Mistake #1: Same Actions Or Inaction

It is common for marketing directors to do the same things they have always done...or not done, with the same poor results. There is certainly no shortage of folks complaining about their census. But when we ask them what they’re doing about it, their eyes glaze over. They explain that there is nothing they can do, or they don’t have the time to do anything. Others are cemented in historical action. They are stuck in the "this is the way it’s always been done" rut. Well, as author Michael Gerber said: "If you do what you always do, you get what you always got". The world has changed and through inaction, managements are being left behind.

Mistake #2: Marketing to Everybody

By trying to appeal to everybody, many facilities end up getting the attention of very few. Just do a search on Google or pick up a local Yellow Pages or open a copy of New LifeStyles. Look at the listings for care homes and service, and you’ll see just how alike most facilities position themselves. There are numerous generic ads that focus on the same things - We Care, 3 Meals/Day, 24 Hr. Care, Caring Staff, etc.). The consumer is given no way of distinguishing one facility from the next. They cannot find someone to solve their specific problem or meet their specific need. (Except for dementia programs, serving a niche market is rare.) Most operators are afraid to differentiate themselves for fear of not being able to serve everyone. When the consumer finally does "pick a facility out of a hat", they put less value on that facility features and services. This leads to lower prices.

Mistake #3: Crisis Management

Marketing must be a proactive effort. The most effective marketing takes vision and a long-term approach. However, when you manage in crisis mode, you handle the most urgent problems. Consequently, you market only when the census is in trouble or when you have the time. Even then, when some other problem comes along, marketing commonly gets bumped to the side.

Mistake #4: Inside-Out Thinking

Most industry managers do not put themselves in the prospective customers' position. They see the world only from inside their own experience. (The staff emulates the management.) This breaks down the communication needed to help seniors and their caregivers understand your services and the assisted living industry. Inside-out thinking is prevalent in the areas of:

- **Care & Services**: Expecting others to know what you know about assisted living.
- **Personal**: Expecting others to like or need what you like or need.
- **Cultures**: Expecting others to communicate in and understand your business, national or family culture.
- **Business**: Expecting others to know how the care business is conducted and funded.
- **Perspective**: Expecting others to see things your way versus through their own filters.

Low pay, lack of training and high employee turnover magnify this mistake.
Mistake #5: Shotgun Marketing

Many assisted living operators feel marketing is an unwanted chore done when a resident is needed. There is no consistent, continuous and/or strategic plan to keep their beds full. Instead, marketing is done in scattered shots and driven by their need (and desperation). Often, it feels like they are begging for referrals, instead of earning referrals. Also, by not strategically integrating the facility's everyday operations into their marketing plan, they lose a phenomenal amount of their selling power.

Mistake #6: Marketing Treated Like Cinderella

In many facilities marketing is treated like the poor step-sister. They know this department is a very important member of the facility family. However, marketing gets very little respect due to a lack of confidence, lack of expertise, fear of expense, and fear of selling (being seen as pushy). In addition, the 4 Needs For Success - time, talent, money and systems - are often not allocated in adequate amounts. Yet they still wait and hope for the census to rise. "Waiting for their prince to come" marketing has put many facilities out of business.

Mistake #7: Not Marking the Trail

If you don't know how you got here, you won't know how to get here again? If you ended up in the wrong place, how do you know you won't end up here again? Facilities must track what they do and what leads people to their door. (A good database and a dedication to its usage, and data integrity are key critical to making successful marketing decisions.)

Poor tracking may cause the premature stoppage of working programs, as well as the continuation of wasteful ones. Also, it can destroy the valuable synergy created by coordinated and integrated marketing programs. Remember, in referral-based marketing, it is often a combination of efforts that leads a new resident to your door.

Mistake #8: Can't Teach Old Dogs... Won't Teach New Dogs...

Closed minds can close the doors. Lack of training, and a lack of a desire to train, can lead to a lack of new residents. Not investing in a facility's greatest asset, “the staff”, can hamper operations. Since top quality operations are critical to a success in assisted living, training is essential. Also, many facilities don't train their staff on how they fit into the selling (consultative) process. Mastering this process is great for marketing and a critical part of fulfilling the facility mission: helping seniors and their caregivers to make one of the most difficult decisions they will ever make.

Mistake #9: Selling Rooms

Many assisted living advertisements and tour leaders attempt to sell prospects on the facility...show and tell. This typically includes a focus on rooms. Of course, it is important to be proud of what you are offering. And a 600 sq. ft. single unit, or even a smaller "semi-private" room may be exactly what is needed and affordable. However, just selling the room cannot compete with a prospective resident's 2,000 square foot home that they've decorated, lived in, and called home for the past 30 years. (Also, many caregivers ask themselves if they would want to live in a room.) So, you have to focus on the need for niche services, the necessity of individual care plans, etc. If you are just selling rooms, you lose.

Mistake #10: Small Thinking

Many facilities focus on the care side of assisted living at the expense of everything else. This is small thinking that has nothing to do with the size of a facility. It's the mindset that ignores solid business principles "we should get the referrals because we give really good care." It is allowing the desire to care to compensate for a lack of sound business principles, including strategic marketing. From a money standpoint, often it is not knowing costs, saving money at the cost of appearing unprofessional and not putting a value on empty beds.