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# Public relations and marketing techniques used by assisted living communities to attract and retain residents

Brianne Rabouin

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**PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING TECHNIQUES USED BY ASSISTED  
LIVING COMMUNITIES TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN RESIDENTS**

by

Brianne P. Rabouin

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Department of Public Relations and Advertising

College of Communications

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at

Rowan University

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Suzanne FitzGerald

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## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my mother and role model, Ann Marie Rabouin; my father and biggest fan, Scott E. Rabouin; my brother, Matthew S. Rabouin; my love and best friend, Justin R. Strasser; and my favorite canine companion, Kelkie. Without your love, support and encouragement, none of this would have been possible.*

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## **Abstract**

Brianne P. Rabouin

### **PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING TECHNIQUES USED BY ASSISTED LIVING COMMUNITIES TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN RESIDENTS**

2010/11

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Master of Arts in Public Relations

The purposes of this study were to determine the public relations and marketing techniques used by assisted living facilities (ALFs) to attract and retain senior residents, investigate the perception of effectiveness in PR and marketing practices among assisted living administrators and identify the role of community relations within ALFs. Consistent with previous research, interviews and surveys with assisted living professionals reveal communities operate using traditional techniques and channels including, but not limited to, newspaper ads, facility tours, community events, word-of-mouth promotion, direct-mail marketing/materials, newsletters, facility websites and professional referral development. Respondents report minimal use of new media, yet maintain an overall positive outlook on their individual facilities' efforts. However, participants' view of the overall assisted living industry contains concerns regarding the economy and the misunderstood perception of independent care. Finally, results suggest a majority of community relations departments integrate marketing and public relations functions within ALFs.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Assisted living emerged in the 1990s as an eldercare alternative for seniors who could no longer live independently, but wanted to maintain maximum independence, (Brady, & Martin, 2005). Assisted living facilities (ALFs) monitor resident activities to ensure the health, safety and well-being of residents, (Chandra, Smith, & David 2006). In recent years the need for these facilities has increased, (Chandra, Smith, & David 2006). Today, there is a high demand for these services as well as a high level of competition between facilities, (Willging, 2005; Willging, 2007; Willaman, 2009).

Because prospective residents, families and payers of these services have many long-term care options, assisted living communities must use strategic communications efforts to attract new residents and retain current residents, (Willging, 2005; Willging, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative for administrators to use public relations techniques to monitor trends in the industry, craft their message and communicate with the public to influence public opinion.

However, assisted living communities may not realize the importance of public relations efforts to the success of their facility. And it seems that those who do implement public relations activities use more traditional or outdated methods to reach audiences and promote their facilities, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl, & Hearld, 2006; Willging, 2005). Therefore, it is important to look at what public relations techniques assisted living facilities use today, the perceptions of their efforts and how current PR programs within ALFs can improve through social media and newer techniques.

## **1.1 Problem Statement**

Previous research indicates that assisted living communities face a highly competitive market, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl, & Hearld, 2006; Willging, 2005; Willging, 2007; Willaman, 2009). In addition, previous literature suggests public relations ALF staff use out-dated methods to market ALF facilities, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl, & Hearld, 2006; Willging, 2005). Therefore, it is important to identify public relations techniques used by ALFs to determine industry trends and common public relations practices within the assisted living sector. This research seeks to answer the question, what public relations techniques do assisted living facilities use to attract and retain residents?

## **1.2 Procedure**

The researcher will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data and study assisted living facilities in the New Jersey area.

The author will administer a multi-question survey to assisted living managers, administrators and directors in charge of public relations and marketing activities to determine the public relations techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents. The survey will also gauge the perceived effectiveness of public relations techniques, determine the level to which public relations is used and identify the roles within community relations positions. The researcher will use a convenience sample to choose facilities to survey in the New Jersey area.

To gather more in-depth data on the public relations techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents, the author will conduct personal interviews with the executive director,

community relations director, activities director, human resource manager and marketing administrator at an assisted living facility located in New Jersey. The researcher will use a convenience sample to choose participants.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify the public relations and marketing techniques used by ALFs. The study will attempt to determine channels used and techniques employed by facilities. In addition, the study seeks to investigate how community relations departments operate and how staff perceives the level of effectiveness in PR and marketing practices within ALFs.

The author believes it is essential to find out what ALFs are doing to communicate with publics and how they perceive their efforts. With this information, the researcher can identify trends in the industry and recommend ways to enhance current efforts and expand to newer PR techniques.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

**RQ:** What PR techniques do assisted living facilities use to attract and retain residents?

**H1:** It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities use more traditional or outdated PR techniques to impact enrollment decisions.

According to Willging (2005), it is the consensus among analysts in the field that long term care facilities have less experience in the public relations and marketing arena and use more out-of-date approaches than most other service industries. Additionally, Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006) found marketing and public relations practices within long-term care facilities remain focused on traditional and constrained practices.

**H2: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities lump public relations and marketing into one single function under the title “community relations,” which engages in both marketing/selling than public relations/relationship building to impact enrollment decisions.**

According to Molloy (1999), public relations and community relations appear to be the functions most often given the extra responsibility of marketing in hundreds of health care organizations across the country, especially long-term care facilities, (Molloy, 1999). In addition, Molloy (1999) believes facilities frequently confuse public relations and marketing and do not understand that special skills are needed for each. Finally, Brady and Martin (2005) believe marketing is seen as a critical component to assisted living efforts, while public relations efforts are not seen as crucial to the success of these facilities.

**H3: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities believe their PR/marketing efforts are effective in attracting and retaining residents in a highly competitive market.**

Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006) found a majority of long-term care administrators view their markets as highly competitive and their efforts as highly effective.

## **Delimitations**

- The author will not study assisted living facilities outside the New Jersey area.
- The author will use a convenience sample to calculate data, which will not allow for a scientifically representative sample.
- The author will not analyze website content of the facilities studied.
- The author will not discuss or investigate other forms of long-term care such as nursing homes, hospitals or rehabilitation centers.

## **Significance of the Study**

Currently, little research on the topic of public relations and marketing efforts within ALFs exists in the literature, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). Because research on the ALF industry is limited, further research may be critical to understanding and improving ALF living, (Warren, & Williams, 2008). Furthermore, it is an area worth exploring because as the “baby boomer” generation ages, the need for ALFs will increase even more, (Chandra, Smith, & David 2006; Willging, 2007).

In addition, assisted living has experienced a recent rise in popularity, public acceptance and use, (Willging, 2007). This popularity however, created an environment where product supply exceeds demand; and today, ALFs face a high level of competition between facilities, (Willging, 2007). As a result, there is a need for key marketing activities for more effective positioning in the future competitive environment, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006).

The first step in successful promotion is to make the public aware of a product or service, (Willging, 2005). However, Willging (2005) suggests that many potential ALF consumers claim to be knowledgeable about long-term care options, but many are not.

Somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of seniors and adult children are still completely unaware of the types of and distinctions among senior housing and care communities. And of the 60 to 75 percent that claim to be aware, only about 15 percent of these people believe themselves to be very knowledgeable about any of the property types, (Willging, 2005, p. 20).

Therefore, marketing eldercare requires both education and persuasion as part of an overall plan, (Willging, 2005). However, most ALFs do not consistently operate with a written public relations and marketing plan, (Willging, 2005).

However, other research suggests the public has a better understanding of long-term care options and educating potential customers should not be a priority, (Chandra, Smith, & Paul, 2006). According to Chandra, Smith and Paul (2006), the public understands the mission of assisted living, believes it is a necessary service and would consider it for a loved one. In addition, people know that long-term care is provided in various settings, and is not limited to nursing homes, (Chandra et al. 2006).

According to the literature, the challenge may not be to educate the public about ALFs; the challenge may be to position a facility as the one to choose when consumers are faced with many comparable options, (Willging, 2005; Willging, 2007; Willaman, 2009). Today, ALFs are faced with a unique challenge: acknowledge today's attitudes regarding resident independence and quality of life and integrate these attitudes to position an ALF as the best choice, (Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999). Therefore, it important to look at what ALFs are currently doing in terms of PR techniques to tackle this challenge.



## **Summary**

There is a lack of research in the area of ALFs and what these facilities do in terms of public relations and marketing to attract and retain residents in today's competitive environment, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). According to Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006), while many long-term care facilities adopted basic healthcare marketing practices and hired marketing staff by the early 1990's, a paucity of research on long-term marketing exists in the literature (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). Therefore, it is important for the researcher to examine previous literature to see how the current study can contribute to the body of knowledge that already exists. See Chapter 2 for an in-depth look at previous work.

## Terminology

**Activities of daily living (ADLs)** — Tasks essential for day-to-day living; ADLs include dressing, eating, bathing and toileting.

**Assisted Living Facility (ALFs)** — Healthcare facilities that provide health services and assistance with ADLs 24-hours-a-day to those who need these services. Other common services, which may cost extra, include social activities, housekeeping, laundry and transportation. ALFs promote independence, dignity in home-like surroundings and some include skilled nursing facilities and dementia units. ALFs are usually located in apartment style buildings. These facilities may also be referred to as assisted living residences, assisted living communities, assisted care living facilities, residential care homes and personal care homes.

**Assisted Living Resident** — An individual who lives in an ALF. Residents of ALFs can range in age and level of care needed. However, most residents are seniors born prior to 1945 and require a moderate level of assistance with ADLs.

**Attitude** — An internal predisposition to act, (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005).

**Baby Boomer Generation** — Comprised of people born between 1943 and 1960. This is the next group expected to flood the long-term care market in up-coming years.

**Belief** — A predisposed conviction of what is true.

**Channel** — An outlet used to carry-out a message.

**Communication** — Interchange of information or two-way transaction to convey a message and allow for feedback.

**Community Relations** — The function that evaluates public attitudes, identifies the mission of an organization with the public interest and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. Unlike public relations, community relations is usually limited to the local area, (Walsh, 2002).

**Lead** — Someone who inquires about the facility and is qualified as a potential customer. Leads must need, and be able to afford, the service offered, (Mullen, 2002).

**Long-Term Care Facility** — A facility that provides rehabilitative, restorative, and/or ongoing skilled nursing care to patients or residents in need of assistance with activities of daily living. Long-term care facilities include assisted living facilities, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, inpatient behavioral health facilities, and long-term chronic care hospitals.

**Opinion** — The outward expression of an attitude in any form — purchase, vote, letter, speech; the effect of a temporary or lasting attitude, (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005).

**Marketing** — Concentrates on influencing the public to buy goods and services.

**Marketing Communications (or Integrated Marketing Communications)** — Strategically merges elements of advertising, public relations and marketing to enhance the image of an entity and sell its product or service. Those who practice advertising, branding, graphic design, marketing, promotion, public relations, sales promotion and online marketing are termed *marketing communicators*.

**Publics** — Specific audiences communicated to by a specific entity.

**Public Relations (PR)** — The systematic communication between an entity and various publics important to that entity to increase understanding and support of that entity and its objectives.

**Public Opinion** — The accumulation of individual opinion on an important matter of public interest that affects the lives of the public, (Litwin, 2008).

**Strategy** — A general approach to reach an objective; generally conditioning an audience to receive the message contained in the strategy, (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005).

**Tactic** — A specific channel technique to deliver a strategic message to a target audience comprising specific agent, cost and time frame, (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Long-Term Care**

Assisted living facilities, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, inpatient behavioral health facilities, and long-term chronic care hospitals all provide what is referred to as long-term care for those unable to meet their basic living needs for an extended period of time, (Thornton, 1998). Long-term care facilities provide rehabilitative, restorative and ongoing skilled nursing care to patients or residents in need of assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs), (Thornton, 1998). According to Willaman (2009), the long-term care marketplace is booming and so is the demand for this service that provides care for older Americans.

Chandra, Smith and David (2006) suggest the need for long-term care will increase as the baby boomer generation ages. In response to this growing need, many long-term care facilities have made facilities more “home-like,” which is a major trend in long-term care, (Chandra, Smith, & David, 2006; Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999).

However, some potential long-term care consumers are still unaware of the various care options.

Somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of seniors and adult children are still completely unaware of the types of and distinctions among senior housing and care communities. And of the 60 to 75 percent that claim to be aware, only about 15 percent of these people believe themselves to be very knowledgeable about any of the property types (Willging, 2005, p. 20).

Willging (2005) suggests that the public is not fully knowledgeable about long-term care offerings available in the marketplace today.

However, results from a study conducted by Chandra et al. (2006) found a majority of healthcare consumers would consider long-term care for themselves or a loved one, feel it is a necessary service and they believe those who need it should receive it. Additionally, nearly all participants understood that long-term care is provided in various settings, and is not limited to nursing homes, (Chandra, Smith, & David, 2006). This study suggests the public supports long-term care and understands its mission.

People no longer perceive long-term care facilities as places to “dump” unloved relatives, (Chandra, Smith, & David, 2006). Quite the opposite is now true. Today, consumers look for amenities much like that of a luxury hotel where loved ones will be safe, secure and well-cared for, (Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999). Therefore, many look to assisted living facilities to meet this need.

### **Assisted Living**

Assisted living is one form of long-term care with a philosophy of care and services that promote independence and dignity, (Brady, & Martin, 2005). Assisted living emerged in the 1990s as an eldercare alternative for seniors who can no longer live independently, but may not need 24-hour care, (Brady, & Martin, 2005). ALFs monitor resident activities to ensure the health, safety and well-being of residents. These long-term care facilities supervise and assist with activities of daily living (ADLs) for elderly people, (Thornton, 1998). Examples of assistance might include the administration of prescribed medication or the coordination of services by outside health care providers.

