

Christy

And most importantly, what does it feel like? Are we welcoming people into our communities? Like Disney welcomes every single guest inside their parks.

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Welcome to the Contributor Wednesday series on the Bridge The Gap Network. This series is sponsored by Peak Senior Living by Functional Pathways. Each week you'll hear from a thought leader discussing topics that are relevant and impactful to the senior living industry.

Christy 00:26

Hi, welcome to Bridge the Gap Contributor Wednesday podcast. I'm Christie Van Der Westhuizen, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing at Legend Senior Living and welcome to the podcast. So today we're going to talk about one of my very, very favorite topics. And you know, LinkedIn is probably my second favorite topic, but my first to favorite topic is how first impressions play a huge, giant role in the sales outcomes of our senior living business. So first off, I wanted to share a little bit about my journey to senior living and why my background is important to know in this entire conversation of first impressions, customer experience, and hospitality. So right after I graduated from college - I went to Chapman University in Orange, California and have my degree in Broadcast Journalism and Public Relations - so once I graduated, I realized, "Oh no, I don't think I really want to do broadcast journalism, but I wanna get more into public relations and really understanding service and hospitality as well." So I got a job at Disneyland. Yes, Disneyland. I'm originally from Orange County, California, and one of my very first jobs out of college was Disneyland. Now I couldn't really even tell you the exact role I had because my Disney career was so short, and I'll tell you why in a minute. But I was, back in the early two thousands when things were not digital just yet, I was the person that once you got into Disneyland, I would ask you for your ticket. I would scan the ticket and ask you where you came from, what zip code you came from, how you got to the park that day, and where you were staying in a hotel. I was basically a data gatherer. That's what I was for Disneyland. So very shortly after I was part of Disneyland, I was offered a job at Disney Channel. And again, I had a background in the entertainment industry with my degree in Film and Television and Broadcast Journalism. I thought a job at Disney Channel sounded amazing and honestly it was. So I got to work on the set and production office of Phil of the Future. Some of you may or may not know that show, but it's a family from the future that is living in current times and it's obviously a very Disney-esque show, and I loved it, but my heart was calling me to travel. One of my biggest regrets in life was that I never studied abroad in college. And so a job on a cruise ship popped up and I was hired as an Assistant Cruise Director for Holland America Line and got to travel the world and eventually met my husband on the cruise ship as well. But at that time, as an Assistant Cruise Director, think Julie from the Love Boat, if you remember that series, but I called Bingo and line dance and socialized with all the passengers on the ship. Now, some of you may know Holland America Line is a very classy, mature audience and passengers. So when I was socializing with these group of passengers, I learned so many stories and it was mostly retirees who were traveling on Holland America line. So I got to know older adults and their stories and really just fall in love with that generation. And so when my cruise career ended, my husband and I decided we wanted to get married and I needed a job on land to sponsor his visa because he's from South Africa. I ended up getting a job selling title insurance and I was a basically an Account Executive Junior for a top sales rep couple in title insurance when I started. And so I did that for about four and a half to five years of selling title insurance. You need title insurance to sell or buy a house, but does it fill my cup up at night with knowing I made a difference in someone's life and that I changed someone's life? Not really. I mean, everyone needs title insurance in the real estate game, but it's not something that I was extremely passionate about. So I learned all that I could about sales and

forming relationships in real estate, but I knew there was something more for me in life. I loved sales, I loved relationships, but knew that I didn't wanna be selling title insurance for the rest of my life. So insert a family experience, and I know so many people probably also have had this experience in senior living where their loved one moves into a senior living community.

5:31

So that was my experience. My parents were overachiever Powers of Attorney for my grandma who was no longer able to live on her own and, and really needed a memory care supportive environment for her to thrive. And they visited 12 different senior living places in two days. And yes, they found an amazing one, but they mentioned to me that they met 12 people that reminded them of me and I should really look into senior living. So that was the catalyst that changed the trajectory of my life. And 14 years later, I'm still here and I'll be here for another 40 years. So I'm very, very thankful for that and that experience and my parents really encouraging me to join this industry because without that, I don't know if I would've found this industry as soon as I did. So the reason I really explained that is I wanted you to understand my background in customer service, hospitality, the customer experience, because that really has been ingrained in me since I was really a graduate of college. So I wanted you to know that I have a little street cred, if I could call it that, with customer service and hospitality.

