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The Complete Data-Driven eBook:
**A Focus on Strategic
Marketing Planning
for Senior Living**

Which best describes your team?

We have...

A.

- ✓ Many marketing goals
- ✗ But not one clear, documented high-level marketing goal

B.

- ✓ One high-level marketing goal
- ✗ But not a clear, documented marketing plan for the year

C.

- ✓ One high-level marketing goal
- ✓ A clear, documented marketing plan for the year
- ✗ But not everyone is aware of the goal

D.

- ✓ One high-level marketing goal
- ✓ A clear, documented marketing plan for the year
- ✗ But not everyone is following the marketing plan

If you related to any one of these scenarios, there is room for marketing planning improvement.

We surveyed marketing executives across the senior living industry to uncover what works best in marketing planning and why, along with specific steps you can take to improve your marketing plan. Herein are our findings.

WHY

In [Why Is Strategic Planning Important?](#), Catherine Cote of The Harvard Business School Online wrote, “Strategic planning is the ongoing organizational process of using available knowledge to document a business’s intended direction. This process is used to prioritize efforts, effectively allocate resources, align shareholders and employees on the organization’s goals, and ensure those goals are backed by data and sound reasoning.”

While a strategic approach is nearly always applied to a business’s financial efforts (read: prioritize expenses, allocate assets, align the team on financial goals, ensure those goals are SMART), less seldomly is it applied in marketing planning. Yet, it is this very strategic approach that makes all the difference in bolstering marketing outcomes.

Do you have a tactical plan or a strategic marketing plan?

TACTICAL PLAN	STRATEGIC MARKETING PLAN
Lists tactics such as ads or SEO	Outlines actions, or strategies, like “Launch social media strategy” or “Improve PR strategy”
Line items do not require research	Line items will need research completed to gather data that will inform each strategy
Each line item is easily assignable to one person	Each line item will require insights from multiple parties
Line items can be completed in a week or less	Line items will need a quarter to be fully completed
Can be measured in opens, clicks or visits	Can be measured against high-level company objectives like increasing brand awareness or acquiring locations
Once completed, the tactical plan gets the organization to its short-term goal	Once completed, the strategic plan moves the organization closer to its annual or 3-year goal

Ready to sharpen your strategic marketing plan? Let’s start with who should be involved.

WHO

Top Internal Team Members Involved in Marketing Planning for Senior Living Organizations

Our study revealed that senior living marketers and executives involve the following parties in marketing planning, listed in the order of popular answer:

1. The whole marketing team
2. CEO and/or COO
3. Marketing executives only
4. Marketing executives with CEO and/or COO

Only 12% of respondents get marketing executives together with the CEO and/or COO for marketing planning, and yet we see this combination of internal team members gain more traction over the others. When the marketing and executive teams are aligned on marketing planning at a minimum once quarterly, the plan garners stronger results.

Involving the whole marketing team in marketing planning dilutes focus and results due to groupthink. (While involving only marketing executives or the CEO and/or COO runs the risk of having one of those parties derail the other, those options would be preferable to involving the whole marketing team.)

Our study showed that 28% of your peers leave final approval of the marketing plan to the whole marketing team. This is one reason why so many organizations struggle to move efficiently from planning to execution. Rely on one or two top executives to sign off on the final plan. Marketing can only do its job when it's out to market.

Now, what are the most common steps to marketing planning - the top research informing marketing planning for senior living and the strategies most often found in senior living marketing plans?

Only 12% of respondents get marketing executives together with the CEO and/or COO for marketing planning, while 28% of your peers leave final approval of the marketing plan to the whole marketing team.

WHAT

Most Common Steps to Marketing Planning for Senior Living

What our data showed in order of popular answers from your peers:

1. Set the goal
2. Conduct competitor research
3. Analyze results from the previous period
4. Research industry trends
5. Conduct consumer research
6. Engage with an external marketing expert, if applicable

Going it alone? Consider the competitive landscape.