Assisted living is not “hospitality,” it is healthcare with a focus on continued independence and empowerment of the customer, (Willging, 2007). Assisted living care provides an environment half-way between independent living and a nursing home, (Warren, & Williams, 2008). Assisted living facilities (ALFs) are the fastest growing residential care option for older adults—expected to double to 2 million users in the next decade, (Warren, & Williams, 2008).

According to Willging (2007) the ALF industry has never been hotter.

As pointed out recently by the board chair of the National Investment Center for the Seniors Housing and Care Industries (NIC), senior housing is producing very attractive returns. Investors in Emeritus Assisted Living [for example] enjoyed a 403 percent return in a year. Industry-wide, mean occupancy is again pushing 90 percent (compared with 80 percent in nursing home facilities), (Willging, 2007, p. 16).

Despite its popularity, there is no universal definition of assisted living. But owners and investors agree assisted living has come a long way in defining itself, (Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999). ALFs are regulated and licensed at the state level and approximately two-thirds of the states use the term "assisted living." Others use residential care homes, assisted care living facilities and personal care homes to describe the same type of facility. Regardless of the term used, many customers prefer the ambience of ALFs over the institutional feel of the traditional nursing home and most consumers see ALFs for what they are—elderly healthcare providers, (Willging, 2007).

Willging (2007) defines assisted living as “a nursing home with a chandelier,” (p.18). This definition is meant to explain how today ALFs deal with the same residents as did nursing homes of years ago (then called intermediate care facilities). “While ALFs have had to attract residents in a highly competitive market, nursing homes did not—thus the chandelier,” (Willging, 2007, p. 18).

Willging (2007) believes administrators should be concerned because assisted living may be seen as the lesser of two evils when compared to nursing homes. In other words, ALFs may be perceived as simply the better choice among a bunch of not-so-great options. Therefore, facilities strategic choices will be doomed if they do not address the fact that ALFs may be attractive merely as an alternative to nursing homes, (Willging, 2007).

However, it is what assisted living offers that distinguishes it from other long-term care sectors, (Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999). But the specialty service of assisted living exists in a highly competitive environment that must compete with others offering comparable services, (Willging, 2007). To support this claim, Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006) found a majority of long-term care administrators view their markets as highly competitive.

Many ALFs offer higher quality or specialized services, which cost more. It is this “value” that influences consumers’ decision-making to believe they get what they pay for, (Willging, 2005). However, facilities must conduct proper research and engage in public relations activities to determine if a demand for these services exists, (Willging, 2005).

According to Scott, Kender and Townsley (1999) there are several emerging trends in assisted living that are important in the future marketing of these facilities. Scott, Kender and Townsley (1999) believe these trends are larger units, increased individual and public amenities, special care components, and most importantly, community integration. According to Scott, Kender and Townsley (1999), community integration thorough events such as community bingo, create “passive marketing,” the subtle positioning of quality care and service. Public relations efforts such as this shift focus away from outright selling and indirectly influence public opinion in the long term care sector.



## **Public Relations and the Techniques**

Public relations is a management function that seeks to improve the image of a person, company or product, (Molloy, 1999). Molloy (1999) defines public relations as, “a management function which carefully evaluates the public’s attitude towards a person, company, or product and then, after evaluation, executes a plan of action to gain a better understanding of or more favorable approval, for that person, company or product, (p. 38). In long-term care facilities, public relations is an important tool to influence the public’s attitude. ALFs must use public relations to ensure communities holds facilities in high regard, (Molloy, 1999).

Experts of senior housing and care believe that the field has less experience in the public relations and marketing arena than other service industries, (Willging, 2005). Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006) found a majority of marketing and public relations practices of long-term care administrators remain focused on traditional and constrained practices. Willging (2005) believes this is a result of the traditionally noncompetitive environment nursing homes and assisted living facilities operated in.

Protected by certificates of need, nursing homes and assisted livings did not see the need to market. Focusing on the inappropriate placement of low-acuity resident in nursing homes, assisted living, early in its history, was able to pick the low-hanging fruit from nursing homes. But times have changed, (Willging, 2005, p. 16).

Today, marketing and public relations are essential in all sectors of long term care, especially the specialty sector of assisted living, (Willging, 2005).

While many long-term care facilities adopted basic healthcare marketing practices and hired marketing staff by the early 1990’s, many ALFs still use out-of-date public relations

practices, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). In fact, there is little evidence to prove promotional practices and communications efforts have contributed to provider success in recent years, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). Yet, few ALFs have reevaluated current approaches and marketing strategies to better compete in the competitive environment of long-term care.

The approach each long-term care operation uses varies because of small marketing budgets and fewer resources facilities have to get their message out, (Willaman, 2009). Regardless of the approach used, public relations efforts must first anticipate customer needs, wants, attitudes and opinions, and therefore, must begin with research, (Willging, 2005). “The lack of research (or lack of effective research) is one of the most critical mistakes made in senior housing and care” and it is a frequent and costly one, (Willging, 2005, p. 17).

According to Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld (2006), a majority of long-term care administrators do not operate with a comprehensive public relations plan. Similarly, Willging (2005) found most ALFs do not consistently operate with a written public relations and marketing plan. In addition, many administrators do not conduct environmental scans and rely heavily on relationships with key stakeholders—residents and discharge managers, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). However, ALF facilities implement a variety of public relations techniques to reach potential buyers and influence public opinion.

### *The Techniques*

Campbell (2004) suggests the most common traditional PR techniques currently used by ALFs are news releases, human-interest feature stories, newsletters, brochures, community events, resident events, personal calls and notes and facility tours. ALFs have used these

techniques since the 1990s, (Campbell, 2004). In fact, it seems many ALFs are hesitant to implement newer internet-based methods, and many still have not. However, Campbell (2004) argues that news releases, human-interest feature stories, newsletters, brochures, community events, resident events, personal calls and tours are still highly effective and can be used in conjunction with more up-to-date approaches.

### *News release*

News releases (sometimes called press releases) produced by a PR specialist must be well written and error free to be effective, (Litwin, 2008). As the “backbone” of gaining media coverage, news releases must be written in Associated Press style (AP), “mechanically sound, logically organized and credible,” (Litwin, 2008). In ALFs, news releases can be used to get the word out in the community about special events, new employees, new services or upgrades to the facility, (Campbell, 2004).

According to Wisniewski (2005), news releases spread the word about special events, new services, new employees and enhancements to the ALF facility. Therefore, it is important for these releases to appear in publications read by the target audience, (Wisniewski, 2005). For ALFs, the target audience resides in the nearby local area; as a result, local newspapers are the primary target for media coverage, (Wisniewski, 2005).

### *Feature Story*

Feature stories usually appear in internal publications such as newsletters, (Litwin, 2008). Feature stories are effective in ALF communities because they involve an important component—human-interest. Usually ALF feature stories appear in a newsletter and will showcase an outstanding staff member or a special bond between an employee and a resident. In

ALFs, human-interest feature stories showcase the relationship between staff and resident to highlight the unique environment of a facility, (Campbell, 2004). According to Wisniewski (2005), human-interest stories capture reader's attention because they highlight the special environment of an ALF or entertain audiences with personal stories of residents and staff.

### *Newsletter*

Litwin (2008) believes print newsletters become the “logo” pieces for organizations. Therefore, organizations must adhere to strict consistency in both appearance and writing style so audiences can recognize and understand them easily, (Litwin, 2008). Newsletters provide opportunities for direct communication, facility updates and feelings of goodwill between the organization and its publics, (Wisniewski, 2005).

In ALFs, “newsletters sent to family and community members maintain a consistent presence in the community as well as update audiences about the facility, staff and residents,” (Campbell, p. 56). Similarly, Wisniewski (2005) found newsletters were a valuable vehicle to reach community members. However, PR professionals must remember a newsletter leaves a lasting impression with readers, (Wisniewski, 2005). Therefore, content creators must pay attention to how the copy and visual feature compliment other promotional materials to create a consistent message that current and prospective customers will both recognize and trust, (Wisniewski, 2005).

### *Brochure*

The purpose of a brochure is to make audiences familiar with the history, philosophy, mission, services and location of an organization, (Wisniewski, 2005). Brochure copy written by PR specialists should promote or persuade audiences to “purchase a product, or support a cause, program, issue or organization,” (Litwin, 2008). In ALF organizations, brochures must clearly communicate what makes the facility stand out from the competition. In addition, brochure copy must compliment other public relations efforts within the ALF to create a consistent image and message, (Wisniewski, 2005). Finally, brochures must be updated regularly to reflect the most up-to-date offerings and services, because it is sometimes the first impression of visitors seeking additional information, (Wisniewski, 2005).

### *Special Events*

Litwin (2008) believes special events attract positive attention to an organization. “Special events include news conferences, anniversary celebrations, rallies, parties, parades, yearlong celebrations fundraisers, symposiums, grand openings, groundbreakings and national conferences,” (Litwin, 2008, p. 424). Getting people to attend special events requires well-planned public relations plans to inform target audience of the happening. The primary goal of any special event is to attract attendees and increase awareness for an organization. Therefore, many ALFs implement both community (external) and facility (internal) events to influence enrollment decisions and foster relationships with current customers, (Campbell, 2004).

Wisniewski (2005) suggests ALFs should become involved with the community through special events where “staff and residents mingle with other members of the community, (p. 19). Volunteerism events can be an effective way for ALFs to gain a positive community reputation,

(Wisniewski, 2005). Many ALFs adopt charities and dedicate fundraisers to support those groups. Wisniewski (2005) believes this type of “giving back” special event is more effective than paid advertising and promotes name recognition in the local area.

To increase publicity, Wisniewski (2005) believes facilities should invite the media to newsworthy events that are unique and generate local interest. When articles are printed in the newspapers, ALFs can copy and disseminate them to current and prospective families to initiate word-of-mouth promotion, (Wisniewski, 2005). In addition, these articles can be sent to referral sources, such as doctors and discharge managers, who can use the material to impress potential residents and payers of ALF services, (Wisniewski, 2005).

In ALF and other long-term care facilities, community events can help attract a target audience such as baby boomers and/or their parents, (Campbell, 2004). Facility events, such as social and recreational resident events, produce good feelings and strong word-of-mouth publicity, (Campbell, 2004). Community events include craft sales, open houses and health fairs, (Wisniewski, 2005). Resident events can range from weekly bingo games or musical entertainment to field trips to off-site locations, (Campbell, 2004).

### *Personal Calls*

Personal calls and notes are best used after potential residents and family members tour a facility, (Wisniewski, 2005). These techniques are also highly effective with new residents because residents and their families are still becoming familiar with the facility and how ALFs operate. Following up with these internal audiences shows people that the ALF community wants to make each resident comfortable and content, which generates positive feelings towards the organization, (Wisniewski, 2005).

Personal calls and notes show that a facility pays attention to detail. When a staff member writes a handwritten note or makes a personal call to a potential or current customer, it is more than a small gesture of kindness, (Campbell, 2004). It acknowledges the person as a valued part of the assisted living family and goes a long way in differentiating an ALF from the rest, (Campbell, 2004).

### *In-Person Tours*

In-person tours require face-to-face communication. Litwin (2008) believes face-to-face interaction is “the most effective because it is often is the most believable and most credible.” Whether tours are walk-ins or scheduled meetings, it is usually the job of the community relations director to escort visitors throughout the building. When tours are in progress, Walsh (2002) believes the tour guide must engage in frequent eye contact to develop credibility and trust. It is important to make guests feel welcome and at home in the facility, so receptionists and managers should offer refreshments, engage in conversation and offer promotional reading materials during the wait. Finally, in-person tours must highlight what makes the facility unique and other benefits, offerings, services and amenities.

### **Newer Public Relations Techniques**

Traditional marketing vehicles used by ALFs, such as print advertising, direct mail and trade shows are becoming less effective in reaching the senior care market, (Willaman, 2009). Therefore, administrators must look to the Internet and other forms of social media, which has changed the way consumers research long-term care products and services, (Willaman, 2009).

## *Internet/Web 2.0*

Online marketing efforts are fairly effective for improving branding, customer satisfaction and the goodwill of the organization, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010). Healthcare marketers work to improve customer perception, which makes the Internet the perfect tool to accomplish this initiative, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010). Public relations professionals can use the Internet to secure current consumers and solicit new customers, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010).

“The internet is a fairly new marketing tool that customers use to find information about potential healthcare providers,” (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010). Internet marketing allows healthcare organizations to promote products and services and differentiate itself from the competition, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010). This research suggests a strong internet presence is crucial for ALFs that must stand out among a plethora of similar options in the long-term care sector.

According to Willaman (2009), some advertising and a Yellow Pages listing was the best way to reach long-term care customers in the past; but today the Web is the primary way many people get information about facilities. Second only to word-of-mouth, Internet presence is essential to successfully promote a facility, (Willaman, 2009). And chances are, if a person hears about a facility through word-of-mouth, they will go online to gather additional information, (Willaman, 2009). The most common place to gather additional information is facility Web sites.

## *Websites*

Savvy PR practitioners must craft a strong online presence and Web site to reach potential long-term care users, (Willaman, 2009). ALFs must create Web site content that



clearly, concisely and effectively tells the consumer about the company and what makes it unique, (Willaman, 2009). The increasingly competitive environment impacts the strategic marketing practices of healthcare organizations and makes the need for quality Web sites a top priority, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010).

Revere and Robinson (2010), suggest that “the more competitors in a marketplace the more likely facilities are to promote its quality as a potential differential advantage.” In other words, due to the competitive environment ALFs operate in, facilities will highlight facility quality to impact enrollment decisions. Therefore, it is important for any healthcare facility to market its quality on the organization’s Web site, because it is usually the first place people go for information, (Revere, & Robinson, Jr., 2010).

