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Christy Van Der Westhuizen

Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast and your contributor host Christy van der Westhuizen. So I am so excited to talk about one of my favorite things. Obviously, I love sales. If you go to my LinkedIn profile, you see that that is my job description. I love sales. I want to talk about why I love senior living sales and why the work matters more than you may know.

And maybe you may think so. I think a lot of people, when they think of sales in general, think that it's really about convincing someone to buy something. Maybe it's strong-arming someone into doing something that they may not want to do, or it's persuading in a negative way. But I think the word sales can sometimes have a bad rap, but I feel like senior living sales is so unbelievably different.

Maybe you've heard my story. Maybe you haven't. But a long time ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth. No, just kidding. About 18 years ago, I was selling title insurance and real estate and was doing that for about four years, and I knew I loved sales. I knew I loved relationship building, but man, I went home every night and said, is this the am I making a difference in someone's life by selling them a title insurance policy?

Now, again, I loved sales, and I loved business development and making relationships and helping people in any way that I could. But it was around that time that I had a little bit of a quarter-life crisis, and my parents were the powers of attorney for my dad's mom. At that point, my grandma and we're looking for a memory care community for her, and they went to I'm pretty sure this is real 12 different senior living communities in two days.

So senior living salespeople, if you've ever had those folks that are like, okay, I've got an hour. No more, no less. Let's get it done. Those are probably my parents, because they had probably booked themselves for eight hours straight for two days. So anyway, they found an amazing memory care community for my grandma, where she lived for the rest of her life.

But they said we met 12 people who reminded us of you. Have you ever looked into senior living sales? And at that point, I don't think I ever knew senior living sales or even senior living the way it is now existed. So senior living sales is so different than when someone thinks of what sales is. We are not slimy.

We are not only numbers-focused, but we are also people who have hearts and do things for the right reasons. So we're helping families navigate one of the most emotional decisions they will ever make. And I take that as a giant compliment for my parents, who said, hey, we met 12 people that reminded us of you, and you can really make a difference in senior living.

So behind every inquiry, behind every phone call, behind every web inquiry, behind every email that comes in is maybe a worried daughter or son, maybe a caregiver who is overwhelmed and doesn't know what the next step looks like. Or it's an older adult who knows something needs to

change. So all in all, I feel like we are not just filling apartments or helping families find peace of mind.

I think that's why that's our why. That's why so many of us love this industry and can't imagine doing anything else. And I know I can't. So again, let me just dive a little bit deeper into why I think senior living sales is so different from quote-unquote sales. So traditional sales can be very product-focused. They can be very transaction-focused, and it might be very pressure-driven.

But I think that senior living sales is relationship-focused, very emotionally driven. And a lot of times, we are untangling lots of family dynamics who call or walk into our communities, and it's extremely based on trust. And I think one of the things that comes from my favorite, favorite book called *Go Givers* or *Sell More*. If you don't have that book, hurry, go out and grab it because it is my number one all-time favorite sales book.

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*Go Givers Sell more*. But in the. I think it's only in the first few pages that talk about how sales, the word sales, truly the word sales or the word sell originates from the Old English term *sellen*, which means, directly translated, to give. So I love to think that sales is truly about giving. It's giving time, attention, guidance, education, empathy, and most importantly, you're creating value for the person standing in front of you.

So there's so many more awesome nuggets in that book. But that's one thing that when someone may say, hey, I don't I'm not a sales person. I don't love sales. Well, I just want us to reframe that sales is actually giving. So when we're talking about senior living sales, most calls or most inquiries come from when something's happened, something has significant has happened.

So it might be a fall. It might be a hospital. Say it might mean the caregiver is burnt out. It might have been months of worry or wondering what the next chapter is. But I feel like our job and senior living sales is not about convincing people to do something. It's about helping them see what's possible and walking alongside them and making their own decision.

So I want you to think if you're in senior living sales, I want you to think about the last inquiry call you received. What was the real story behind that call? What was their why? Or probably very uncomfortably raising their hand and asking for help? Was it about the senior living? The actual apartment was about the housing, or was it a lot more than just the one-bedroom apartment rate?

Was it about safety? Was it about loneliness? Maybe stress or desiring to find peace of mind? So I want you to think about the real mission behind the work. I really think that our mission is to transform lives. It's to listen, understand, and help families make their own decisions in this journey. So every inquiry, again, every inquiry represents a real human situation.

It might mean a daughter who hasn't slept well in months, a spouse struggling to care for a partner, or an older adult who is feeling isolated and doesn't know how to ask for help. So when we talk about move-ins, to me, move-ins represent safety, relief, friendship, peace of mind. And honestly, families like to say I wish we had done this sooner.

So when we're looking at senior living sales, and you're in your database, every prospect in your CRM represents a human story. It represents a raised hand. Looking for hope. Looking for answers and looking for help. And when families say that they're shopping, they're visiting communities. They're not necessarily looking at the real estate. Although that is a piece of the puzzle.

Having a clean, welcoming, warm environment is incredibly critical. But what they're looking for is answers. They're looking for someone to help them navigate this journey. Because typically, people only go through looking for senior living once or twice in their lives. And we get to be the trusted guide. So when families interact with you, do they feel like they're talking to a salesperson?

Maybe in the worst way possible, that we think of sales done at its worst? Or are they talking to a trusted guide, someone who has their best interest at heart? So I love to think of us as salespeople in senior living as sense makers. So I think families often come to us overwhelmed, and I think I'm a very visual person.