67%

of your competitors have engaged outside support for marketing planning in the past

74%

of your competitors will engage outside support for marketing planning in the future

As a comparison, here is the order of priorities we recommend and why based upon our 15 years of experience working with teams like yours:

1. Set the goal – Expert marketing planning starts with one clear, documented high-level goal.
2. Engage with an external marketing expert, if applicable – Don't wait to issue that RFP. Your team has agreed on the goal, a fresh perspective is most valuable at this earlier phase so your organization doesn't overproduce underperforming marketing.
3. Analyze results from the previous period – Align with your team and share with any potential external marketing expert the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats gleaned from previous marketing efforts. Share also your vision for the future, your process for selecting an agency, a full list of decision makers, the date upon which you wish to make a decision and the amount of allocated funds.
4. Conduct consumer research – Gather survey data from members of your target audience to understand the marketing media they most often use to make care decisions. This way you only invest in initiatives that most entice the people you seek.
5. Conduct competitor research – Vet your organization's brand messaging against core messaging touted by competitors. Adjust any messaging that isn't truly differentiating.
6. Research industry trends – To resist Shiny Object Syndrome, do this last.



**YOU
ALONE**

Set goal

Engage external
marketing expert



**YOU + YOUR AGENCY
TOGETHER**

Analyze previous results

Conduct consumer research

Conduct competitor research

Research industry trends

Marketing Planning Starts with One Goal



One Focus

One

Only one goal. Two at most. This focuses the team. As Sean Covey wrote in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*, "These goals make all the difference. Failure to achieve them renders all other efforts inconsequential."



Clear 15 words

Clear

Nix the 7-page strategic plan for each of the 7 departments (yes, we've seen this scenario) for one 15-word Big Important Goal (BIG). As Bréne Brown wrote, "Clear is kind." Plus, folks can get behind a goal they fully understand.



Documented Written for all to regularly see

Documented

Once everyone agrees on the goal, document it for all to see. It can only be followed by all if documented and regularly reviewed. At all-hands meetings, marketing team meetings and marketing/executive team standups, have one person read aloud the goal then invite one team member to share how another team member took bold action toward achieving it. Week over week, month over month, quarter by quarter, these micro-conversations add up to traction for the team.



High-Level Focuses on revenue or profit growth

High-Level

Here's our formula for developing your BIG: Increase [awareness/nurture/intent] marketing in order to increase [revenue/profit] from _____ to _____ by [month, day, year]. Very often, senior living executives and operators suggest the goal should be focused on closing a census gap. We say this is short sighted. If three years from now, all we did was achieve higher occupancy, you would be disappointed in marketing results. Go big. Anchor your goal in increasing revenue, profit or number of communities for stronger long-term results.

Next, let's dive deeper into the ideal research assets to inform your marketing plan.

Top Research Informing Marketing Planning for Senior Living

Our data revealed three major trends in data informing marketing planning: analytics, survey data and focus group data. Let's take a closer look at the best practices for each.

Analytics

In our study, the top result for research informing the marketing plan was an analysis of results and analytics from the previous period. Organizations often over-rely on this reactive data, getting stuck in conversations about how to improve weaknesses. While it's one part of the marketing planning mix, we also suggest gathering proactive data for a focus on untapped opportunities in the future.

Survey Data

The next top result reflected just that: your peers are surveying people who have used or are using their services to understand what media led them to find and understand their organizations. While we were pleasantly surprised to see this among the top rankings, only 43% of your industry peers are conducting this research.

This is the single best way to gain a marketing edge for your community, and here's why: residents and families will tell you precisely how they found you and what other media they use to make care-based decisions - perhaps some your team had previously overlooked. Market directly through these channels to reduce marketing waste, sharpen marketing targets and increase efficacy.

What is the difference between customer satisfaction (CSAT) surveys, voice-of-the-customer (VOC) surveys and programmatic surveys, and which is best for marketing planning?

- CSAT surveys indicate how well the organization is performing and where it can further improve. They occur throughout the customer journey and are more reactive than the other two survey varieties.
- A VOC survey is a market research tool that provides in-depth data to identify preferences, expectations, how the organization provides value, what makes the organization unique and how residents and family members initially became involved with the organization. The resulting data provides information related to what residents and family members value most about the organization, providing the foundation from which a brand can be built.
- Programmatic surveys can reveal which marketing media most engage the members of the target audience and are best suited for marketing planning. Through a platform like Pollfish, we select different qualifiers such as age, career and gender to reach the right people in the target audience. We ask pointed questions about how people search for senior living and what media they focus on most. The results paint a clear picture of where marketing dollars should be invested for healthy returns.