The internet is a useful tool for those looking for assisted living facilities because today’s seniors and baby boomer-age children visit Web sites regularly, (Campbell, 2004). Potential residents and family members can navigate a facility Web site in a fraction of the time they can take a tour in-person. But the site must be up-to-date, easy to navigate, accurate and engaging, (Campbell, 2004). In addition, pictures, testimonials and a virtual tour should be included to showcase interaction between staff and residents and the quality of the facility, (Campbell, 2004). But facility Web sites only brush the surface of the new public relations tools available to practitioners in the field. Web 2.0 (social media) presents both opportunities and challenges for today’s PR professionals.

### *Facebook*

Today, Facebook has more than 150 million users and it is the world’s top social networking site, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). Facebook started in 2004 for college students, but it was

not until 2007 that its doors opened to non-college students and businesses, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). This allowed corporations to engage in public relations, marketing and advertising via Facebook. But successful Facebook PR depends on conforming to the Facebook culture that was put in place by the college crowd that created its social norms, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). Vorvoreanu (2009) refers to this group as Facebook “natives.”

Practicing effective public relations via Facebook requires practitioners to preserve the Facebook culture and blend seamlessly into the social network. “Failure to adapt communication efforts to the local social norms presents the risk of failed communication efforts, being labeled as spam, and, in the long run, damaging the Facebook culture,” (Vorvoreanu, 2009, p. 67). However, if PR people can successfully use Facebook, they can build relationships between the organization and the public, (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

According to a focus group study conducted by Vorvoreanu (2009), college students are comfortable “friending” businesses on Facebook when it creates a mutually beneficial relationship and they are not being pushed to buy a product or service. In other words, students wanted to interact with organizations on Facebook only if they wanted to learn the story or mission of that entity. In addition, participants of the study indicated that they had no desire to converse with “faceless” large corporations via Facebook, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). And they felt that these corporations did not belong on the site if they were only after a profit.

However, if large organizations offer deals and special offers, the group was more inclined to communicate, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). While offering coupons is still profit-driven communication, it benefits the receivers who can potentially save money. However, participants felt corporations should not join Facebook as an attempt to be “cool” or “cutting edge” because

this turns off users, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). And while people seem to understand the value of companies joining Facebook, they do not see the point if corporations do socialize the right way, (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

A Facebook presence does not give a company an advantage, and it can even make users suspicious of intentions and damage an organizations image, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). But organizations can successfully market themselves on Facebook indirectly. Organizations should aim to build relationships outside Facebook first, and then reach out to an individual or group through Facebook. In addition, this research suggests that organizations should use Facebook to craft a corporate image and maintain relationships with existing publics; they should not “chase sales” and engage in sales promotion, (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

This research suggests Facebook is a channel that can be used for relationship building to influence favorable public opinion in the long-term care market, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). According to Vorvoreanu (2009), corporations should aim to keep it personal and cultivate dialogue. However, in certain instances, a lack of engagement altogether may benefit organizations more than utilizing social networks (Vorvoreanu, 2009). However, besides this study, “no scholarly research about public relations or marketing on Facebook or other social networks” exists in the literature, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). And while this study gave an understanding of Facebook college culture as it relates to public relations, more research is needed to determine the expectations for appropriate two-way communication via Facebook between entity’s and publics, (Vorvoreanu, 2009). Similarly to a Facebook presence, blogging provides a form of two-way communication between corporations and publics ((Xifra, & Grau, 2010)

## *Blogging*

Many public relationship practitioners now see blogging as a trend here to stay, and no longer view it as a “fad,” (Yang, & Lim, 2009). “Key features of blog-mediated public relations are conducive to initiating and nurturing relationships with publics,” (Yang, & Lim, 2009). As a result, blogs have become a new vehicle for public relations in recent years, (Yang, & Lim, 2009).

According to Marken (2005), blogging is one “new avenue for public relations to use in our increasingly connected world.” Weblogs or blogs provide management with a “fast, effective and economic means to carry-out two-way communications with many audiences,” (Marken, 2005). Blogs also serve as a “long-term commitment to educate, inform and influence consumers,” (Marken, 2005). Blogs must be updated often, sometimes even daily, to show the importance of the organization and the subject matter (Marken, 2005). “Nothing is worse than visiting a blog or company Web site for information that has not been updated recently,” (Marken, 2005).

Marken (2005) believes that public relations people must embrace blogs because they are not going away, and are only expanding. Blogs have become an important part of any communication program; and all public relations teams that want to grow organizations should use blogs, (Marken, 2005). Marken (2005) suggests PR people should research the number and kind of blogs that exist within their industry as a first step to the blogging process. Therefore, marketers and public relations practitioners for ALFs should investigate blogs of competitors and aim to blog as well.

Yang and Lim (2009) found that most bloggers engage in conversation with visitors which allows for two-way communication. Therefore, blogs are a “useful tool to enable dialogue and feedback, which can initiate and nurture relationships between an organization and its publics,” (Yang, & Lim, 2009). Yang and Lim (2009) refer to all blog-mediated public relations, such as storytelling, discussion, transparency, credibility, authenticity and interactivity, as BMPR. In addition, Yang and Lim (2009) found that PR professionals tend to focus on “tangible outputs of BMPR efforts such as comments and links posted.”

At the most simple form, a blog is a public online diary that allows management to directly communicate with customers, employees and all stakeholders, (Marken, 2005). Yang and Lim (2009) describe this simple version of Web-based logs or Weblogs as “personal publishing or content management systems on the Internet,” (Yang, & Lim, 2005). Blogs allow managers to “reach out, obtain direct feedback and influence audiences to increase a company’s position, market share and profits,” (Marken, 2005). Because of the opportunity for feedback, blogs are two-way communication, not one-way like e-newsletter or print newsletters, (Marken, 2005).

“Newsletters, especially print, have been used by companies for tens of years to get their message to specific stakeholders – shareholders, employees, partners, market segments,” (Marken, 2005). However, newsletters are a costly, time consuming and slow means of one-way communication that does not allow for feedback, (Marken, 2005). Additionally, many e-newsletters end up in spam folders; and many print newsletter end up in the trash, (Marken, 2005). But a blog is there forever. The same is true for nanoblogging, a condensed version of online diary entry.

### *Twitter (nanoblogging)*

“Nanoblogging (or microblogging) is a system of communication or an Internet-based publishing platform that consists of sending short text messages with a maximum length of 140 characters through tools such as Twitter, created specifically for this function,” (Xifra, & Grau, 2010, p. 171). The purpose of Twitter is to explain what people are doing at the moment, share information with other “tweeters” and provide links to other Web sites, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010).

Twitter was developed in 2006 and took off in 2007 as a popular nanoblogging platform, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). In 2007, Twitter won the “South by Southwest Web Award to the best blog initiative,” (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). Today, Twitter is the fastest growing internet phenomenon, with a growth rate of 1400 percent between April 2008 and April 2009 and 40 million users from the U.S. and Europe, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010).

Twitter provides a space where users can collaborate and communicate by following others, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). In addition, Twitter indexes the content, so information can be found easily through browsers, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). However, marketers and public relations professionals must understand that Twitter is a public space, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). As a result, what is written remains online for people to see, regardless if a friendship or following is established, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). In other words, users cannot block content that is contributed to the Twitter site.

In the exploratory study conducted by Xifra and Grau (2010), the researchers sought to determine the public relations topics discussed on Twitter and how the platform does or can influence the professional and theoretical development of the PR practice. Xifra and Grau (2010) found that most PR professionals use nanoblogging to build and maintain relationships and a

positive image for their place of employment. It seems that PR activity via nanoblogging replace other channels of communication or are used in conjunction with more traditional techniques, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). Public relations practitioners most commonly use corporate Twitter accounts to communicate with the press, clients and shareholders about recent news and activities, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010).

According to Xifra and Grau (2010), most tweets are portions of news releases that are shared with community followers and become indexed by the browsers through the key words contained in the message. Additionally, Xifra and Grau (2010) suggest Twitter has become a desirable and effective channel for job searches in the public relations industry for both employers and job-hunters. According to careerbuilder.com, many job openings and applications are increasingly shared on platforms such as Twitter, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010).

Finally, research suggests Twitter is “more a medium of professional use than a platform which directly contributes to the theoretical development in the field,” (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). In addition, Twitter is a good tool to disseminate information, access feedback and monitor industry trends and the public relations discourse in the Twitter community, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010). However, limited research has been conducted on nanoblogging and its relationship to public relations practice. Therefore, additional research is needed to build the body of knowledge on this topic, (Xifra, & Grau, 2010).

Regardless of the techniques used, old or new, marketing communicators in the long-term care industry must be able to recognize when a PR issue exists as opposed to a marketing issue, (Molloy, 1999). If you have a good product and quality service, but a weak reputation, PR can strengthen relationships with key publics to influence behavior and enhance image, (Willging,

2005). However, if you have a lousy product and poor care, the issue lies within the product itself (Willging, 2005). Therefore, you must first improve services offered and care given before PR techniques can make an impact, which first involves distinguishing public relations from marketing, (Willging, 2005).

### **Distinction between Public Relations and Marketing in Healthcare**

Public relations and marketing functions are often lumped together by healthcare organizations, (Molloy, 1999). But marketing is not public relations. Public relations involves continuous communication between an organization and its stakeholders—it builds relationships, (Molloy, 1999). On the other hand, marketing effectively promotes services—it sells products, (Molloy, 1999). According to Brady and Martin (2005), marketing is a critical component to assisted living efforts, but public relations efforts are not seen as crucial to the success of these facilities.

According to Molloy (1999), the worst mistake a facility can make is confusing marketing with public relations. Although they both are necessary functions for any long-term care operation, marketing problems require marketing solutions, while PR problems require PR solutions, (Molloy, 1999). But many long-term care administrators mix up the two functions and do not realize that special skills are needed for each, (Molloy, 1999).

Molloy (1999) argues there are three differences between public relations and marketing. First, marketing is a tool that motivates people to buy; public relations is a communications tool that creates positive perception, (Molloy, 1999). Second, marketing aims to influence consumer's purchasing decisions and public relations aims to influence consumer's attitudes and perceptions, (Molloy, 1999). Third, the main goal of marketing is to increase sales and revenue;



the main goal of public relations is to increase favorable public opinion, (Molloy, 1999). In other words, PR sells ideas, while marketing sells products and services. Molloy (1999) advises facilities to keep marketing and public relations functions separate to ensure they are each done well.

However, in today's integrated communication environment, keeping these functions separate may not be realistic or even desirable. And in many cases, merging marketing, public relations and advertising to practice integrated marketing communications can enhance the image of an entity, produce a consistent message and sell its product more effectively. Those who practice advertising, branding, graphic design, marketing, promotion, public relations, sales promotion and online marketing are termed marketing communicators.

For hundreds of health care organizations across the country, public relations and community relations appear to be the functions most often given the extra responsibility of marketing (Molloy, 1999). While this approach means the organization does not have to hire an additional person, it does not gain new marketing expertise when it adds a title to an existing job or responsibilities to an existing job description (Molloy, 1999). But many ALFs still employ this method. The person who handles public relations, marketing and community relations in ALFs is most likely titled "community relations director," and the success of the facility depends on his or her ability to wear multiple hats, and where they wear them well.

### **The Role of Community Relations in Assisted Living**

According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), community relations can be defined as, "an aspect of PR having the responsibility of building relationships with

constituent publics where the organization operates,” (Litwin, 2008). In other words, the function of community relations is to evaluate public attitudes, identify the mission of an organization with the public interest and execute a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance, (Walsh, 2002). Unlike public relations, community relations is usually limited to the local area, (Litwin, 2008). Therefore, assisted living facilities must be interested and involved with the community to enhance image and build goodwill, trust and mutually beneficial relationships with potential local consumers.

In the long-term care sector, most community relations departments are responsible for sales, marketing and public relations. This presents a challenge for assisted living facilities that must beat competitors for the local market. Therefore, community relations directors (CRD) must become strategic marketing communicators both internally and externally. It is essential for ALFs to maintain relationships and develop support systems in the community with current and potential residents and families along with a variety of providers such as hospitals and therapists, (Walsh, 2002). In addition, CRDs must facilitate well-planned and carefully targeted direct mail campaigns, local events and media relations tactics to communicate with key publics (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006).

It is also equally important that community relations administrators realize good external communication comes from good internal communication. Therefore, it is the job of community relations people to communicate with staff (Walsh, 2002). When employees are aware of the organization’s mission, vision and strategic goals, they can actively help the organization reach them. As a result, internal audiences influence external publics when they promote facilities, recommend services and talk positively about their place of employment. In addition, strong community relations maintain a free-flow of communication which welcomes feedback from

staff members, who portray the values of the facility, (Walsh, 2002). With feedback, facilities can make changes to enhance their image, products and services.

According to Willging (2005) the top reasons customers choose assisted living facilities are: services offered, appearance (environment), food service, administration, security and amenities. But most importantly, residents and their families judge the quality of service on one specific service: personal relationship building (Willging, 2005). Therefore, those in charge of community relations should make relationship building a top priority, (Willging, 2005). Presutti (2006) suggests facilities should recognize outstanding staff members to establish a positive culture within the facility and increase the relationship building and small-scale public relations that takes place each day inside ALFs.

