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Christy Van Der Westhuizen

Hi there. Welcome back to the Bridge The Gap podcast. I'm your contributor, host Christy Van Der Westhuizen. So today we are talking about one of the most important conversations in senior living sales. And no, it's not the discovery conversation, although hint, hint, that's extremely important. It's not the pricing conversation, although that's also super duper important. It's not even the conversation where someone says we need to think about it, which is usually code for we have 17 additional questions three siblings to call, and at least one person who is about to go on a Google quest to find every senior living community within a 40 mile radius.

Okay, so not even those three really, really important conversations. Today we are talking about the parking lot conversation, and I'm like, what do you think that means? Well, you know, the one the family finishes. The two are experience. We walk them to the door. We smile. We thank them for visiting. We have all those happy feelings. We tell them we're available if they need anything and then the doors close behind them.

They walk to the car. Are salespersons feeling? Oh so good. But that is when the real conversation begins. They are no longer sitting across from us. They don't have to be polite. They're not worried about hurting our feelings. They're not nodding while secretly wondering why the model apartment had seven decorative pillows and absolutely nowhere to sit and maybe smells a little off.

They're finally, finally saying what they really do think about your community. They might be saying something like, well, that felt warm, that felt comfortable, or that felt way too clinical, or mom would love the courtyard, or I did not like the smell near the elevator. That sales coordinator was amazing though. Did you notice how no one greeted us when we walked in that apartment?

Way too small for dad. Or I think mom could be happy here. Or the this is the most dangerous parking lot sentence of all. I don't know, what do you think? Because when nobody knows what they think, the families usually do what families do best. And I bet you guessed it, they wait. They don't do anything. They keep doing status quo.

So our job in sales and senior living is not just to give a great tour. Although when I started in the industry almost 20 years ago, I really thought that that was what my job was. I was going to be the best darn tour giver that that community had ever had. Our true job is to help shape the parking lot conversation before the family ever reaches the parking lot.

Okay, so the parking lot conversation actually starts before the tour. So that's when you do a lot of preparation and prepare. So the parking lot conversation actually begins during discovery. I bet you guess that discovery is the missing link to so many of those lost leads that you may have, but that parking lot conversation begins during that discovery process, and it's when we truly understand what matters to the family.

That's only when we can create an experience they will naturally talk about afterward. And so maybe the daughter tells us, my mom has always been very social, but since my dad passed away, she stopped doing the things that she loved. So this is not just information. This is our tour plan. This is when we start putting all the pieces of the puzzle together to create an amazing experience for the family, and so we shouldn't spend 20 minutes explaining the dimensions of every apartment while mom quietly follows behind us, wondering when the fun starts.

We need to introduce her to residents, show her our calendar, walk through the dining room while people are gathering, and maybe mention the book club, the garden group, or the lady who somehow wins every single pinochle game and is currently being investigated. No. Just kidding. But that's where the life is. So when the family is in the parking lot, the daughter is not saying the apartment had a nice refrigerator.

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She's saying, did you see how Mom lit up when she met Carol? That is the conversation we want. That's the best parking lot conversation that we can really hope for and really plant the seeds during their tour experience. People rarely choose a senior living community because of a refrigerator. Although you can call me and tell me if I'm wrong, maybe it's a truly spectacular refrigerator.

But people choose a senior living community because they can picture a better life at your community. So what will they remember on their tour when they are again walking back to their car in the parking lot? Families won't remember every feature we showed them. They'll remember how the community felt. They're going to remember whether people looked happy and whether we made eye contact and team members made eye contact.

They're going to remember whether the resident seemed engaged, or whether everyone looked like they had been positioned in the lobby for a brochure photo. And just sitting there, they're going to remember whether we listened. They're going to remember when the two were felt personalized or whether we delivered that exact same speech we gave the family who visited 20 minutes ago.

And yes, they're definitely going to remember what the community smelled like. And of course, I wish this wasn't such a major part of senior living sales. But here we are. And my toxic trait is believing that a plug-in air freshener and a clean trash can can solve at least 12% of our occupancy challenges. Just kidding, of course, but the smell of your community either confirms their thoughts that maybe we are a nursing home, or it dispels their thoughts and reminds them that we are a community.

We're a senior living community, very different from a skilled nursing facility. So the family on their tour is collecting evidence. Now. The evidence again will either support or not support what

they already thought going in. So every interaction becomes part of the story they will tell one another later. It might even be as soon as the parking lot.

So it's things like the receptionist who knew the prospect's name and even had a welcome sign. Even better, it's the caregiver who stopped to say hello with a beautiful smile, welcoming them. It's a resident who smiled and said you'd love it here. I wish I had moved here years ago. It's the maintenance director who picked up a piece of trash without being asked.

