

# Perfecting Sales Skills is Key to Attracting and Converting Baby Boomer Prospects Into Residents

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According to demographics, today's 50-plus adults are more fit, better educated and more financially secure than previous generations of mature men and women. If anything is true about this large group — 77 million Baby Boomers are approaching retirement — of potential customers, it is that they are intelligent, savvy and diverse. They will expect to continue living the life they have earned and to which they have become accustomed.

In the coming years, companies in all industries will spend millions of dollars on advertising campaigns and hire seasoned marketing professionals to perform research in an effort to successfully reach the boomers, but it will be the front line sales professionals that will spend the most time actually converting these discretionary prospects from inquiries to residents. Therefore, it will be imperative that communities hire and train sales professionals to be skilled at asking the *right* questions and work to understand what each individual prospect values. A cookie-cutter or lazy sales approach will not work because Baby Boomers will make decisions on what they want to do, not what they fear they have to do.

However, one thing is certain: Baby Boomers will still need assisted living facilities and long-term care facilities. While they are more physically fit and active than any other retiring generation before them, they also account for the majority of the population with chronic health issues such as heart disease, osteoporosis and diabetes.<sup>1</sup> They will continue to spend more on health care and will require continuing care services as much, if not more, than seniors do today.

**Marketers that expect to capture more than their share of this growing, lucrative market need to focus on perfecting the way their sales people interact with the boomers just**

**as intensely as they have focused on crafting the messages used to attract them.**

For example, one Florida-based company that I have worked with lowered their advertising budget by 30% over the previous year while attracting more than 10,000 qualified inquiries because they crafted their message more effectively and focused their efforts in the most productive areas. This same company more than doubled their sales with the same number of leads by a strategic focus on developing sales skills through training. The result was that their overall cost-per-sale was cut in half and they filled their communities at twice the pace they were filling them before. Bottom line: increased annual revenue.

So how does your staff measure up? Industry statistics show that the average closing ratio is fairly low, with only 3-4% of callers or inquiries being converted to sales. The highest performers can achieve closing ratios up to 10-12%. What makes the difference? Selling to Baby Boomers requires specific skills. Research shows that if salespeople ask the right questions, and develop the right skills, including those listed below, they can reach or exceed top closing ratios.

The following sales skills techniques have been developed through years of mystery shopping and performance audits in senior housing communities. They are actionable strategies that sales professionals can use to achieve immediate results, and to attract and convert Baby Boomers in the coming years.

**1. Every employee should be a salesperson.** When your housekeepers, waiters, groundskeepers, and other staff members see a prospective tenant visiting the property, they should greet them and welcome them to the community. It is what we call the "30-second commercial." It works because the friendliness of the staff matters to prospects.

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<sup>1</sup> American Medical Association

**2. Don't try to oversell or "over-pitch" all the features of your community on the first phone call.** Remember that your main objective is to develop trust with the caller and invite them to visit the community. One technique is to gently remind the caller, "I'm sure you would want to visit a community before considering it." The only way to feel the difference is to actually visit.

**3. Remember that most prospects don't really trust salespeople.** Your first objective is to build rapport and trust - this is best accomplished by listening, showing interest in the prospect and asking questions. Skilled sales people want to learn how to subtly but effectively redirect prospects from asking questions to sharing personal information. This openness is the foundation in any long-term relationship.

**4. Ask the right kind of questions.** Try to avoid questions that can be answered with a no or yes. Avoid two-part questions, direct questions, and lengthy questions. The best queries should start with "Why, when, how, where and what." (i.e., "How do you feel about this?")

**5. When the prospect answers your questions, repeat the answer back to them word for word.** This helps insure that you understood their answer, and also validates their importance by showing them you are listening.

**6. Call your recent prospects.** Those who called you in the past six months are still a gold mine of opportunities. Make calls to your database of former visitors or callers and you will improve your percentage of move-ins. If they're not hearing from you, they are going to someone else. Follow-up service is indicative of the type of service they will continue to receive as a resident.

**7. Don't wait until the end of the visit to ask for the deposit.** The prospect will often wait until you ask for a deposit before they give you a clear statement about their concerns or problems. Salespeople won't get an objection unless they ask for a deposit or check, and the key is to overcome the objections.

**8. Consider utilizing mystery shopping as a tool to improve your sales results.** Senior communities that have conducted mystery shopping report favorable responses from salespeople who know in advance they will be shopped and evaluated. Selected calls that come in to your property are tape recorded and then played back to the salespersons who took the calls. Mystery shopping is typically a very effective way to monitor the effectiveness of employees, enhance sales training, and improve closing ratios.

**9. Try to avoid quoting prices on the first call.** Focus on the values important to the caller and try to match, if applicable, the amenities and services to those values. Research shows that most residents don't make their decision on price, but on the perceived value.

**10. Take prospects to the dining room.** Business offices can be intimidating to a prospective buyer. The lounge area or dining room is a familiar environment where most people are accustomed to having informal discussions and making decisions. Food can enhance any business or sales interaction (if it's good.)

**11. Be flexible and willing to try new techniques.** Many salespeople falter because they are fastened to a rigid routine. In sales training sessions, the marginal salesman frequently responds to the training by saying, "that's not the way I do it." In the future, the real illiteracy will be the inability to learn new skills and change with the times.

**12. Slow down when you face objections or hesitation.** When salespersons encounter objections from a prospective tenant, they often panic and "step on the gas" to accelerate the dialogue. Instead, slow down, back up, and start over with the customer by honestly addressing the issues and working through them.

In summary, good sales efforts with any generation involves recognizing each prospect as a unique, intelligent individual and working to build rapport, ask good questions, listen, and then ask for the order and follow up on leads.

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