It seems obvious, but how the person is treated directly relates to how satisfied and loyal residents are (Willging, 2005). ALFs are selling services, expertise and most of all, bonds between staff and residents. How staff builds relationships with residents and members of the family is what stands out to the consumer, (Willging, 2005). “So for better or for worse, every member of the staff engages in public relations and marketing,” (Willging, 2005). Each impression made, determines whether “the customer is happy or unhappy and will determine, by word-of-mouth, whether the facility’s reputation is correspondingly enhanced or diminished,” (Willging, 2005).

Communicators within long-term care operations must understand this issue, and train employees to serve as ambassadors for the organization, (Willging, 2005). All employees must do their job well, but also sell to and serve current and potential consumers, (Willging, 2005).

The public relations and marketing staff within a facility cannot, and should not, do the work alone, (Willging, 2005).

Greeting customers and potential customers and being knowledgeable about the complete property are important parts of everyone's job. Early and lasting impressions about the property are formed based on a customer's impression of security guards, maintenance, grounds personnel and receptionists. It is a rare but excellent company that selects and trains all of its employees to be marketers, and recognizes that *they* are the service being purchased. As you might expect, companies that see their employees as part of the marketing team are more profitable than those who do not, (Willging, 2005, p. 18).

According to Walsh (2002), it is all about serving others and solid customer service—the basics of healthcare. However, too many facilities play what Walsh (2002) describes as “follow the leader” and do not focus on the qualities that make their facility stand out. For example, one trend in long-term care is ALFs with a home-like feel. But when everyone in long-term care has that same selling point, it makes all the facilities look the same in the eyes of the prospective customer, (Walsh, 2002). Therefore, good marketing communications will promote particular programs or residents to gain consumer buy-in to the mission, goals and vision of the facility. As a result, customers will be more likely to make an enrollment decision and feel good about their choice. However, this is no easy task in today's highly competitive market and presents a number of public relations challenges.

### **Public Relations Challenges within Assisted Living Facilities**

Today's ALFs are faced with a unique challenge: acknowledge attitudes regarding resident independence and quality of life and integrate these attitudes to position an ALF as the best choice, (Scott, Kender, & Townsley, 1999). Positioning an ALF as the best choice is no easy

task, especially when consumers have a plethora of comparable options, (Presutti, 2006). In other words, “an abundance of assisted living facilities breeds a highly competitive market,” (Wisniewski, 2005). And providers of these services are unprepared and unaware of the increasing levels of competition they will face, (Willaman, 2005).

The biggest challenge ALFs face is how to fill communities and keep them full, (Willging, 2005). This takes work—hard work—and lots of it,” (Willging, 2005). “The fact is, there are very few true waiting lists in this field; by the time it is decided that assistance is needed, the actual move is a very short-term phenomenon,” (Mullen, 2002)

The truth is, assisted living is designed for a very small segment of the senior adult market: individuals who need assistance with ADLs; individuals who want assistance with ADLs; and individuals who want an ADL instead of receiving care at home from formal caregivers, (Thornton, 1998, p. 38).

As a result, ALFs are having trouble filling their beds, (Walsh, 2002).

Therefore, staff in ALFs must strive to maintain a customer focus to keep ALFs full and productive, (Willging, 2007). That customer focus is best served by the community’s willingness and ability to meet industry challenges, (Willging, 2007). According to Brady and Martin (2005), continued challenges in the ALF sector will bring new opportunities for facilities that are able meet those challenges.

Assisted living has experienced a recent rise in popularity, public acceptance and use, (Willging, 2007). This popularity however, created an environment where product supply exceeds demand; and today, ALFs face a high level of competition between facilities, (Willging, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for key marketing activities for more effective positioning in the future competitive environment, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006).

Public relations practitioners and marketing experts must monitor public perception of their services to successfully market their product, (Willging, 2005). It is imperative for long-term care providers to persuade potential patients and payers of these services to make informed choices about their various care options. Otherwise, they risk losing prospective consumers to other long-term care facilities who are able to better stand out in the competitive market, (Willging, 2005).

Remember, the assisted living “product” does not move as quickly or as easily as the need-driven product of long-term care, (Thornton, 1998). Informal and “seat of the pants” development approaches to this business are ineffective at best, and can be disastrous, (Thornton, 1998). Market research is basic and necessary to define the assisted living target audiences and the depth of market demand, (Thornton, 1998). Do not proceed without it, (Thornton, 1998).

However, a frequently made mistake by facilities is to send facility literature as the only form of follow-up on a potential lead and do not conduct market research, (Mullen, 2002). ALFs must take the next step to establish relationships, uncover needs and invite leads in for visits, (Mullen, 2002). In addition, Thornton suggests public opinion polling can help ALFs meet the challenges these facilities face, (Thornton, 1998). A consumer survey can determine how familiar the market is with the assisted living concept, (Thornton, 1998).

Mullen (2002) suggests ALFs need an integrated marketing communication plan that includes public relations, direct mail, telemarketing, newspaper ads, seminars and events, television and radio ads to meet the complex ALF challenges. But Mullen (2002) stresses the most important aspect of any strategic plan is to cultivate professional relationships with

hospitals, physicians, discharge planners, case managers and any other referral source to keep facilities at full-capacity.

### **Public Relations Techniques Used to Attract and Retain Residents**

Public relations is an effective marketing communication tool to create visibility and increase credibility within the assisted living community, (Campbell, 2004). Currently, referrals from residents, relatives, medical professionals and professional agencies are perceived as more effective in the healthcare industry than the widely used print ads, radio spots, billboards, open houses, tours and special events, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006). Therefore, the entire referral system, from employees to healthcare providers, should be regularly analyzed and researched for relationship development, communication, reputation transmission and overall success using both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld, 2006).

According to Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006), ALFs still rely on unsophisticated methods to attract and retain residents such as maintaining the facilities, developing informational brochures and tours, and spreading reputation through word-of-mouth. While these techniques are effective, they sometimes result in temporary results ineffective for long-term success. Because the market is increasingly competitive, facilities can no longer simply disseminate information and engage in short-lived promotional activities to attract and retain residents, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006).

Campbell (2004) suggests the most effective PR techniques ALFs can use are news releases, human-interest feature stories, newsletters, community events, resident events and personal calls and notes. News releases can be used to get the word out in the community about special events, new employees, new services or upgrades to the facility, (Campbell, 2004). Human-interest feature stories showcase the relationship between staff and resident to highlight the unique environment of a facility, (Campbell, 2004).

In addition, “newsletters sent to family and community members maintain a consistent presence in the community as well as update audiences about the facility, staff and residents,” (Campbell, 2004). Community events can help attract a target audience such as baby boomers and/or their parents, (Campbell, 2004). Social and recreational resident events produce good feelings and strong word-of-mouth publicity, (Campbell, 2004). Resident events can range from weekly bingo games or musical entertainment to field trips to off-site locations, (Campbell, 2004). Finally, personal calls and notes show that a facility pays attention to detail. When a staff member writes a handwritten note or makes a personal call to a potential or current customer, it is more than a small gesture of kindness, (Campbell, 2004). It acknowledges the person as a valued part of the assisted living family and goes a long way in differentiating an ALF from the rest, (Campbell, 2004).

According to Willging (2005), the most important component to public relations within ALFs is the product itself. You cannot influence public support with a lousy product or a reputation for poor care, (Willging, 2005). Similarly, Presutti (2006) stresses the importance of word-of-mouth promotion in long-term care facilities. Presutti (2006) places the value of a positive word-of-mouth reputation higher than other useful methods such as community fundraisers, in-house seminars, open houses and advertisements. Strong word-of-mouth feedback



reaches members of the nearby medical community, such as physicians, and increases customer referrals from those sources, (Presutti, 2006).

However, Willaman (2009) believes that ALFs should not abandon proven tactics such as advertising (print, cable, TV or radio), trade shows and sponsorships. Willaman (2009) argues these techniques should be included in any ALF marketing program. In addition, senior care administrators often cite speaking appearances, search engine optimization campaigns and bylined articles as preferred and proven public relations and marketing activities that should remain, (Willaman, 2009).

In terms of communicating with external audiences, Walsh (2002) points out that many ALFs engage in ineffective techniques such as “dropping in” to deliver giveaways because he or she was “in the area.” “Techniques such as this are about as welcome and effective as a telemarketer at dinnertime. The lack of trust for the representative involved becomes projected on the company whose name is on the gift,” (Walsh, 2002). Walsh (2002), believes ALFs need to go back to the basics. “Eye contact is often the best start. Giveaways should accentuate a good visit, not replace it,” (Walsh, 2002).

Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006), suggest the best and most effective PR techniques to attract and retain residents begin with a solid, comprehensive strategic plan that outlines public relations, marketing, customer management, customer service and selling initiatives. They believe customer relationship management (CRM) is the most effective strategy for the long-term care industry. ALFs must become customer-driven, focus on customer preferences, develop personal relationships and deliver superior services, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl & Hearld, 2006).

However, research on public relations efforts within the ALF industry is still limited, especially in the Web 2.0 arena, (Warren, & Williams, 2008). Not much is known about the current marketing and public relations techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents in today's highly competitive environment, (Calhoun, Banaszak-Holl and Hearld (2006). It seems that further research is needed and is critical to understanding and improving ALF living (Warren, & Williams, 2008). In addition, further research will help ALFs expand to newer and more effective public relations techniques.

Therefore, this researcher will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the public relations techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents. The research will gauge the perceived effectiveness of public relations techniques, determine the level to which public relations is used and identify the roles within community relations positions in ALF communities. Chapter 3 explains how the researcher will design and implement the proposed study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Method**

The researcher will use both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data and study assisted living facilities in the New Jersey area.

The researcher will use in-depth interviews as the primary qualitative research method. The researcher will conduct personal interviews with the executive director, community relations director, activities director, human resource manager and marketing administrator at Brandywine Senior Living, an assisted living facility located in Bridgewater, N.J. between January 10 and January 14, 2011. Personal interviews with these five administrators will provide data on the public relations techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents. In addition, the interviews will explore how administrators perceive PR effectiveness, the extent to which ALFs use PR and the duties of community relations staff.

The researcher will use a survey as the primary quantitative research method. The author will administer a snowball multi-question survey to assisted living managers, administrators and directors in charge of public relations and marketing activities at select ALF facilities in the tri-state area for a one month time frame between February 25, 2011 and March 25, 2011. The survey will determine the public relations and marketing techniques used by ALFs to attract and retain residents. The survey also will gauge the perceived effectiveness of public relations techniques, determine the level to which public relations is used and identify the roles within

community relations positions. The researcher will develop the instrument through the online survey service, Survey Monkey and send it via email and Facebook to participants.

## **Sample**

The researcher will use a non-random convenience sample to choose five participants for the personal interview. All participants must be managers or administrators in charge of marketing and public relations activities with at least 10 years experience in long-term care. Because the executive director, community relations director, activities director, human resource manager and marketing administrator from Brandywine Senior Living located in Bridgewater, N.J. all participate in facility public relations and marketing, the researcher will interview these individuals. In addition, these five participants have an average of 14 years experience in assisted living management and a combined 72 years experience in the long-term care industry. Each participant will remain anonymous in the study for confidentiality purposes.

The researcher also will use a non-random snowball convenience sample to choose facilities to survey in the New Jersey area. The researcher will begin the snowball sample at Brandywine Senior Living in Bridgewater, N.J. and Classic Residence in Teaneck, N.J, where administrators at those locations will pass the survey along to other ALF administrators in charge of marketing and public relations through email. The researcher anticipates approximately 25 respondents involved with PR and marketing activities from at least 15 different ALFs will complete the online survey.

However, because the author will use a convenience sample to calculate data, this will not allow for a scientifically representative sample or generalizable results. However, it is the

goal of the researcher to gain enough participants for statistically significant and predictive findings. Again, the researcher will protect the identity of all survey participants to ensure confidentiality and truthfulness in responses.

## **Data Collection**

### *Personal Interview*

Personal interview questions will consist of 18 open-ended questions and eight topic areas the researcher will administer to each of the five participants, in-person at Brandywine Senior Living. Topic areas include: general demographics; perception of PR effectiveness; staff involvement in PR activities in ALFs; PR activities to attract new residents; PR activities to retain current residents; newer PR techniques used by facilities; traditional methods of PR in ALFs; current challenges in the long-term care industry. See Appendix A for instrument.

### *Survey*

The survey instrument will consist of demographic questions, eight questions on a seven-point Likert-scale and one chart question to determine which PR techniques are used, unused or in development at ALFs. This researcher will send the survey via email to marketing and public relations administrators at ALFs in the New Jersey area.

Sample questions include, what do you believe is the most effective PR technique to attract new residents?; what do you believe is the most effective PR technique to retain current residents?; does your facility use any social media or newer forms of PR?; what traditional PR

efforts does your facility use regularly?; and what is the biggest challenge to get new residents into your assisted living facility? See Appendix B for complete instrument.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Personal Interview*

The researcher expects each interview to take approximately one hour to complete. Once data is collected, the researcher will tabulate open-ended questions. To tabulate open-ended questions, the researcher will compile and analyze all descriptive responses. Comments that appear frequently will reveal themes and general findings between interviews. The results section of this study will reference the findings.

### *Survey*

Once surveys are completed and returned to the researcher via email, results will be analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Survey Monkey. Following data entry, the researcher will evaluate the most frequent answers to survey questions, using percentages for reporting. Specifically, the researcher will look for frequencies relevant to the hypotheses stated in chapter one.

