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Christy Van Der Westhuizen

Hi everyone, and welcome back to the Bridge The Gap podcast. I'm your contributor host Christy Van Der Westhuizen. So today I want to talk about something that may not seem glamorous at first, but it is absolutely critical to running a strong senior living community. And so today, we are talking about business and financial acumen. Now before anyone immediately thinks, oh no, please don't make me stare at another spreadsheet, I promise this is not that type of conversation.

And also, this isn't about becoming a CFO. And this is also not memorizing accounting terms, although they're helpful or pretending we love pivot tables. Again, very helpful. But this conversation is about something much more useful. It is about understanding what the numbers are trying to tell us so we can make better decisions, support our teams, grow occupancy, protect revenue, and serve residents and families well.

Because at the community level, the numbers are always talking. Occupancy is talking, tours are talking. Move ins and move outs are talking. Inquiry volume, lead sources, revenue, staffing, care levels and even speed to lead is basically standing on the table, waving its arms, telling us to listen. The question is not whether we have the data. We have the data.

We have reports. We have dashboards. We have awesome CRM. We have occupancy trackers. Move in, move out reports. We have budgets and goals. I think we have enough reports to pretty much wallpaper a model apartment. But the real question is this are we using the data to lead? Are we using the data to drive our decisions? Because data by itself does not change performance, but leadership does.

One of the most important mindset shifts for executive directors and sales directors is this data is not just numbers. Data is a story in every community. Whether it's new, whether it's not new, has a story. And the story may be we have great inquiry volume, but we're not converting enough tours or we're getting tours, but families are just not choosing us or we're moving residents in, but ooh, move outs are wiping out our gains, or our professional referrals have slowed down and we need to rebuild market confidence.

So that is why we can't just look at a report and say occupancy is down, okay. Yes, occupancy may be down in your specific community, but why? And that is where the leadership begins. And data is what helps drive those actions to improve. So in executive director and sales director need to be able to sit together and ask some questions.

Questions like what changed? What are we seeing? Where are we stuck? Where do we have momentum? That hint hint we can build upon what our families telling us what a referral source is telling us, what are move out reasons, telling us what is within our own control. And then this is the kicker. This is the most important question.

What are we going to do next. And so that to me is true business acumen. It's using data to drive action. And so it's not just knowing the number but it's knowing what the number means and what action it requires. Okay. So let's start talking about the number that everyone watches. And by the way, when I say everyone I mean especially me.

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Occupancy that big word occupancy because it matters. Of course it does. Occupancy impacts revenue. Revenue impacts staffing. It also impacts programing and impacts capital improvements. Revenue impacts our ability to invest back into the community. But I have to be honest. Occupancy is a result. And so if we only look at occupancy we're actually looking about what already happened.

And so we have to look at the leading indicators that tell us where occupancy is going. So I want to talk a little bit about the things that our sales directors need to be looking at frequently. So if you have a pen here we go. I'm going to start naming the list. We need to look at inquiry volume tours, deposits, move ins, hot leads, database management.

And when I say this I mean follow up activity our sales activity. How active are we in the database. Referral source activity lead source performance and lost lead reasons. Those need to be looked at frequently and discussed frequently. So for executive directors, it also means looking at these things move outs, resident satisfaction, family concerns, care level changes, team engagement.

First impressions. That's a big one. Apartment readiness, resident retention. Because here is the honest truth. Sales cannot out sell a poor community experience forever. We might get temporary gains temporary occupancy, temporary revenue. But if the performance of the community does not equate what we're selling, that's just short term gain. And it's not long term. And here's some more of that truth.

Bomb operations cannot fully shine and happen if sales is not telling the story while in the market. And you actually need both. So a sales director may be doing a great job driving leads and tours, but if the lobby feels cold, the model apartment is not ready and maybe even disheveled. The tour path is cluttered or dirty, or team members do not warmly engage.

Prospective residents and families feel that. And on the other hand, an executive director may be running a beautiful community with a great care, great team culture. But if the sales director is not responding quickly, following up consistently asking awesome discovery questions or asking for the next step, families may never get far enough to experience it. And so that is why executive directors and sales directors have to be locking arms.

They have to be walking in lockstep. And so it's not o sales over there or operations over here. It is one team, one story, and especially one goal together. And so I'm going to break down a

couple of KPIs that I truly look at as a sales leader in our industry. And so first off we're going to talk about inquiry to tour conversion.