CSAT

How can we improve?



VOC

What do people value most about us?



Programmatic

How are people finding us?

Focus Group Data

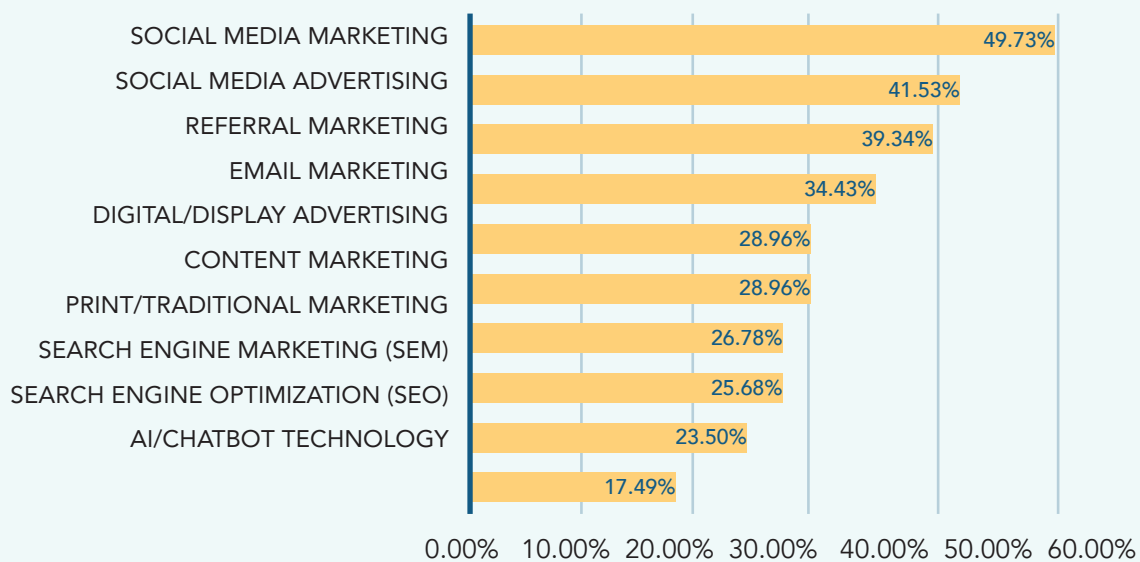
The research also indicated a preference for conducting focus groups among the internal marketing team and external marketing partners to brainstorm initiatives to include in the marketing plan. Generally speaking, we advise against this. Inevitably, you will get an overconfident participant in the room who drives others to concur with their limited perspectives on marketing opportunities and the organization misses its marks.

Once the research is complete, what are the most common strategies found in marketing plans across the senior living industry?

Top 10 Initiatives Found in Senior Living Marketing Plans

Have you ever wondered what strategies appear in your competitors' marketing plans? Here's what our surveys revealed:

Top 10 Initiatives found in Senior Living Marketing Plans



Since investment in senior living is a relationship-based decision, it's appropriate that social media marketing and advertising topped the list. As Big Buzz CEO Wendy O'Donovan Phillips wrote for Forbes in her article *10 Steps To Posting On Social Media For Healthcare Marketers*, "Think of social media as an online open house for your organization—join the party, show up as your authentic self, an ambassador of the brands we serve and live."

Referral marketing is also a smart choice. No one has more power to bring you highly qualified new leads than those you already serve since they already know and love what you do for them. Train the team to remind folks you have openings and are accepting new move-ins. For a step-by-step guide to training, see our blog post, *Keep Your Profits: 3 Ways to Increase Senior Living Occupancies*.

Email marketing and content marketing can also be strong strategies to include, especially when coupled with a storytelling marketing strategy. For more detail on how to master storytelling, check out our last eBook and our CEO's most-read Forbes article, *The Power Of Narrative: Change The Story, Change The World*.

And yes indeed, print/traditional marketing still gets traction in the senior living industry. It's important to keep that strategy alive and well.