6:51

Okay, so again, I promise you this relates back to first impressions in senior living. I would like you to think of a time when you had an amazing first impression. Okay, so I can think of a few, but Chick-fil-A, In and Out, Ritz Carlton, Disneyland have all knocked it out of the park for me time and time again. Now, these locations and these companies are not a one and done type of place. I go there repeatedly, Chick-fil-A, there's one by my house and, and I'm probably there every other week, right? In and out, if there was one by my house, I probably would be there a lot more. And Ritz Carlton, if I could afford it, I would probably be there a lot more and Disney. I was there all the time when I lived in Orange County. So again, how did I feel when I walked into these companies or these locations? I felt expected, I felt wanted, I felt I was truly a guest and I was going to have a great experience. So you better believe I went back time and time again.

8:06

So now I want you to think about a time when you had a poor first impression of a business. Now again, I don't want you to think only of senior living industry experiences. I want you to think of yourself as a customer and a consumer of a different business. So I want you to think about a time when you had a bad first impression, a negative first impression. How did it make you feel? Were you unwanted? Were you a nuisance to someone? Were you a bother to someone? I want you to think, did you ever go back? If you had a choice, did you go back to that company or location ever again? So I've had a few of these two, a lot of them involve not being seen when walking into an office or being put on hold for a very, very long time or not being helped appropriately. So I think of myself as, "Okay, I was just a number, I was a nuisance and I was an interruption in someone else's very, very busy and packed day." So you better believe if I had a choice, I absolutely did not go back. So I'd like to come back to my experience with Disney and training the Disney Way because the Disney commitment to first impressions is pretty much unbelievable, but yet it is doable and replicated with hundreds of thousands of cast members daily.

9:42

Walt Disney said, "It will be someone's first time to Disneyland every single day." And I believe that! That so many of their guests, it is their very first time going to Disneyland today and tomorrow there will be a whole lot of new people going to Disneyland again tomorrow for their first time. So I'll be mentioning a few items from a Forbes article written by Blake Morgan, and the link is listed in the show notes if you'd like to read more about some of the topics on how Disney creates this amazing first impression and customer service experience that follows the guests throughout the park. Okay, in just a little tidbit, in the year 2018, Disney locations welcomed 157 million visitors. But here's the even more impressive part. 70% of those are repeat visitors. So I would love a 70% return rate for all of our first tours in our communities. How about you? Would that change the trajectory of your business? It would mine. So I would love to speak more about this topic on how to get that return visitor back in your community.

11:14

The first thing that we're going to talk about is creating immersive and magical experiences that Disney does. So have you ever noticed that entering a Disney theme park is like entering another world? It's immersive, thoughtful, in all the details. I mean, they even put Mickey Mouse logos on the manhole covers - everything, and I mean, everything is meticulously planned out. At Disney World, there's more than 15,000 speakers and lots of algorithms to place certain music to create a specific ambiance throughout the park. Even Disney imagineers invented the smellitizer, say that five times fast, machine to pump specific scents at the Disney parks. So for example, Main Street smells like fresh popcorn while some rides and attractions have scents that add to their ambiance. So just because you're not an amusement park doesn't mean these details don't matter. They do. They matter. Each and every interaction needs to be intentional and immersive.

12:29

The second thing that we're going to talk about is details, details, details. And yes, even the trashcan is important at Disney. So you're probably wondering, okay, why are we talking about trash and why are trashcans so important? And this is the perfect display of Disney's approach to excellence in the customer experience. And the happiest place on Earth should not be the dirtiest place on earth. Trash cans are often colorful and plentiful, and there are a lot of them. So you may not know this, but Disney placed trash cans within 30 feet of each other based on research that people will only walk 30 feet to throw something away. So Disney wanted a clean theme park. So every 30 feet you'll notice the trash can. And that idea dates back to Walt Disney and one of the reasons why the parks are so clean. And so just recently the theme parks also added sensors to some of its trash cans to monitor their use and alert custodians when they need to be emptied. And there's even an underground network of pipes to connect many of the trash cans to empty them around every 20 minutes. So I know it's a simple concept and the dedication to trash highlights a much larger principle that you care about every detail and remove things that will hurt the experience. So again, seeing trash may not necessarily change how a customer views Disney or their experience, but a clean park and the attention to detail is what makes the difference. So I would love for you to think about what things in your senior living company or community are similar to the trashcan in your community. So again, thinking about how a concept as common as the trashcan is, but how Disney has elevated that experience. What in your community can be the quote "trashcan?"