So I think about this giant bowl of spaghetti. So every family that comes in or calls in, they actually have this giant bowl of spaghetti that they bring with them. So every noodle, if you will, represents a different dynamic or a different concern or a different factor. So there might be health concerns. There might be family dynamics. There might be a whole host of feelings, guilt, shame, maybe excitement, which I love.

But there might be financial questions or concerns, a giant fear of change. But our role is to help them untangle the spaghetti noodle by noodle. And so I think of our job is to help them not do it for them, but help them evaluate each noodle and go, okay, this is how I would like to line up the noodles and get them out of their very tangled mess.

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And into it might still be a mess, but something that makes a lot more sense in order for a family. So the way that we untangle this giant bowl of spaghetti is by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions. And if you've listened to my first podcast with Bridge the Gap, I may have mentioned that I did all of these things wrong in my initial start in senior living.

I loved me a good yes or no question. So ask thoughtful, open-ended questions and listen deeply. Help families slow down and help them break these really big decisions into smaller, more digestible steps. And so oftentimes, families just need someone to walk alongside them

and say, all right, let's take this one step at a time. Because clarity is one of the absolute greatest gifts we can give families.

And one of our biggest strengths and responsibilities is to be a sense maker for them. So when families leave you, whether it's after the initial inquiry call or perhaps during a tour experience, when families leave a conversation with you, do they often seem or feel more overwhelmed or more clear about what is next? So another thing that I would like to chat with you all about is I believe that we have an obligation and a responsibility to have a heart sell, as opposed to a hard sell in senior living. So most people have experienced a hard sell as a customer. A hard sell might be pushy, scripted, very transactional, and again, very pressure focused. It is do this today, do this now or else. So a heart sell is where we thrive in senior living because we listen first. We understand the why. The human element behind the inquiry.

We meet families emotionally, which, I'm going to be honest, can be really trying and can be very draining. But we also get to build trust. And I think that that is something to be very proud of in senior living. So a heart sell, which is what I believe we all strive to be and to do means we see the person before the fact that they're a prospect.

We get to know their stories. We get to know their fears and their hopes and dreams before the fact that, oh, this could be a potential resident for us. So when you're thinking about hard sell versus hard sell, I don't think anyone in the history has ever said, oh, wow, I'm glad that that salesperson pressured me into buying this. No. So what people want is understanding, and we get to be that trusted guide who helps them. Because when families feel heard and understood, the decision to trust and make a decision becomes easier. And here is my absolute favorite part of this conversation. And this is why urgency matters in senior living sales. Because every empty apartment represents someone who is still needing help.

It might represent an older adult isolated at home. It might also mean a caregiver that is still overwhelmed or a family who is still unsure of what to do. So I think every vacant apartment, if you're a senior living salesperson and you walk past a vacant apartment, obviously not only does that represent potential lost revenue, but that represents someone who is desperately in need of life at your community and who's not receiving it.

So I think this urgency that we feel is a very positive emotion when placed correctly. I think that urgency fuels our mission. But urgency isn't pressure. It's purpose because every call, every two or every single day can change the trajectory of someone's life, and it also strengthens your community. So that's why, for me, urgency matters in senior living sales.

And every time you walk past an empty apartment, think, man, this is a missed opportunity for someone who is living at home, isolated and potentially not living the best life that they could. So high occupancy for us fuels our mission. Not only does that mean great staffing, great programming, but it also means more relationships formed in your communities with residents and with staff members.

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And this is something that I'll dive deeper in a future Bridge the Gap podcast. But sales is a culture when prospects and families walk into your community. They feel it. They feel, is this a positive community? And I like to think that that's a very positive, healthy sales culture. Or is this not a great place? And people can feel that.

So sales is not one person's job. It really is a team culture where everyone contributes. This is care teams, dining teams, life engagement, maintenance, the entire leadership team, and every single person who is a team member at that community is part of the sales team. Because the truth is, families don't fall in love with buildings. They don't fall in love with the four walls of your community.

Although I love the amenities sometimes, I love some of these great dining options that we have. That is fantastic. And I love where the industry is going with providing so many different options with residents. But people fall in love with people. And just yesterday I was doing a sales training here at Jaybird, and an executive director told a story.

And when she was trained as a salesperson years ago, she was told that when families tour different communities and they leave a community and they're sitting in their car digesting what experience they just had. Do we want them to recall the weight of the community or the who of the community? And I want them to remember who, because that is the true heartbeat of the community, the people. So when you're thinking about your sales role and the things that we sell, we sell relationships. We sell the intangible. My hope for this chat is to hopefully inspire you to think about senior living. Sales is something much bigger than pure numbers. We help families find peace of mind, reduce fear, rediscover connection which I love, and begin a new chapter of life.

Because movies are not transactions. They are transformations and they are turning points in families lives. Because we're not just filling apartments. We are truly changing people's lives. And in go give or sell more. We learn that each person has a sphere of influence of about 250 people. So whether you know it or not, that one move in can truly transform 250 people's lives around that one person. So senior living sales is one of the very few careers where the work you do at this very moment can truly change someone's tomorrow. And when we remember that the every call, every two or every interaction has the ability to transform someone's life, that's pretty darn special. Thank you so much for listening, and I can't wait to chat with you all again soon.