Data results will be reported in the next chapter. Common interview responses will be displayed by theme. Final statistics will be shown by percentages in charts, graphs and written format.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

#### *Survey Results*

In total, 28 ALF administrators with a self-reported average of 13 years experience in the long-term care industry who identify as “involved” or “highly involved” in PR and marketing activities completed the survey. The 28 respondents represent 16 different assisted living communities across New Jersey and parts of New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware:

Brandywine Senior Living at Middlebrook Crossing in Bridgewater, N.J.; Classic Residence in Teaneck, N.J.; Haverford Estates in Pa.; Crane's Mill CCRC in West Caldwell, N.J.; Brandywine Assisted Living at Moorestown Estates in Moorestown, N.J.; Mill Gardens at Midland Park in Midland Park, N.J.; Brandywine at Senior Suites in East Norriton, Pa.; Brandywine Assisted Living in Englishtown, N.J.; Brandywine Assisted Living at Toms River in Toms River, N.J.; Brandywine Assisted Living at Seaside Pointe in Rehoboth Beach Del.; Unidentified Assisted Living Community in Atlantic County, N.J.; Brandywine Assisted Living at The Gables in Brick, N.J.; Brandywine, Reflections at Colts Neck in Colts Neck, N.J.; Paragon Village in Mount Olive/Hackettstown, N.J.; Potomac Homes in Bergen County, N.J.; Classic Residence in Yonkers, N.Y.

Table 1 represents a breakdown of respondents by the job title each provided on the survey.

Table 1

**Breakdown of Respondents by Job Title**

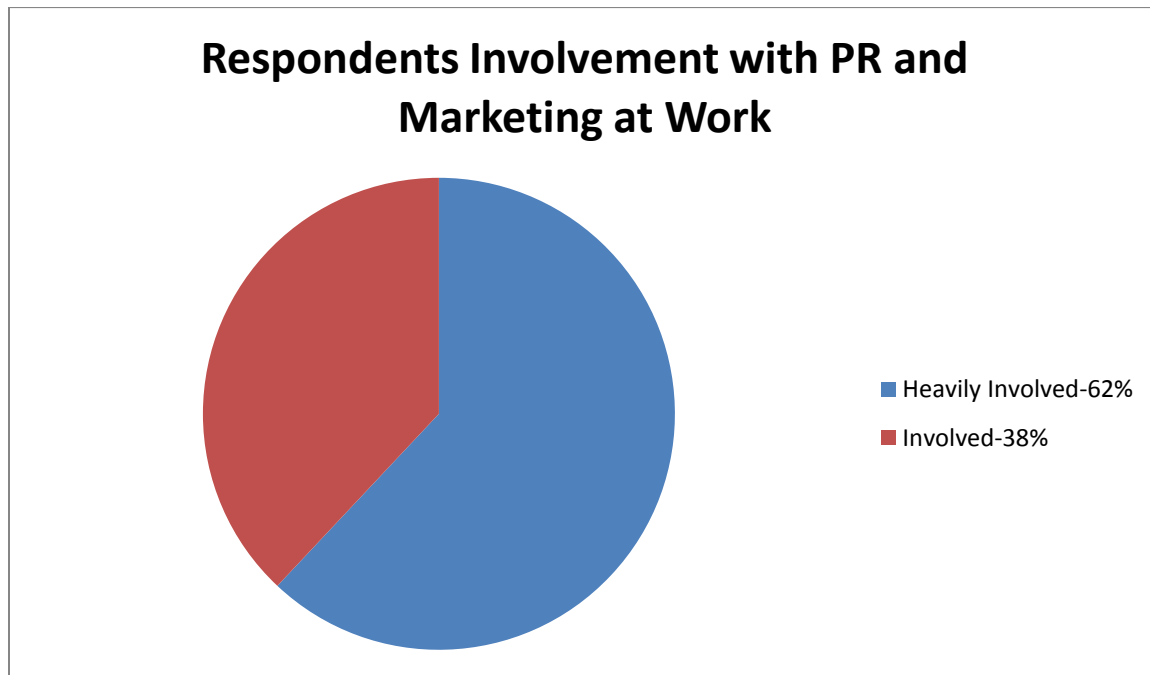
Job Title	Percentage of Respondents with Job Function
Executive Director	36%
Director of Community Relations	32%
Sales and Marketing Administrator	11%
Director of Human Resources	11%
Director of Arts & Entertainment	7%
Director of Dining Services	3%

As noted in Figure 1, a majority (68 percent) of respondents are either Executive Directors or Community Relations Directors in the ALF they work for. Those positions are traditionally the most involved in PR and marketing according to job title and function.



Figure 1 shows the level of involvement survey participants have with PR and marketing efforts at their assisted living community.

Figure 1



As seen in Figure 1, 100 percent of respondents are involved in PR and marketing activities and 62 percent (the majority) indicate they are heavily involved in this area.

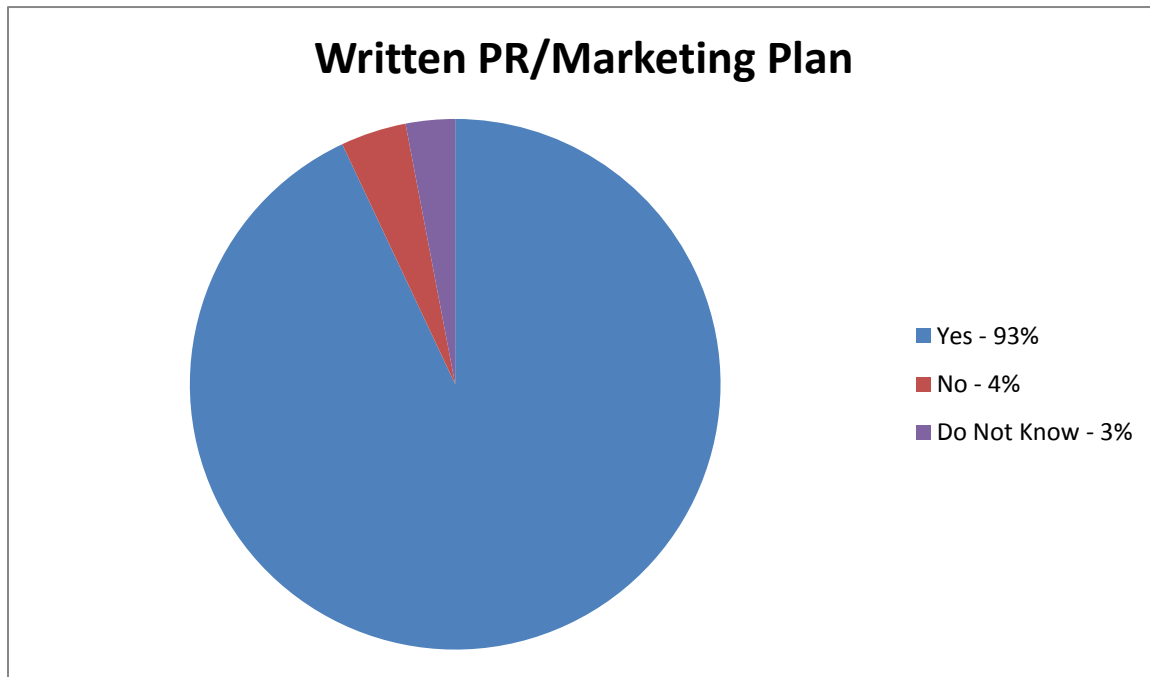
**RQ: What PR techniques do assisted living facilities use to attract and retain residents?**

According to survey responses, 100 percent of the facilities use news releases, brochures, newspaper advertisements, a facility website, direct mailings, guest speakers and special events (e.g. hired outside entertainers) to impact enrollment decisions. Other activities facilities use regularly include internal newsletters (96 percent), email (96 percent), health and wellness classes (96 percent), senior social events/outings (96 percent), open house tours (96 percent) and community events (96 percent).

Respondents indicate varying levels of use, non-use, development and uncertainty for all other activities shown in Figure 2 – Figure 21 below.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which written public relations and marketing plans are used within assisted living facilities to influence decision makers and the surrounding community at large.

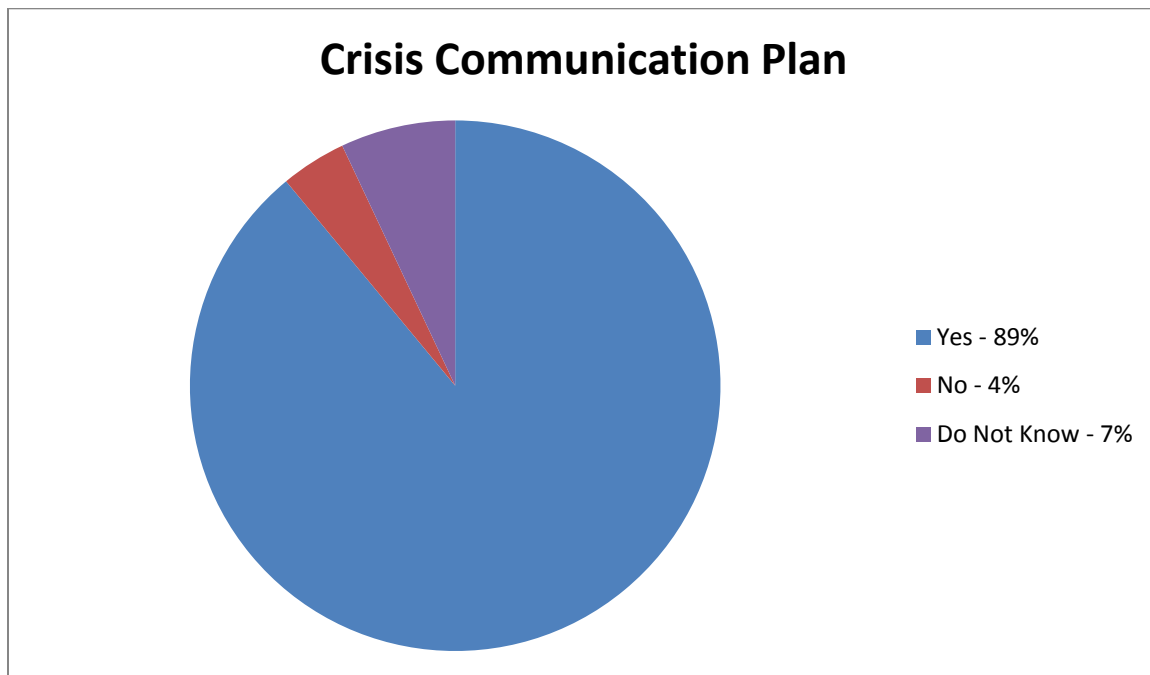
Figure 2



As seen in Figure 2, a majority (93 percent) of ALF administrators report their facility uses a written public relations and marketing plan to attract and retain residents. Only 4 percent do not use a PR or marketing plan and the remaining 3 percent do not know.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of ALFs surveyed that have a written and crisis communications plan in place. Written crisis communications plan differ from marketing plans in that they anticipate possible public relations disasters and offer solutions to prevent or minimize the impact such events may have on image, reputation and indirectly, the bottom-line.

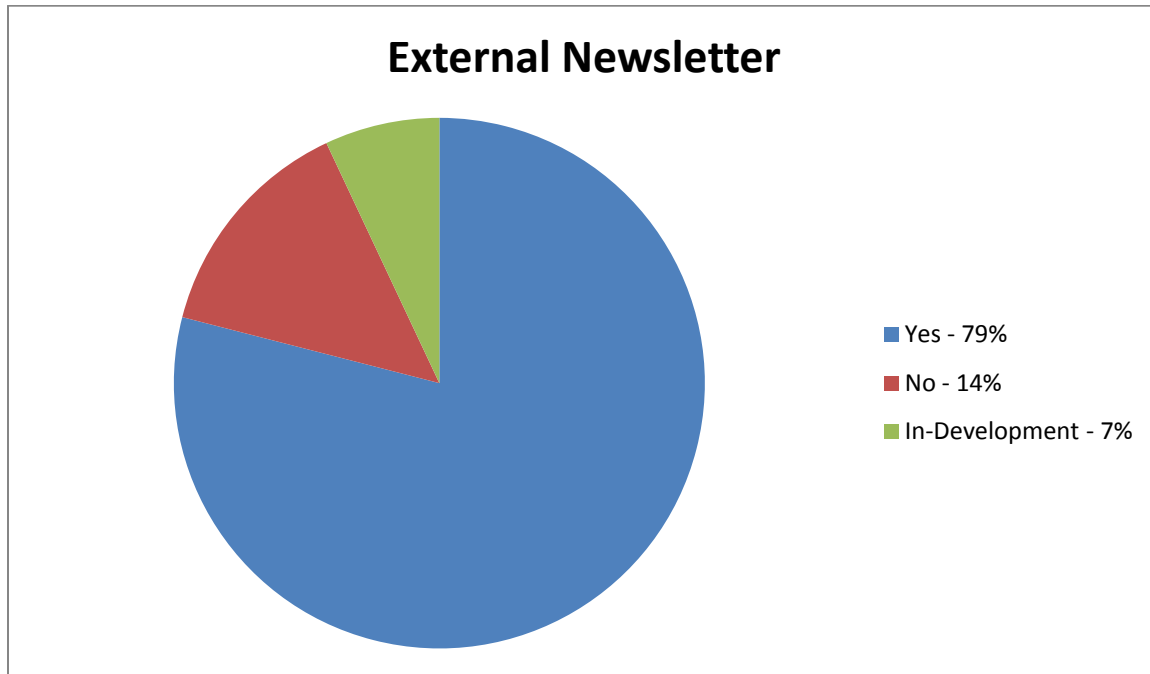
Figure 3



As seen above, Figure 3 suggests a majority of assisted living communities operate with a crisis communications plan. But while nearly 90 percent of respondents report their building has a crisis plan, the remaining approximately 10 percent either do not or are unaware of its existence.