14:48

Another way Disney impacts first impressions and the customer experience is every single employee is trained to be customer service experts and the uniform doesn't matter. So it doesn't matter if you are dressed as a character or you are selling souvenirs on Main Street. Each of the more than 130,000 employees of Disney resorts, they're focused on customers. So on the very, very first day of training, every employee learns that their primary goal, and it does not matter their position, is to create happiness. That is their goal. It's not their job description that they're responsible for. It is to create happiness with the guest experience. And there's a ton of regular training. So they have the tools to best serve customers and are given creativity to solve problems in the most, my favorite word, magical ways possible. And so it's not unusual to hear about an employee going out of their way to provide a memorable experience for a guest. And we were not allowed to say, "I don't know." Instead, we needed to work and find a solution to avoid the frustrated guest. And so we were also trained not to say no. So if someone asked a question where the answer unfortunately would've been no, we could say, "Wow, I wish we had a parade at that time. However, the best experience at that time is blank." So it's saying no, but providing a different experience that may be even better than what they were looking for or asking for. So really it's training the team to be customer service experts as well as to have freedom and creativity to help them solve guest issues on their own.

16:58

Okay, so the fourth thing that Disney does extremely well is personalizing the experience. And I kind of call this the "wow factor" and "sprinkling the magic fairy dust" and "pixie dust" in the entire resort. So for most people, going to a Disney resort is like a special occasion. And so it doesn't matter whether it's the guests' first time at Disney or it's their hundredth, they are all considered very important people, VIPs, at Disney. And so much of that comes from understanding guests and really personalizing the experience to meet their needs. And so employees are really tasked with paying attention and asking guests about their visit, and they're really encouraged to go and create over the top experiences and interactions. And one thing that Disney does amazingly well is data collection. You may not know this, but Disney collects an enormous amount of data to understand guests both as a whole and as individuals. And so Disney even applied for a patent to collect customer data by scanning guests' shoes, which would help them determine the best information on creating common paths through rides and really understanding where guests spend the most time to learn how to create a more customized and personalized experience for the guests. So again, each employee is trained to really get to know the guests and create personalized experiences for that person.

18:54

All right, the last thing that Disney does extremely well is Disney leverages technology. So you, if you've gone to Disneyland or Disney World recently, you may have noticed smart magic bands that contain tickets and fast passes and payment information that are able to be easily swiped for a much simpler, faster, and more efficient guest experience. So technology plays a huge factor in the overall Disney experience. And I have the Disney app on my phone, and anytime I'm at Disneyland, it helps me order food in advance. It helps me understand what the wait time is. So again, it provides accurate and efficient data to the consumer when they want it, how they want it. To me, that's a great use of technology.

19:50

Alright, so those are the five things that Disney does extremely, extremely well. So what does that have to do with senior living? You may be asking yourself that, and I want you to close your eyes, you're driving, don't do it. But if you are not driving, then close your eyes. Pretend it's your first time visiting your senior living community. Park in a different parking spot and walk in. What does it look like? What does it smell like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? It is all of our responsibility to make sure that all of these impressions are paid attention to and are intentional. So if it doesn't look right, what can you do to make sure it does? If it doesn't smell right and doesn't smell good, what is something that you can do to fix that and make the scent a positive, memorable experience? What does it sound like when you walk into the building? Is it crickets, which gives an appearance of not very vibrant? Or is there light music playing in the background? Bonus points for having different music throughout the building for different spaces. And most importantly, what does it feel like? Are we welcoming people into our communities like Disney welcomes every single guest inside their parks? I want you to look and see what tools does your company have to make sure first impressions are checked regularly and by a variety of people. The more you train others to look at first impressions, the better they become because it's intentional and it's looked at and it's noticed by more people.

21:55

So that's my homework for you today, is when you finish listening to this podcast, take a look at the tools that your company has already produced to look at first impressions. What are they, who is responsible? And hint, it's everyone, by the way, that's the answer to that. But how often are first impressions looked at and what are the standards that your company has put in place to create that intentional and positive experience? So I wanted to thank you all so much for listening to this podcast. It's been an absolute pleasure and I look forward to bringing you more content in January. Now if there's something specific you would like to hear about, please let me know and I will certainly bring it up on a future podcast. Have a wonderful day and have a magical rest of the month. Bye-Bye.

22:53

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