And I think this is one of the most important sales metrics, because it really tells us what's happening at the very beginning of the sales relationship. So if inquiry volume is decent but tours are low, we need to get curious. And by the way, that's one of my favorite favorite words in this industry is curiosity. And data will definitely tell us a ton.

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But unless we're curious, we're never really going to know the full story. So let's get curious for a little bit. And by the way, I mean curious, not defensive. Curious. It's really easy to say I've said it before, and I'm sure in the future I'll say it again and I'll need to remind myself about this podcast that it's really, really easy to say the leads are bad, not good, leads are bad, and listen sometimes lead.

The leads that we receive are not amazing. We've all seen the inquiry that says they're looking for senior living for their 43 year old cousin, their dog, and possibly themselves in the year 2047. If you do the math, that's in 21 years. So yes, not every lead is perfect. Not every lead is looking to move in right now.

But before we blame the lead source, we need to ask ourselves. And and again, we're getting honest here. How quickly did we respond? Did we call text and email? And I like to say did we send a video? Sales mail is an amazing tool to introduce yourself and your community to the person and the prospect that is looking at the time.

Did we make it personal? Did we ask really great questions to truly understand the person situation? I love this one. Did we create a compelling reason to visit? Or did we say, oh, call me when you're ready to tour? Did we offer specific appointment times? And ooh, this one. Did we follow up more than once? Friendly reminder. On average, it can take 28 sales touches for one move in.

So calling just once and giving up is not helping you or your community. It's just not. It takes multiple tries using multiple ways of communication, typically to even get the first connection. And then another question did we sound like a helpful guide or did we sound like we were checking a box? And so this is a big old hint.

Take a listen to some of your recorded inquiry calls. It's going to be awkward. You're going to hear your voice and you're going to cringe the entire time. But oh, it is so helpful and telling of what you're doing really well and what you may have opportunities to improve. When I first started in Senior Living 18 years ago, I was queen of yes or no questions.

Now I have corrected that, thank goodness. But I loved to ask. Oh, so is mom living at home? Oh, is she still driving? Does she use in an assistive device rather than. Oh. Tell me about your

mom's living situation. Tell me about mom's transportation needs and so on. There are so many ways that we can learn more by just asking open ended questions.

As opposed to the yes or no or the one word answer questions. So families are overwhelmed and they're not necessarily always ready to tour, although we should always ask, but they're not always ready to tour just because they filled out the online form. Sometimes they're scared. They're researching quietly. Maybe. Maybe they're worried about money. Maybe there's adult siblings that are just not agreeing on what to do next.

Sometimes the prospective resident is not ready. Even though everyone around her is exhausted. So the sales job is not just to say, oh, would you like to schedule a tour? The job is to build enough, enough trust that the family is willing to take the next step. So that may sound something like, tell me what happened that made you start looking.

What are you worried about most right now? Would it be helpful to come in, see the community and talk through options together? That feels different. That's not a transaction. That is guidance. And typically senior living families need that guidance. Now let's talk about tours to move in conversion. If tours are happening but move ins are not. That means we need to look closely at the tour experience.

And a tour is not a building walk. And it's not a feature parade. And oh man, I hate the hordes tour guide to represent the sales director and shoot. I even called myself a tour guide when I first joined the industry, and I probably acted like it too. So a tour is not. Here is a dining room, here is a salon, here is the activity room, and here is our emergency call system.

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Those things matter, but they are not the heart of the decision. Families are asking deeper questions even if they don't say them aloud. Well, mom, be safe here. Well, dad. Be lonely. Well, the team know her and love her like I do. Well, I feel guilty. Will he decline faster, or is there hope here? Can I feel it?

Will she be cared for? Can I trust these people? That is what they're really deciding. And so the tour has to connect back to what matters most to them. So if a daughter tells us that her mom has stopped eating well and spends most days alone, we should not just show the dining room and point at it. We should talk about connection.

I love that word because that is the giant difference between us and status quo. And when I say status quo, I mean doing nothing. And usually that means staying at home. So maybe in this instance it is. We would love for your mom to meet a few residents who also came in feeling nervous at first. Many families tell us the dining room becomes one of the first places their loved one starts reconnecting.

Now that is a stronger story. If a son tells us his dad keeps falling at home, we should not just show the apartment. We should talk about safety, care, response, and especially peace of mind. If a spouse tells us she is exhausted, we shouldn't just talk about amenities. We should talk about relief. And that's where the conversion happens.

Not in more talking, but in better connecting. And so if you know who I am, you know I love to celebrate every win. Every move in should be celebrated. Please, please, please, please celebrate the move ins. That might mean ringing the bell, sending the email, high fiving someone. But movies matter. But as community leaders, we also have to understand net occupancy.