Figure 4 represents the use of an external newsletter in the facilities studied. External newsletters highlight benefits to long-term care and are usually sent to prospective families and residents, sometimes referred to as “leads.”

Figure 4



As seen above in Figure 4, 79 percent of administrators report use of external newsletters to impact enrollment decisions. However, 14 percent do not use such measures and 7 percent are unaware.

Figure 5 depicts how percentage of communities that use advisory boards for both residents and family members to encourage two-way interaction between customers and those providing services.

Figure 5

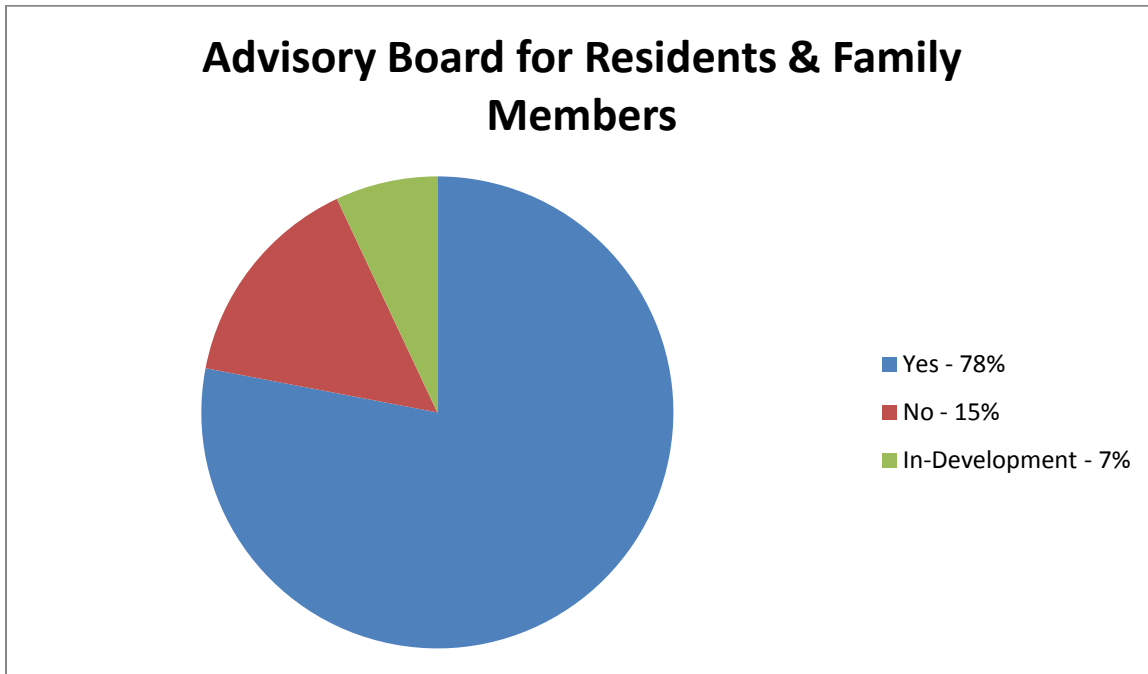


Figure 5 reveals 78 percent of facilities use advisory boards to gain feedback from residents, family members and payers of independent care services. And 7 percent of surveyed managers report their community will develop advisory boards in the near future. Finally, the remaining 15 percent of respondents report their communities do not implement advisory boards at this time.

Figure 6 presents the use of yellow page advertisements in ALFs to promote services and attract new residents.

Figure 6

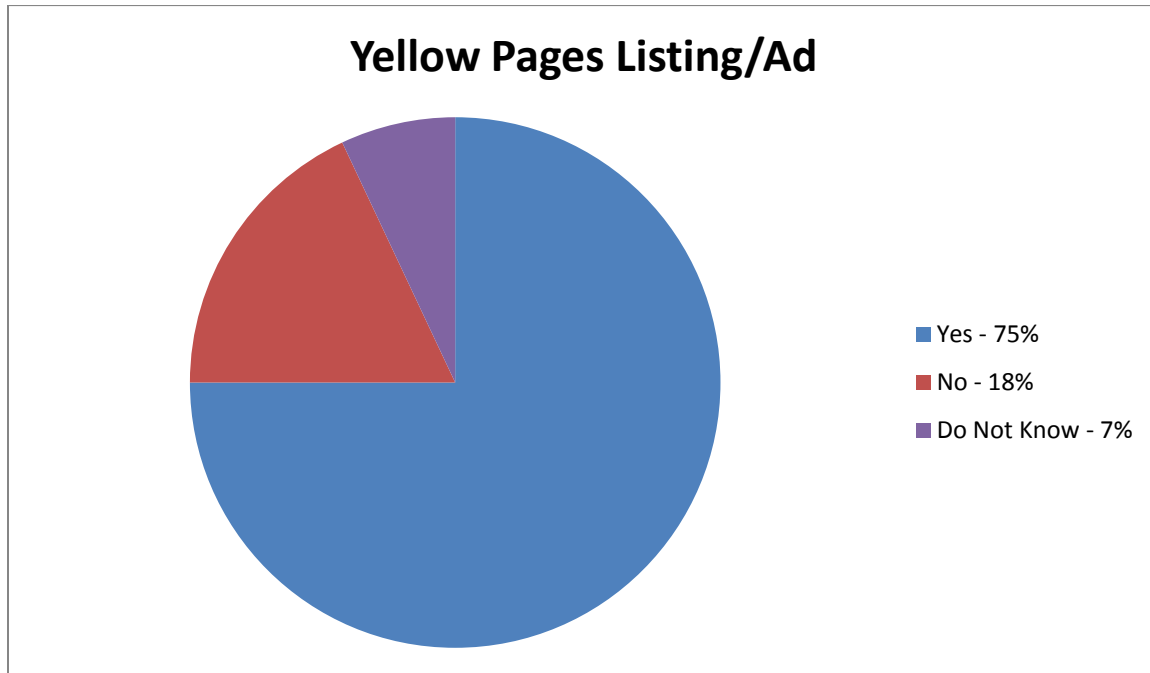


Figure 6 shows 75 percent of respondents note their facility uses yellow page listings. However, 18 percent of managers do not use yellow page listings and 7 percent do not know if this technique is currently implemented.

Figure 7 illustrates the level to which ALFs use surveys with current residents to determine satisfaction with care, services and activities offered.

Figure 7

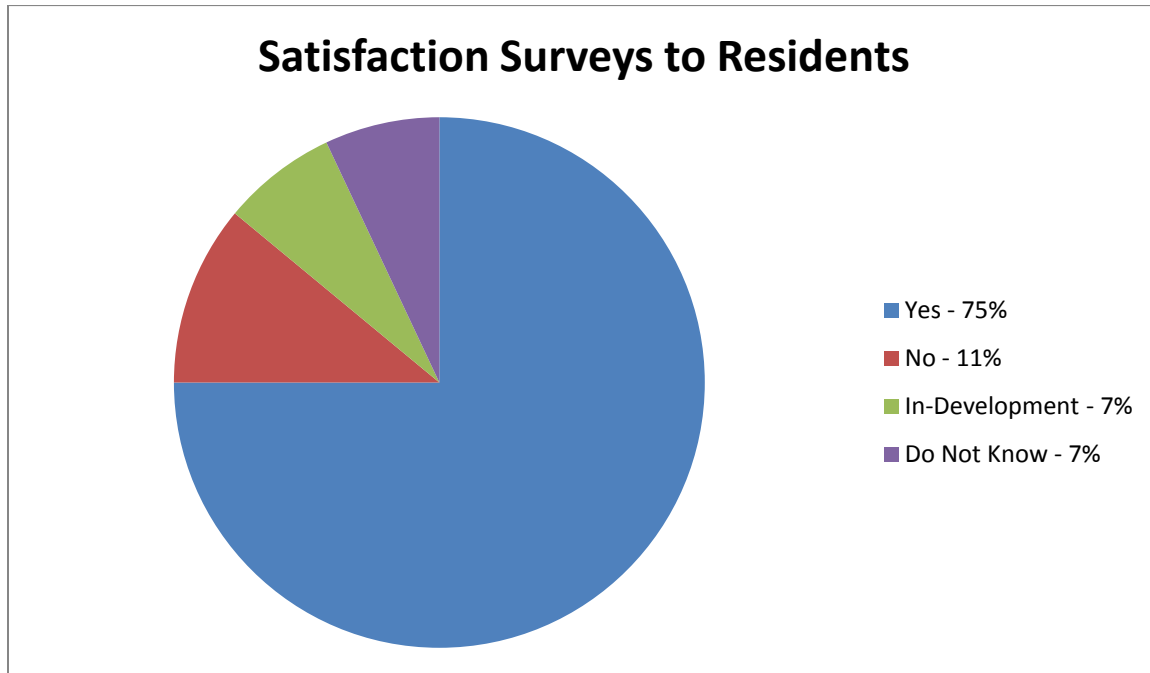
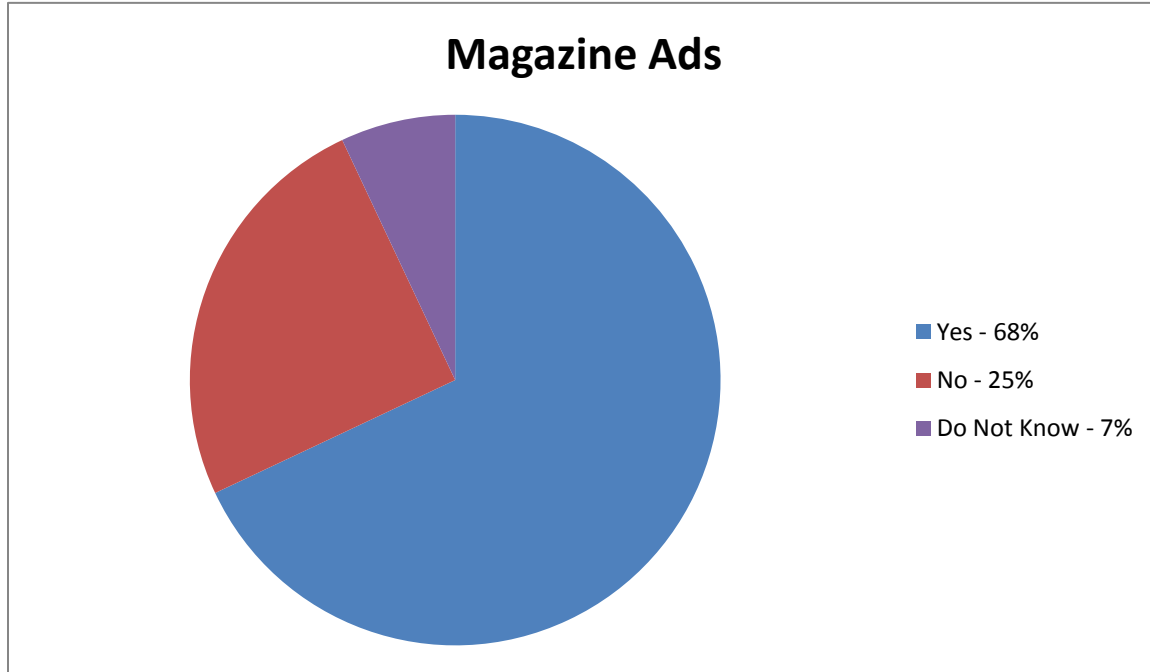


Figure 7 reveals 75 percent of communities use satisfaction surveys to gauge the happiness of current residents living there. And while 11 percent report non-use of such surveys and 7 percent are simply unaware, satisfaction surveys are in-development at 7 percent of facilities studied.



Figure 8 shows the use of magazine ads for marketing purposes in the ALFs surveyed.

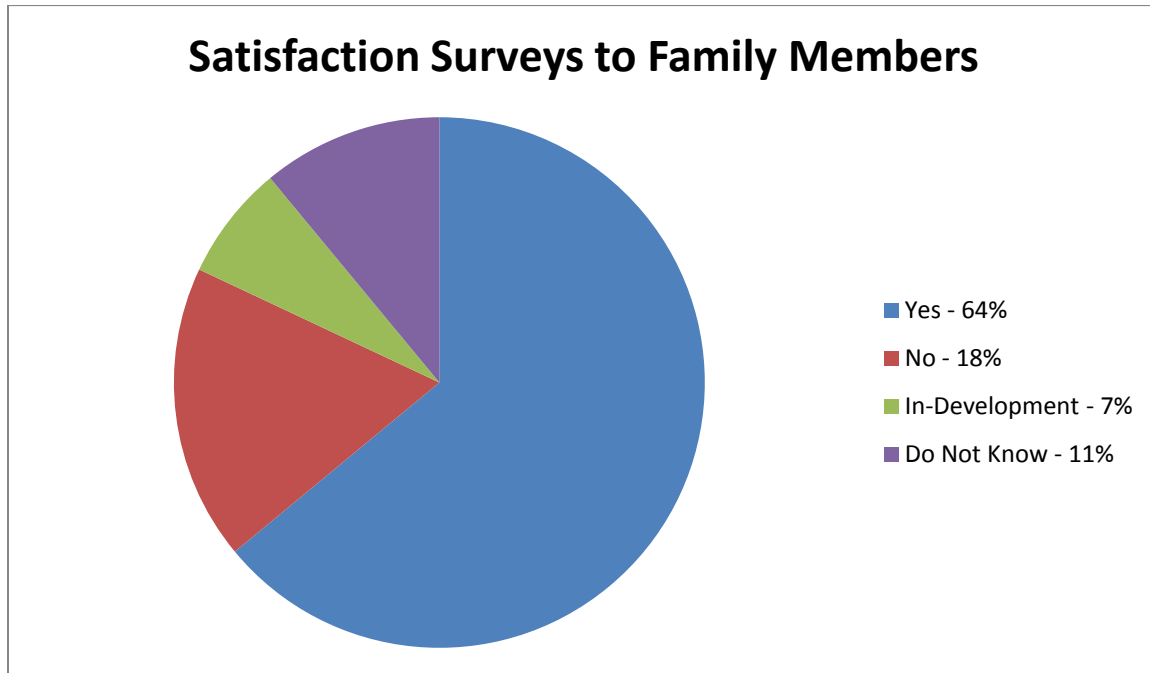
Figure 8



As noted in Figure 8, 68 percent of communities use magazine ads, 25 percent do not and the remaining 7 percent do not know if magazine ads are a current technique used in the building they represent.

