, us trying to kind of convince people, it's a good idea. We have an overwhelming amount of peer-to-peer communication with testimonials and, stories and things that we're promoting. Because I think people do relate to people sets of themselves, right? That if you hear it from a friend, if you hear it from someone like you, you're probably more likely to be open-minded to it. By in large communities, during this, you know, really trying time over the last year or so have done an excellent job of keeping residents safe.

DeAnne:

There have been very, I mean, there are cases, of course there are cases of COVID, and there are some isolated stories of outbreak. But because they're prepared for infection control, they're used to, you know, flu season and things like that. So it's, it's really a long extended flu season for them. And having already had a plan and preparations and implementing that plan. And so I think, you know, where our challenge lies is addressing the new concerns of, well, how do I visit my family? If I decide to come in and enjoy the benefits of community life right now, how do I visit my family? And you know, how do I get to interact with people? And so we've seen these, you know, there's just so many examples of people innovating, and rising to the occasion of how to address that because maintaining connections is so important.

DeAnne:

And even with, you know, when we had some good weather, boy, it was a lot easier, right? We could do things outside. So now there's more creative ideas and colder weather. With, I mean, people making beautiful outdoor spaces with fire pits and covered areas and, you know, scheduling visits, if that's not possible. Having a regular schedule of virtual visits, helping residents to access those options, to stay in touch with their friends and family. And then in some places, you know, where there is a little less restriction on gatherings, they're doing things like the pod system, you know, so maybe it's four people who play bridge together and they're, they're now kind of a group that can do all sorts of things together and dine together and things like that. So they're being supported in that way.

Josh:

Well, there's definitely been an amazing adaptation and innovation, adoption over the last 12 to 14 months. Like we've probably never seen in our industry and, you know, a huge kudos to all the heroes out there, the leaders that are making that happen. And so we're excited about that. And, you know, one of our objectives, which is very consistent with your mission and Bridge The Gap is the, what we talked about, which is helping to change that public perception for the people that don't get to experience senior living on a daily basis yet. So what are some of the things and obstacles that we have to overcome? Let's talk to the industry people for just a minute, you know, it's because it is a, I hate to use the word fragmented because that gives a negative connotation. I don't mean it to, but because there is such diversity in product and there's for profits and non-profits, there's a lot of different groups out there that have formed to try to change perception and have tried to lobby and do a lot of different things. So there's a lot of people out there saying very similar things that might be just delivered in different ways, in different methodologies. But to really change perception, it seems like we've got to really unite around some uniform messaging. Do you have any, do you have any thoughts or strategies on that because that's something we're really passionate about?

DeAnne:

Yes, absolutely. As am I, and I know other people that I work with. And I guess I would say what I would suggest to industry leaders is also thinking differently about the industry. So I've been in senior living marketing for over 20 years, but prior to that, I did, retail marketing. And so, I think it would be similar to hospitality or, you know, industries like that, where it is so customer service focused. So thinking like a customer, thinking, you know, our customers, our residents, prospective residents, family members of those people, members of the community at large. So thinking of those people as customers and what everything that we can do to provide the best customer service possible. And when you mentioned, we were talking about innovation and adapting and, you know, kind of rising to the occasion during a crisis, it's almost, you know, I'm not going to say a good thing, but a tiny silver lining to kind of prove we can. And I hope that that means we will continue and continue in a much more aggressive way than we have in the past. So evolving and accommodating the situations that are, put our customers are in, we need to think more like retail, hospitality, those other industries. And definitely not continue down the path of, we have a package and you can buy the package or not, right. Understanding what it is people want and evolving your services to meet those needs.

Josh:

So, DeAnne, one of the things it seems, and I don't have the statistics in front of me, but there's still such a, a huge number of communities that are classified as senior living all across the country that are not part of big systems. Or big chains, if you will, big operating platforms, big brands, and maybe don't have a lot of the resources to have big PR firms or big marketing teams, or maybe they can't even afford to go to a lot of big conferences and things like that because they're really just, you know, head down in the weeds, providing awesome quality care with everything that's within them. You know, what are, what are some of your, your advice to those groups out there that they want to do their part in helping to change the public perception, but they're just feeling like so squeezed, like, "Hey, I'm just a little guy." So what would your message and advice be to them?

DeAnne:

Sure. Well, I mean, you're, you're speaking to one of the main reasons why we formed Seniors Better Together for one thing. You know, it was never intended to, we want to represent everybody. It's not just for nonprofit communities. It's not just for, for profits. It's not just for big companies. It's not just for, you know, single mom and pop locations. It is truly for everybody to provide that voice. I mean, if you feel like you can't do something in your little corner of the world, then let's collaborate and unify and do something that helps everybody within our category of business. Beyond that, I would say you do have the power, especially in your own local market. You have the power to redefine what it is people think about you, and you just have to want to do it. And there are so many ways you can demonstrate that primarily with how you operate your business, how you treat customers, the things that you choose to participate in your greater community.

DeAnne:

So, you know, I would urge if you're really trying to change kind of flip the script, don't follow the script. Don't just do everything that, you know you've ever done for the last 10 years. Don't do everything that your competitor community does, do different things. And here's a big one. I mean, we needed to have a whole other discussion on this, but unfortunately there is, um, age-ism in our society and older adults are not necessarily revered as they should be, or, you know, seen as the viable important part of the fabric of our society. And so I would focus on doing things that come back fast, you know, if you normally like, okay, having some sort of seminar on, you know, pain management or things like that. Okay. That's kinda, you know, that's maybe an issue that a lot of older adults have, but get out of that, medically focused, rut, right. Because they're whole people with a whole broad diversity of interests and want to be engaged and have a purpose and contribute to society. So don't, you know, try to view them 360, you know, very holistically and start doing some programming, start doing some events, start doing some marketing that caters to that whole person.

Lucas:

That's really good thoughts DeAnne. And we'd love to have you back on, that's a great topic and one we've covered a couple of times, but I think it bears repeating. So, you know, there are so many challenges that we have faced in 2020, and so many lessons that we learned, and I'm very optimistic about 2021, especially for the senior living industry that has become now a big national conversation on a larger scale due to all the challenges that, uh, are going on from a healthcare perspective. So we're so grateful for your time this morning and your thoughts and your insights on this. We will make sure to connect you in all of our show notes and the links to what you guys are all about, so our listeners can learn more and reach out to you and connect. We'd love to continue the conversation. You can go to [BTGvoice.com](http://BTGvoice.com) and get all of our show notes and transcripts and links to our social media, and really appreciate this conversation. And thanks for everybody listening to another great episode of Bridge The Gap.

Outro:

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