And so what this means is, if you have four move ins and four move outs, you are working extremely hard. But if the community is not growing and so that doesn't mean the move ins are not valuable. Trust me, they are. But the business is telling us we need to look at both sides of the equation. Sales directors should know what's coming in.

Executive directors should know what may be going out and both need to be talking constantly. Who is at risk? Which families are unhappy? Which residents may need a higher level of care? Which residents are considering moving out? Any service concerns we can address? Are there residents? We need to reengage. Are we following up after the moving to make sure the transition is going well?

Retention is an occupancy protection plan. A happy resident is a referral source. Confident family is an advocate for us. A strong move and experience reduces buyer's remorse. And trust me, that is a real thing. A strong care and service experience protects revenue. So when we talk about business acumen, we have to talk about both move ins and move outs.

Growth is not about just adding residents. Growth is keeping the residents. We are honored and lucky enough to serve. So now we're going to talk a little bit about lead sources and lead source performance. And I think this is an area where sales directors and ED s can really find opportunity, because not all lead sources perform the same. Some bring volume, some bring quality, some bring urgency.

That Friday afternoon at 3:30, call from the social worker. That's an urgent need. Some bring price shoppers looky loos. Some bring adult children who are really, really early in the process and don't know how to broach the subject with their parents. And some bring families who are ready right now. So the question is not only how many leads did we get or how many leads did we receive in a certain time frame?

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The better questions are which lead sources are turning into tours which lead sources are turning into move ins? Which referral partners are producing and which ones have gone quiet? Which sources cost the most? Which sources convert the best? Where should we spend more

time? And then where are we doing sales activity but getting no results. So for example, if you're online, leads are high, but conversion is low.

You may need a couple things. Maybe better speed to lead to make sure you're number one to connect with a potential resident or family. Better follow up or better nurturing. If professional referrals are low, your business development efforts may need more structure, more and better messaging or understanding of the referral sources. If a hospital or skilled nursing partner used to refer a ton and suddenly stopped.

That is a story. That is something to learn. That is data. So something changed. Maybe there was a leadership change. Maybe a competitor became more visible in the marketplace. Maybe the referral source had a bad experience. Maybe we haven't been showing up consistently. Maybe they don't understand who we are and what we offer. So it's time to really understand and engage with referral sources.

If that truly is something that happened where, man, you had a great referral source and they stopped. And by the way, I love a good muffin and I love a good donut. But business development is not dropping off donuts or muffin marketing. We like to laugh. I'm not here to slander pastries. I love them. But a donut without strategy is just frosting on the donut with mileage reimbursement.

We all know we fill out those mileage reimbursement spreadsheets. So business development should be intentional. Who are we seeing? Why are we seeing them? What do they need for us? What problem can we solve for them? How are we following up and how are we measuring whether the relationship is growing? And so that's how referral relationships become strategy.

Okay. Here's another data point to noodle speed to lead and speed to lead is one of those metrics that can feel extremely simple. And yes, we talk about it a lot. It's because it's a big deal. When a family reaches out, they are raising their hand. They may be in crisis. They may feel overwhelmed. They're probably comparing several communities and they may have just finally, finally admitted that they actually need help.

And so the faster we respond, the better chance we have of building trust early. But speed alone, I'm going to say, is just not enough. Fast and cold is not impressive. Fast and warm is powerful. There's a huge difference between. Thank you for your inquiry. Please call us to schedule a tour. And. Hi, Susan. Thank you so much for reaching out.

I know this process can feel overwhelming, and I would love to learn more about what's happening with your dad and how we can help. That first one feels like a form letter. That second one feels like a real person. Sales directors. This matters deeply. ED 's. This matters too. Because if your sales director is out of the community, busy with a tour or helping with a prospective resident, there still needs to be a plan.

Who is back up? Who responds? How fast? What's the expectation? How about what happens after hours or on weekends? What happens when the sales director is out? Communities lose opportunities when there's no system and especially no backup system. And in senior living, delayed responses doesn't just cost us the lead. It may cost us the chance to help a family at the moment that they needed us the very most.

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Okay, time to talk about the ED's role in sales, because I believe this strongly. The executive director does not have to be the sales director, but the executive director absolutely has to be the sales leader. So that doesn't mean the ED owns every follow up call or every referral visit. It means the ED sets the tone, the ED creates urgency.