Figure 9 illustrates the level to which ALFs use surveys with family members to determine satisfaction with care, services and activities offered to loved ones.

Figure 9



As seen above in Figure 9, 64 percent of communities use surveys to gauge contentment with various aspects of amenities and care. In addition, 7 percent of ALFs studied will implement surveys with family members in the near future, while 18 percent do not use this technique at all and 11 percent are unsure of its use.

Figure 10 depicts the number of ALFs that report use of email marketing efforts through Constant Contact or other services.

Figure 10

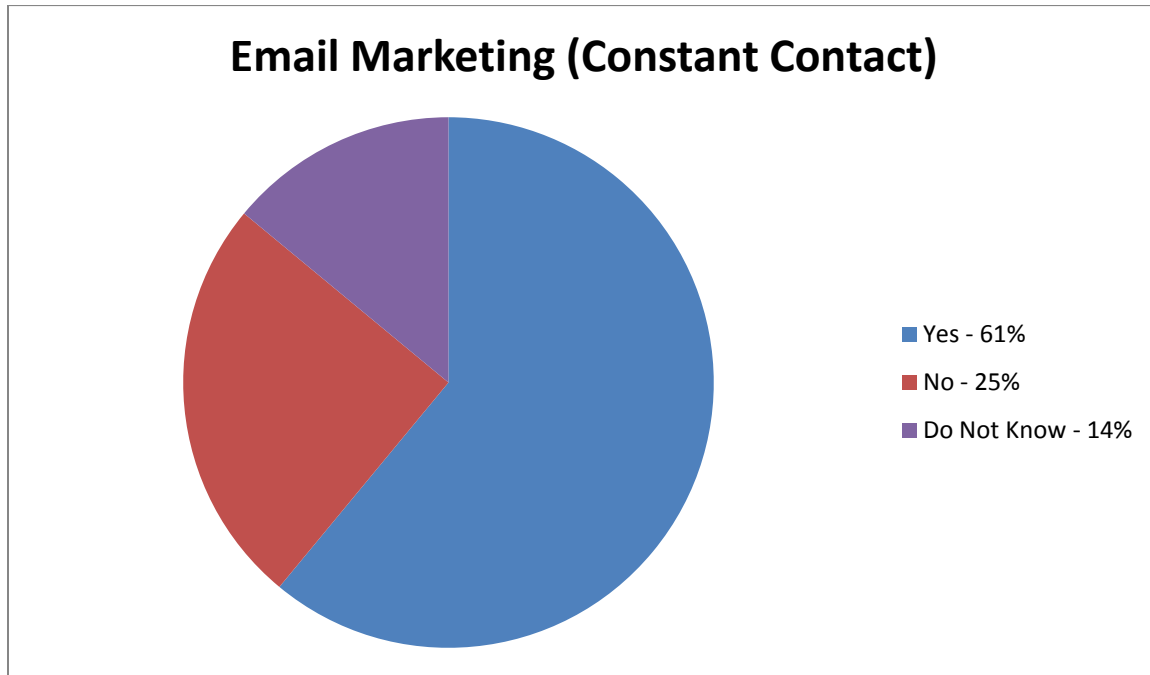


Figure 10 notes 61 percent of ALFs use email marketing while 25 percent do not use this technique and 14 are uncertain if email marketing is presently a used method to reach target audiences.

Figure 11 represents the use of branded online communities, such as interactive membership forums, blogs, websites and social media sites to encourage customers to become co-creators in the message and mission of assisted living homes.

Figure 11

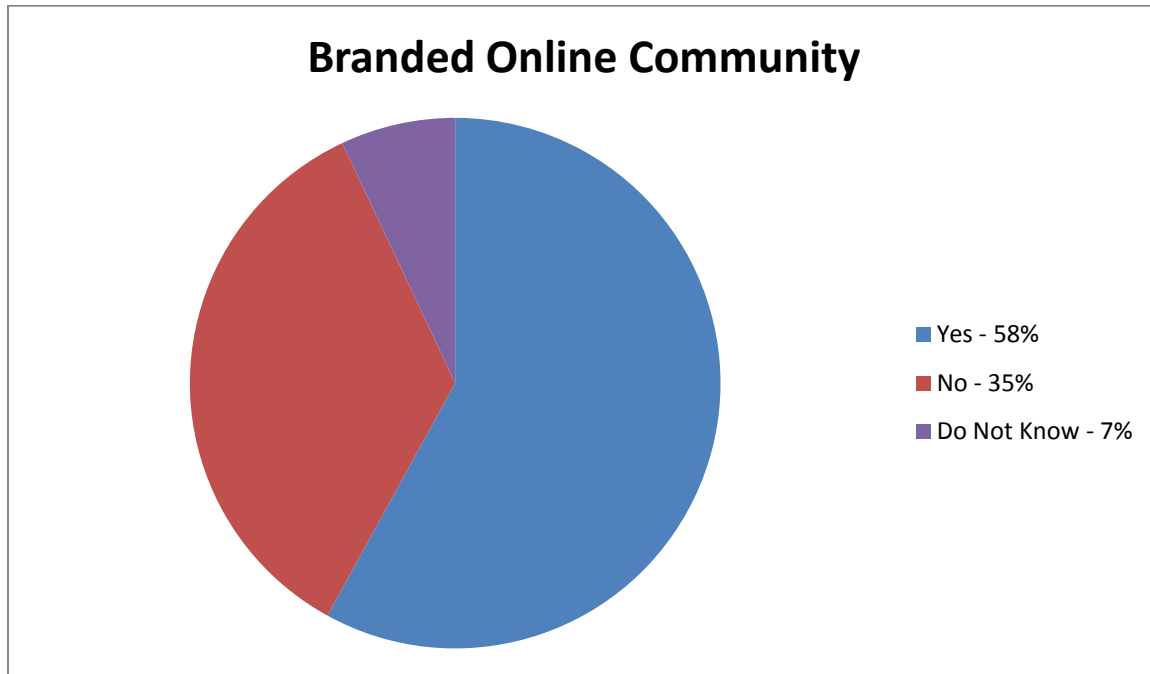


Figure 11 suggests a majority (58 percent) of ALFs currently use a branded online community as a marketing and public relations tactic. However, 35 percent of communities surveyed do not participate in a branded online approach and 7 percent do not know if their facility does or not.

Figure 12 presents the level to which administrators report their facilities use Facebook, the social networking site, as a communications and promotional tool.

Figure 12

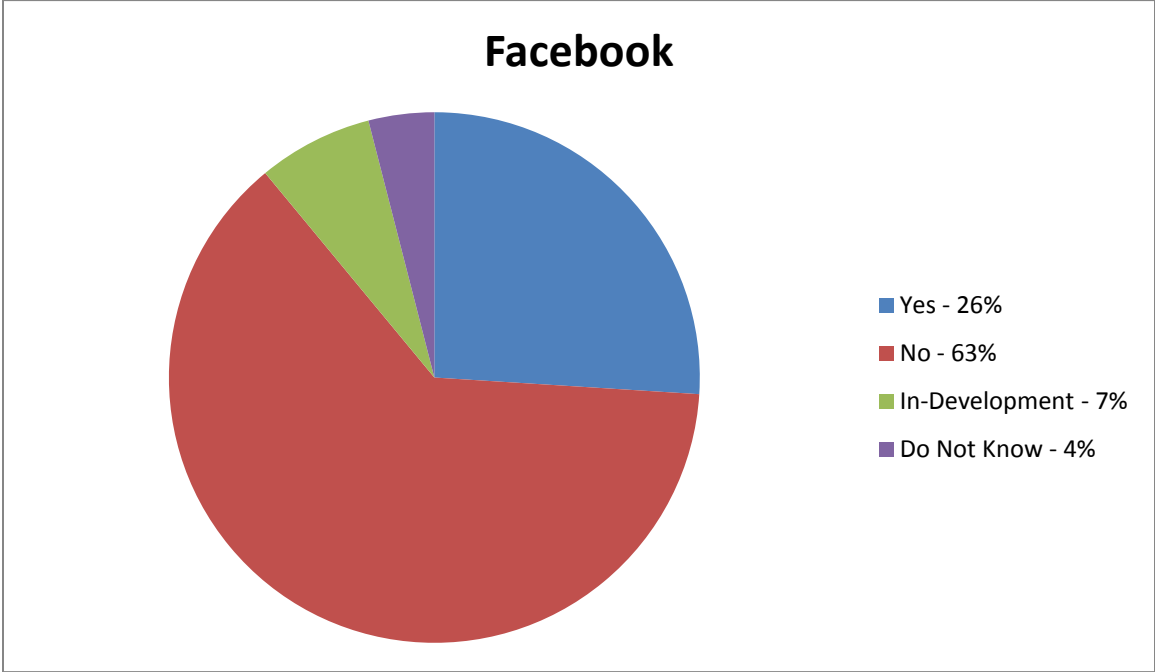
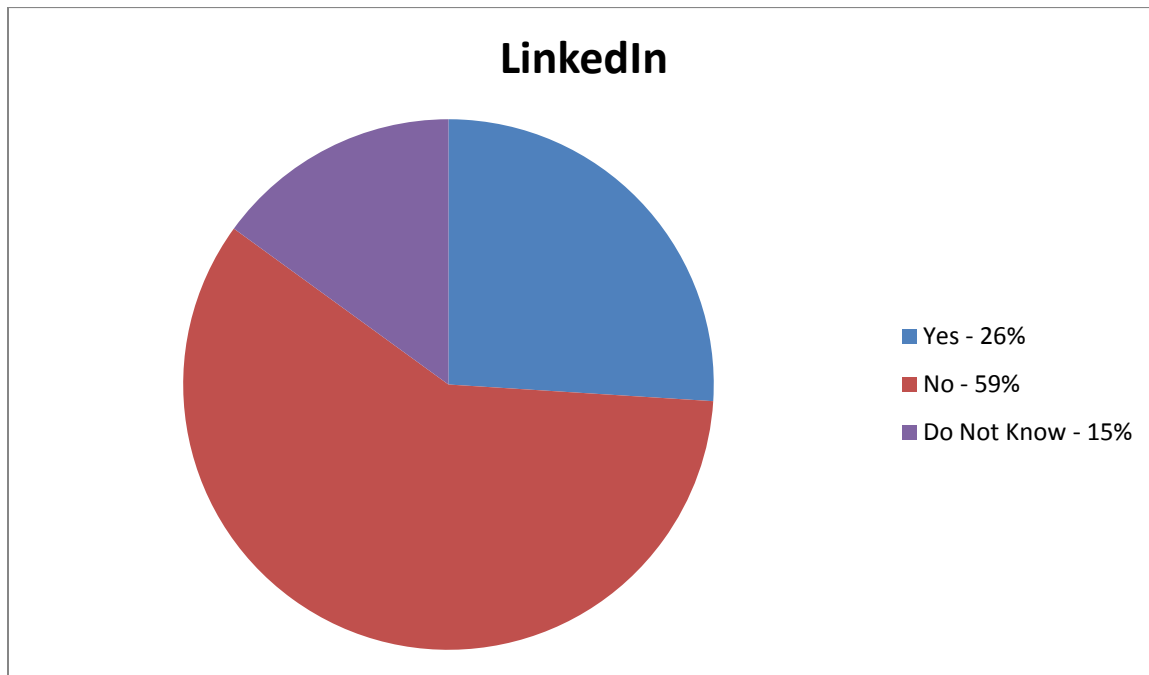


Figure 12 notes most facilities (63 percent) do not have a Facebook presence. But 26 percent engage in Facebook activity and 7 percent plan to join and are in the development phase. The remaining 4 percent do not know if their company is on Facebook at this time.

Figure 13 shows reported use of LinkedIn, the professional networking site, in ALFs to develop professional referral networks.

