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McKnights
Senior Living

5 STEPS TO HELP TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENTS PAY DIVIDENDS

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Senior living operators face more challenges than ever, including staffing and resource management; rising prices; changing expectations of employees, residents and families; and the need to maintain occupancy rates and produce a healthy bottom line.

Technology can be a key differentiator to help senior living communities remain competitive, said Sarah Thomas, CEO of Delight by Design. The right tech mix can inspire more move-ins, increase length of stay and make staff members more efficient and satisfied, she said. Unfortunately, Thomas added, operators often lack a good way to prioritize initiatives and the skills to advocate for technology investments and justify the spend internally.

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– SARAH THOMAS, CEO, DELIGHT BY DESIGN

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“Communities feel pressure to show the revenue gains and the bottom-line improvements of any new technology they want to engage with,” she noted, speaking at McKnight’s *Senior Living* webinar titled “Revenue-builder secret recipe: 5 ingredients for tech-driven predictable growth,” sponsored by Sentrics.

MEETING CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

Some technology initiatives in senior living, Thomas said, are simply a natural outgrowth of the technologies that have become commonplace in society at large. Residents want familiar entertainment choices and options, voice-first and smart-home technology, automated security features and immediate connectivity to resources in the community. They also want personalized health and telehealth information, instant access to primary care physicians and specialists, and lifestyle enhancement and engagement options that can help them continue to grow, feel independent and build relationships.

Increasingly, Thomas said, families want more information about the lifestyles and services provided for their loved ones, a demand that has increased with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shelley Esden, co-founder and chief operating officer at Orlando, FL-based Sonata Senior Living, said that her communities increasingly have leveraged the integration of engagement tools and technologies to improve communication with families. “Never before have we had so many questions about infection control and the measures communities are putting into place to ensure the safety of their loved ones,” she said.

Staff members, too, have increasing expectations of the technology that will be available to them. Dave Morgan, director of technology and information systems for Dayton, OH-based Graceworks Lutheran Services, explained that administrative staff members and direct-care workers are going to see a huge disconnect if their community’s technology is lagging behind the technology available to the residents – or even their own personal technology.



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"A sense of being connected to the organization is important from a recruitment and retention standpoint," Morgan said. "Employees feel like the organization is placing a priority on the staff by providing the tools and technology for them to do their job effectively, and that's certainly an important part of keeping employees happy and engaged."

5 KEY STEPS

According to Thomas, five key steps can help senior living communities successfully prioritize and implement their technology initiatives. Those steps can create happier residents, staff members and families, and they lead to predictable and profitable growth, she added.

Step 1: Define your goals.

Having clear expectations and goals at the start of any new tech initiative is very important, Thomas said. Leaders must understand upfront what process or position within your organization the technology will support, who will benefit from it and how, and how success will be measured.

Communities, she added, also must "consider the audience" and get stakeholder understanding and buy-in from everyone affected by the technology.

Esden agreed, suggesting that it is important to take a step back, examine the big picture and consider the challenges that the technology is designed to help the

community overcome, as well as assess whether leaders and others are ready to adopt it.

Intangible factors also must be considered, Esden said. For instance, is the technology going to bring additional peace of mind to families, allow enhanced communication or minimize team member burnout?

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"I encourage everyone to look not just at the bottom-line metrics, but also those intangibles, because eventually those intangibles are going to lead to your bottom line," Esden said.

Step 2: Automate processes.

Esden admitted that over the years, she hesitated to turn over too much control to her communities' websites. Her fear, she said, was based on the idea that potential residents' interactions with the website might detract from the personal connection that is so important in the senior living industry.

"I've always been a believer that nothing replaces that one-on-one communication," she said. "I have learned that integrating marketing automation into the website supports resident journeys by providing timely, accurate information while generating high-quality sales-qualified leads. It's automatic and creates workflows that are directly tied to the individual goals of your organization."

Automation, Esden explained, plays in other areas that touch the resident. For example, the Sentric360 eCall solution senses when a resident is not up for the day and notifies staff. That same staff automatically can geofence an off-limits area and notify them when two people who don't get along are in the same room. Dashboards can identify appropriate staffing patterns, and the Engage360 platform soon will assess resident well-being and provide recommendations to residents and staff members.

Step 3: Leverage technology integration.

A fast-track way to make technology a key differentiator has been the use of pre-integrated technology.



Photo: Maskot/Maskot/Getty Images Plus

The position of technology concierge has been very popular in some senior living communities.



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The right investments can make a real difference to a community's bottom line.

For Graceworks Lutheran Services, that included implementing a bundled TV, internet and Wi-Fi solution that is managed and operated by a single vendor.

"We initially offered basic TV service across our Bethany campus and telephone services in the apartment and connected buildings," Morgan explained. "The independent cottages were on their own, and we provided Wi-Fi services in common areas only — no internet. Residents struggled, because their services changed as they moved through the continuum."

The answer was to use one vendor — Sentrics — to complete the technology realm for residents. By bundling the services, the organization was able to reduce some costs, improve the services the residents received and simplify the billing.

Step 4: Translate technology into successful occupancy.

According to Morgan, the move-in process is a continuation of new resident information being collected and staff being prepared for residents' arrival. But technology's role certainly doesn't end there.

One service that has been proven to be very popular at Graceworks Lutheran Services' Bethany Village, is the "tech concierge." On move-in day, the tech concierge helps residents set up their television, computer and smart devices, and this person also ensures that residents' email and Facebook accounts can be accessed, so residents can stay in touch with friends and family. It

doesn't stop there, though; that same tech concierge is on-site and available during regular business hours to help residents resolve any technology issue.

Step 5: Drive adoption and boost revenue.

The key to ensuring that any new technology rollout goes smoothly is overcoming the fear of change, Thomas said. To that end, communities must be prepared to invest in the necessary infrastructure up front.

Esden advised that operators must vet potential vendors to ensure that they can assist with training and the integration of new technology, and Morgan noted that infrastructure upgrades — such as fiber optic cable — may be required to support new technologies.

"Communities need to understand that upgrading technology is a cost of doing business and the investment is going to support the growth of the business," Morgan said. "We can talk about new technology helping to generate revenue, but we can't overlook the nuts and bolts that provide the underpinnings for the technology."

Morgan said he sees a world of opportunities for technology-driven revenue enhancement.

"Much like other service providers, we can provide tiers to the residents based on their needs and desires," he said. "For example, residents who need increased internet speed because they do a lot of streaming or have large numbers of grandkids visiting can seamlessly

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connect and stay connected. That's just one example of the opportunities for increasing revenue based on an investment in technology."

Justifying investments in technology always may be a part of the challenge for senior living communities, Thomas concluded, but the right investments can make a real difference to communities' bottom lines. ■