As for digital/display advertising, search engine marketing (SEM), search engine optimization (SEO) and AI/chatbot technology: remember these are tactics, not strategies. Rather than simply running ads and SEO, consider developing a digital marketing strategy. This starts with leadership encouraging high-level critical thinking and proactive research across the internal and external digital marketing teams to uncover opportunities that will boost outcomes. Here are a few questions to frame the conversation:

- What are all the digital marketing initiatives in which we are currently investing?
- What data do we have to show those are the right initiatives to reach our target audience?
- Of those initiatives, which are working best?
- Which need to be strengthened?
- Which should we consider discontinuing?
- Considering data from programmatic surveys, what should be added?
- What is our total annual investment in digital marketing?
- What is our total annual investment in all marketing?
- Is our ratio of investment in digital marketing versus investment in all marketing representative of the results gained from digital marketing versus all marketing?
- What action should be taken week by week and by whom over the next quarter to close any gaps identified in this conversation?

26% of survey respondents said they do not have a documented marketing plan for the year that is agreed upon by everyone on the team. When is the time to create a strategic marketing plan, and what is the right cadence for review?

WHEN

Cadence of Marketing Plan Review in Senior Living Organizations

If you do not yet have a strategic marketing plan in place, the time to create one is now. From there, it's critical that the plan maintains a cadence of accountability.

Cote went on to say, "It's important to highlight that strategic planning is an ongoing process—not a one-time meeting... Strategic planning requires time, effort, and continual reassessment."

Our study showed that 42% of senior living marketing teams and executives review the marketing plan quarterly. The data indicated that 38% refresh the marketing plan at that time. We believe this cadence to be healthy, particularly when coupled with the review of a single scoreboard that has tracked results week over week for the quarter. The team can then pinpoint, discuss and resolve issues based on trends rather than feelings.

The data revealed that 39% of teams review the marketing plan once annually, 9% once every three years and 10% not at all. A plan is meant to create accountability and a path forward. Without regular review, it's just another document collecting dust on the shelf. Reviewing the plan more often than once quarterly pulls the team into groupthink and can also jeopardize marketing results. Review quarter by quarter is recommended.

KPIs for various team members to add to your scoreboard every week and to review in entirety once quarterly may include:

- ✓ New CRM Contacts
- ✓ Email Traffic
- ✓ Organic Traffic
- ✓ Social Traffic
- ✓ Open Rates
- ✓ Content Page Views
- ✓ Pipeline
- ✓ Close Rate
- ✓ YTD Revenue as a Percentage to Plan
- ✓ Net Promoter Score (NPS)
- ✓ Client Satisfaction Survey Data
- ✓ Employee Satisfaction Survey Data
- ✓ Changes in Occupancy
- ✓ Lead-to-tour Conversions
- ✓ Tour-to-Move-in Conversions

Is your organization's marketing plan successfully supporting the organization in reaching its KPIs? Our research showed that 16% of your peers do not have documented KPIs. Another 17% said their marketing plans do not support them in reaching their KPIs. Simply by documenting and managing marketing KPIs, you gain a competitive edge.

Next, we will have a look at the best practices for budgeting in tandem with marketing planning.

HOW MUCH

Marketing Plan Budgeting Practices for Senior Living Organizations

Our data showed that over the previous year, 54% of marketers in senior living increased their marketing budgets, 27% made no change and 19% decreased their marketing budgets.

The Small Business Association suggests reinvesting 6-8% of top-line revenue back into marketing each year. What you put in is what you get out, so be sure the marketing budget aligns with your desired outcomes.

WRAP UP

The Big Picture: A Word on the Marketing Objectives Workshop Approach

What if you had a one-page marketing plan for the next three years upon which the marketing and executive teams all agreed and focused quarter by quarter to gain traction toward long-term growth objectives? What difference would that make for the marketing team? For the executive team? For the organization? For those you serve?

Big Buzz takes a Marketing Objectives Workshop approach to accomplishing this, and you can get started on your own. The outcome of this workshop, the Strategic Planning Model, is that one-page, three-year marketing plan: a living and breathing document that is meant to be reviewed, acted upon and edited regularly. Here is a breakdown of how to get started.

Outcomes in Marketing Planning for Senior Living Organizations

The results showed that 21% of respondents perceived their organizations' marketing planning efforts were slightly below average compared with competitors', and 10% thought they were significantly below average. 20% said marketing planning outcomes were slightly below average compared with competitors', and 8% thought they were significantly below average.

Is your marketing planning working for you? How can you strengthen your marketing planning strategy?

**Get your free initial
marketing planning session**

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