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These moments matter because the family's not evaluating the apartment. They're not only looking at the apartment, they're evaluating whether their loved one will be known, safe, supported, and most of all, happy. So I want you to think about giving them something specific to discuss in that parking lot conversation. So a generic tour creates a very generic parking lot conversation.

It was nice. Nice. Not a sales strategy. We need to give families specific emotional moments to discuss in the parking lot. Maybe we arrange for a prospect to meet someone who shares a similar interest. It was nice again; nice is lovely. Nice is polite, but nice does not always lead to a move-in. Instead, ask questions that prepare them for a productive parking lot conversation.

So here are some ideas of questions to ask, so we can really give them some cues on what to talk about in that parking lot. So what felt most like home today? And then pause. What do you think your mom would enjoy most here? What concerns do you still have based on everything you saw today? What feels like the best next step or one of my favorites when you get into the car?

What do you think you're going to talk about first? Now, that question is powerful because it gives us a preview of the parking lot conversation while we're still standing there. If they say we will probably talk about the apartment size, we know what needs more discussion. If they say we're going to talk about how friendly everyone was, we know the emotional connection landed and was felt.

If they say we still need to convince my brother congratulations, because you found the next person who needs to be included in the conversation. So we want to give family some language to use, because sometimes the person touring is not the only decision maker. I would say that happens a good amount of the time, because we need to give the family who is doing the talking, some really good resources and explanations on how to explain the community to their loved one or their decision maker, so they may need to go home and explain the community to a sibling, a spouse, a doctor or parent who didn't attend the tour experience.

So we want to help them tell the story. And so please don't just hand them their your marketing folder thick enough to qualify as carry on luggage. You're going to want to summarize the value in language that they can repeat. So it might sound something like this. So based on what you

shared it sounds like the biggest priorities are medication support, more social connection and giving you peace of mind that someone is nearby.

Those are three areas I would focus on when you talk with your brother. Now the daughter has a clear message. She doesn't have to remember every detail from the 90 minute visit, what the dining room looked like, what they had on the menu, what were the activities for the day. She can say this community gives mom the support.

She needs more connection and gives us peace of mind. That is a much, much stronger family conversation than they have three apartment styles a studio, one bedroom and two bedroom. Oh, and on Wednesday they serve meatloaf, although depending on the meatloaf and I've had some amazing meatloaf in in communities that could still really be compelling for me. And then I want you to follow up on that feeling.

So your follow up after they leave should continue the emotional conversation from the tour experience. So we don't want to send that same generic email to every family. Thank you for touring. Please let me know if you have any questions. Again, I know I love to talk about my mistakes, but this was a big one in my beginning of my career.

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I love pre-formatted emails, so I want you to think about that email and if you still want to keep sending it, or if you want to personalize it for every single person who you have the ability to touch greatly. So thank you for touring. Please let us know if you have any questions. That hurts because, of course, they have questions.

They're making a major life decision. So instead, remind them of what mattered and what they saw and felt during their tour experience. So it might be something like your mom's smile when she met the gardening group was such a special moment. I could truly picture her becoming part of that group, or I know apartment size was still a concern.

I would love to help you think through furniture placement and what she would realistically want to bring back. You mentioned your brother wasn't able to attend, so let's schedule a video call so he can see the apartment and ask questions to us directly. A thoughtful follow up can restart the right parking lot conversation. It reminds families what they felt before fear, and those nasty logistics and sibling opinions started piling into the car.

So here's the final question. Before your next tour, ask yourself, what do I want this family to say when they get into the car? Not what do I want them to say about me? Not what I want them to say about our granite countertops or meatloaf or that amazing refrigerator. What do I want them to say about the life their loved one could have? Maybe it's. I think mom would be happy here, or I finally feel like dad would be safe, or that felt different from the other places. They really understood us. I can see her living here. That is the goal, because the best tours don't end when the family walks out the door again.

Newbie Christy. Oh, I thought that was the absolute best part because you knew you nailed it. No, no. The best part? It continues through the parking lot, into the car, around the dinner table, and into every conversation that leads the family closer to a decision. So this week, don't just plan the tour, although you need to plan the tour.

Plan the conversation that happens after the tour. Create personal moments. Address the hesitation. Ask better closing questions. Give the family language and talking points they can use, and make sure when those doors close behind them and you're waving at them, they're not just simply saying, that was nice. Make sure they are saying, I think we found the right place.

Now go create a parking lot conversation that moves someone forward. Thank you so much for the time and I hope you love learning about all things senior living, sales and marketing as much as I have. Have a great day!