They remove barriers. They reinforce the importance of first impressions. The ED participates in tours. They help close confidence gaps. The ED understands occupancy and revenue and what the goal is and what the budget is. The ED knows the story behind the numbers, and the ED makes sure the whole team understands that growth matters. And so when an ED is engaged in sales, families feel it.

They see leadership confidence. And they they understand that the community is aligned. Sometimes a family needs to hear from the ED. They need to maybe feel reassurance about care. Maybe they need to know that someone from the leadership team is accessible and welcoming and friendly, and sometimes they might need someone to say, we can support your mom. And here is how that matters.

So sales directors, do not be afraid to bring your ED into the process, and especially strategically, not randomly. Not as a panic button strategically. If a family is close to making a decision, but a little nervous, bring the ED in. If there is a service or care concern, bring the ED in. If the prospect is a strong fit and needs confidence, bring the ED in.

So sales shouldn't be lonely because the best communities sell together. And as a team now sales directors, you're not off the hook. Your role is not just to be friendly. Now friendliness helps. It absolutely helps. People love to do business with friends, so please be friendly. But this is senior living and not the DMV. The role is bigger than being personable.

You are a business driver. You're responsible for pipeline health, for follow up discipline, and it takes a lot of discipline to make those calls, those texts, those emails, those videos. You're responsible for knowing your prospects. Knowing the why behind the prospects. Not just the what, not just the ailments or the diagnoses, but who they truly are as people.

You're responsible for understanding and leading the next steps. You're responsible for understanding lead sources. You're responsible for knowing why families chose us and frankly, why they didn't. And you absolutely have every right and responsibility to communicate what

you need. So a strong sales director should be able to answer, who are our hottest prospects? What is the next specific step with each one?

What apartments are you showing and selling? What are your biggest objections? Who toured and who hasn't moved forward? Which referral partners are active and referring? Which ones aren't? Which lead sources are converting? What support do you need from your executive Director and what is your plan this week to move the business forward? And so that's not micromanagement. That is professional sales.

And so if the answer is I'm just following up. That's not enough. Following up with whom and when and what's the message. What's the next step. What's the next agreed upon step that you want to get to? And what are we trying to move them toward? Because hope is not a sales strategy. I'm sure you've heard that a million times, but a plan is.

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And so we also have to talk about revenue because movies matter. But rate matters too. A move in and a deeply discounted rate may help you and help your occupancy, but we also need to understand the financial impact. So that doesn't mean concessions are bad or good. They are not. When used strategically, concessions can create urgency, remove friction, and help a community regain momentum that builds upon itself.

But concessions should be intentional, not emotional. Not because we're nervous or because the close feels uncomfortable. Asking for money might feel uncomfortable. Or maybe we haven't really communicated the the real value of living at our community. So before offering a concession, we need to make sure that we're asking what problem are we solving? Is price truly the barrier?

Have we built enough value? Is this resident a good fit for our community? What's the financial impact? Whether it's short term or long term? And how are we going to measure success? And so protecting revenue is not cold. It's responsible because strong revenue helps us invest in our community. And mission and margin are not enemies. And senior living margin supports the mission.

And so here's the big takeaway. Business and financial acumen doesn't mean ED and sales directors need to become accountants. It means we need to become stronger operators, sales leaders, and partners with each other. But it also means that we understand that numbers tell a story. And when we listen, we lead better. We stop reacting and we start planning.

We stop guessing and start diagnosing. Which is one of my most fun parts of my job, is I love grabbing my magnifying glass and going, oof! Let's figure out the problem so we can solve it. And when we listen and understand the numbers and understand what story it's telling us, we stop blaming or getting defensive and we truly start solving.

And so maybe we don't say we need more leads. We say, where's the real opportunity with not only the leads that we have, but how we're managing the leads that come to us. Because at the end of the day, this work is both heart. I love to call it heart sell, not hard sell, but it's both heart and business.

Occupancy matters. Yes. Revenue matters. Why matters? Conversion rates matter. But behind every moving is a person, a person that you are truly impacting their life. It's a daughter who can finally sleep again. It's a spouse that doesn't have to do this alone. It's a resident who gets connection back. And so that's why this business matters. So when the mission matters, the numbers matter.

And so the next time you look at your occupancy report or your CRM or your moving tracker or your revenue report, don't just ask what is the number? Ask what is the story? What is this mean? And most importantly, what are we doing next? What is the action that we are going to take because of this data? And then you lock arms executive Director and sales director together and you move the business forward.

So thanks for listening, friends. Keep leading with heart and keep using the data to drive decisions and to understand the why behind the story that you're trying to tell. Have a great day.