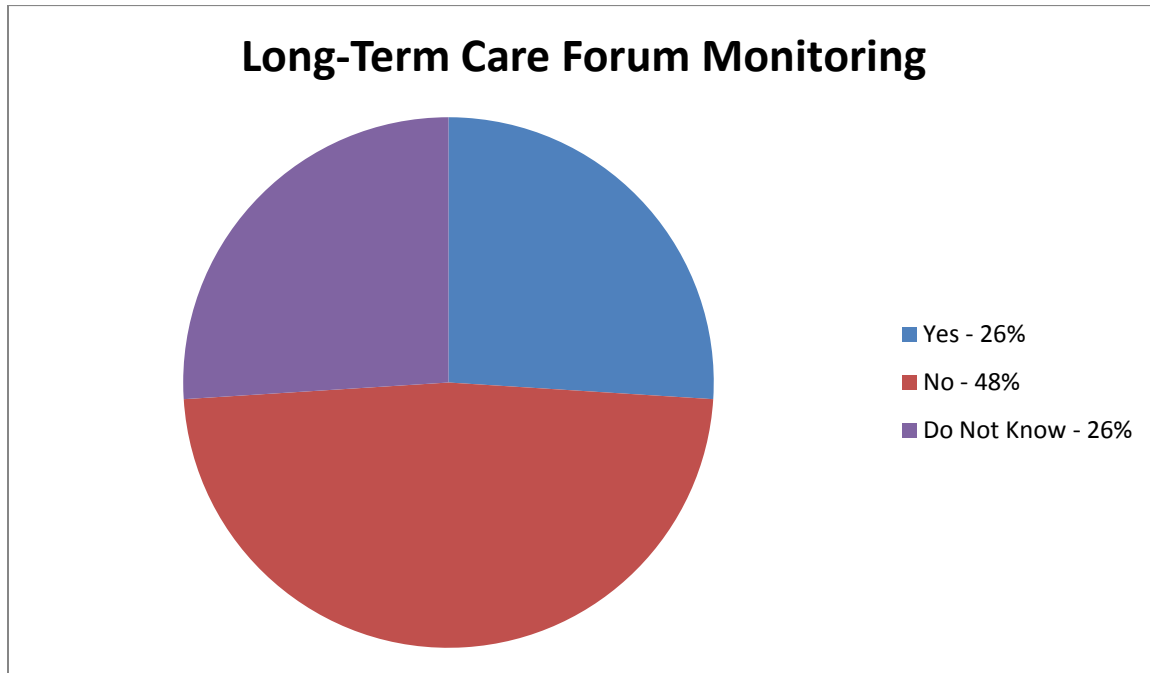
Figure 13



As seen in Figure 13, only 26 percent of ALFs studied use LinkedIn. Survey results reveal 59 percent of managers do not use LinkedIn and the other 15 percent are unsure if it is currently used.

Figure 14 illustrates the number of facilities that monitor long-term care forums online to identify industry trends and opportunities and weaknesses in the overall marketing approach.

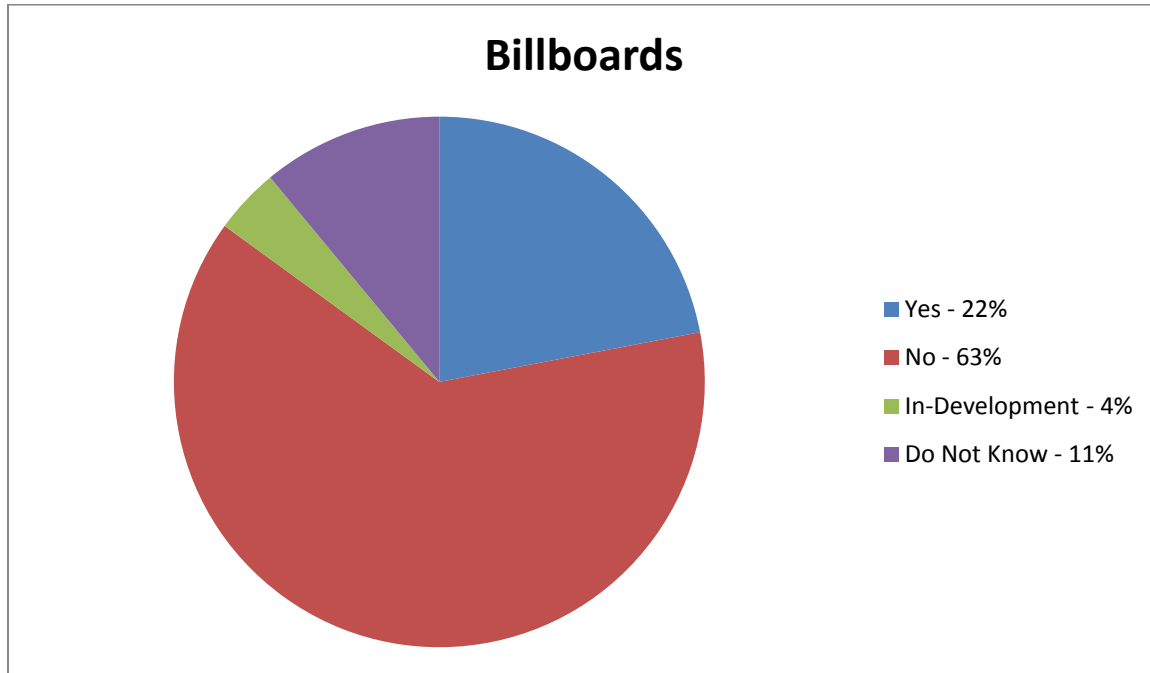
Figure 14



As Figure 14 notes, 48 percent of ALFs do not monitor online forums dedicated to long-term care or assisted living, 26 percent do conduct scans of these forums and 26 percent indicate this tactic may or may not be implemented.

Figure 15 shows the use of billboards for assisted living promotional purposes.

Figure 15

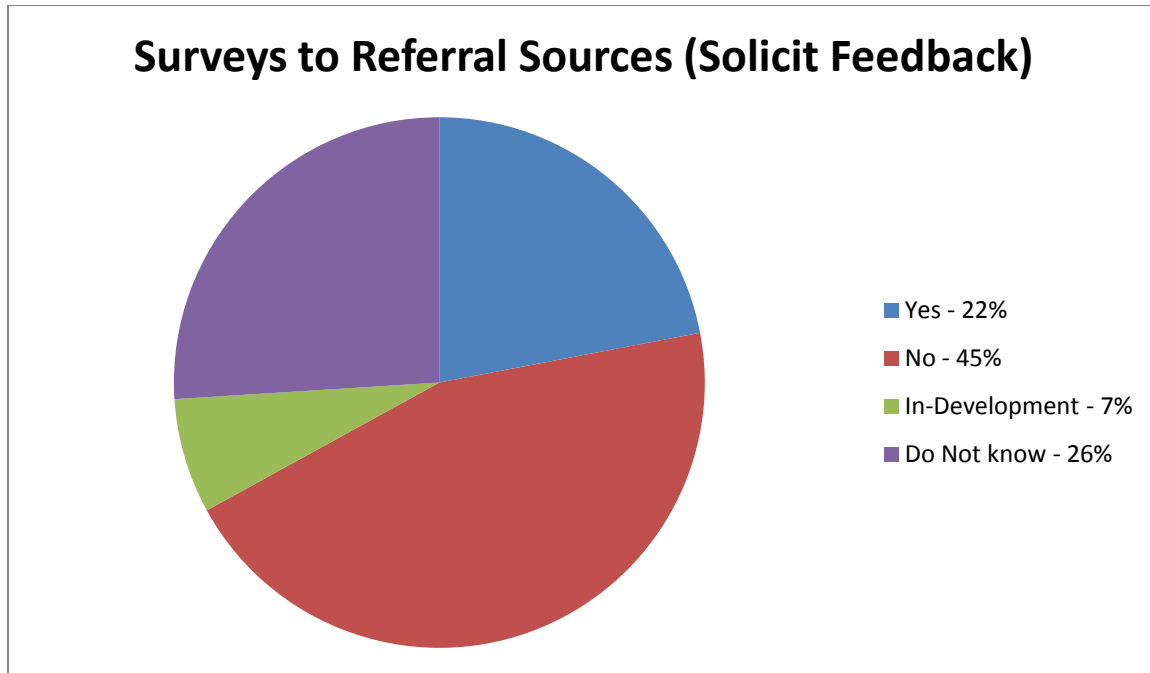


As noted in Figure 15, most (63 percent) of facilities do not advertise via billboards. However, 22 percent do use billboards, 11 percent are unsure if they are used and 4 percent are in the process of obtaining billboard ads for their facility.



Figure 16 depicts the use of surveys with referral sources—doctors, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, social workers to solicit feedback.

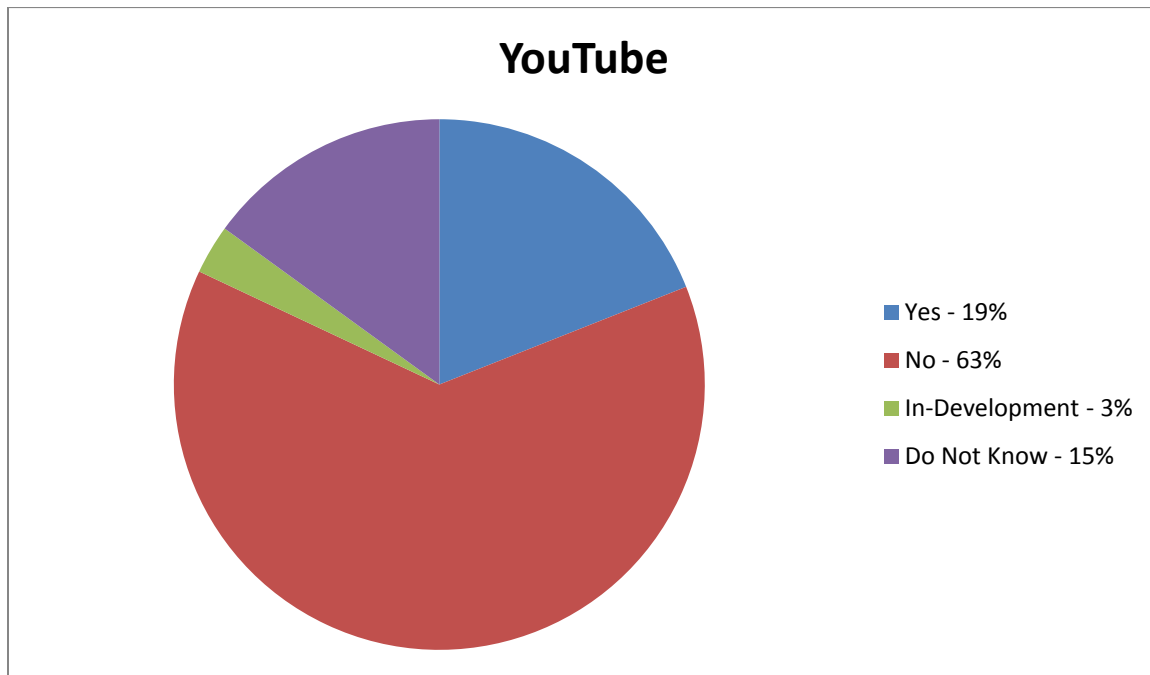
Figure 16



According to Figure 16, 45 percent of facilities do not survey referral sources, 22 percent do conduct surveys with these individuals and 7 percent are in the process of implementing referral source surveys. However, 26 percent do not know if surveys are done with referral sources.

Figure 17 represents YouTube, the video sharing site, use within ALFs for PR and marketing purposes.

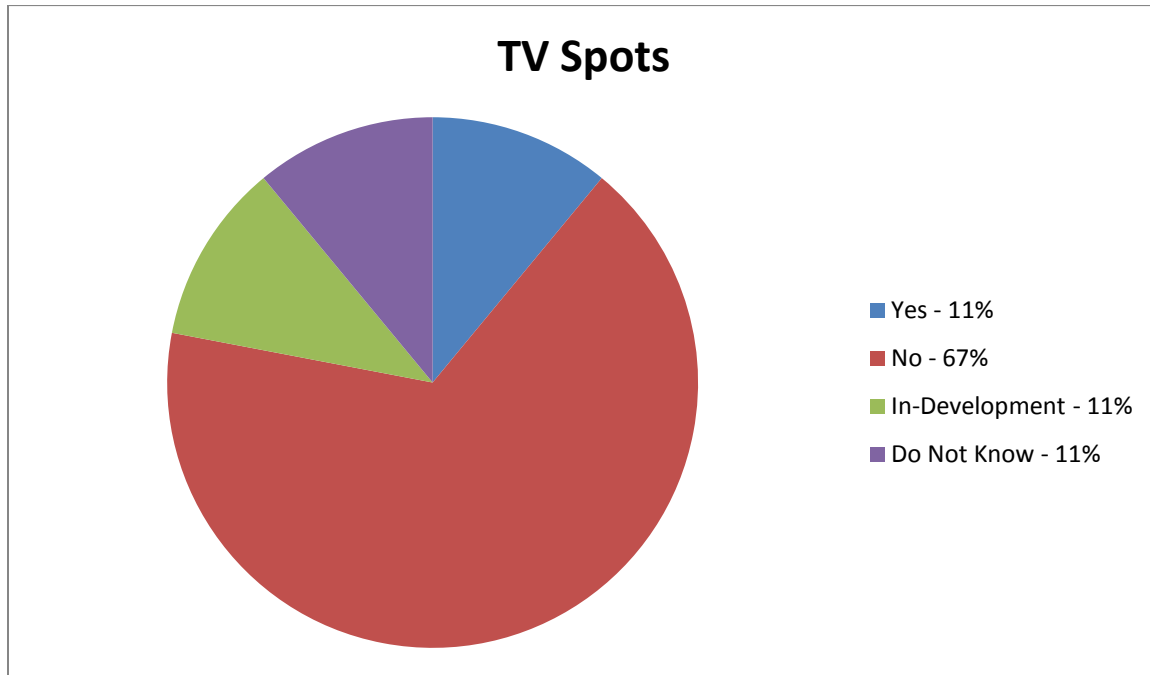
Figure 17



As seen in Figure 17, only 19 percent of facilities currently use YouTube video sharing technology. A majority (63 percent) do not use YouTube.

Figure 18 illustrates the percentage of administrators that report use of local TV spots to drive ultimate decision-makers to their ALF.

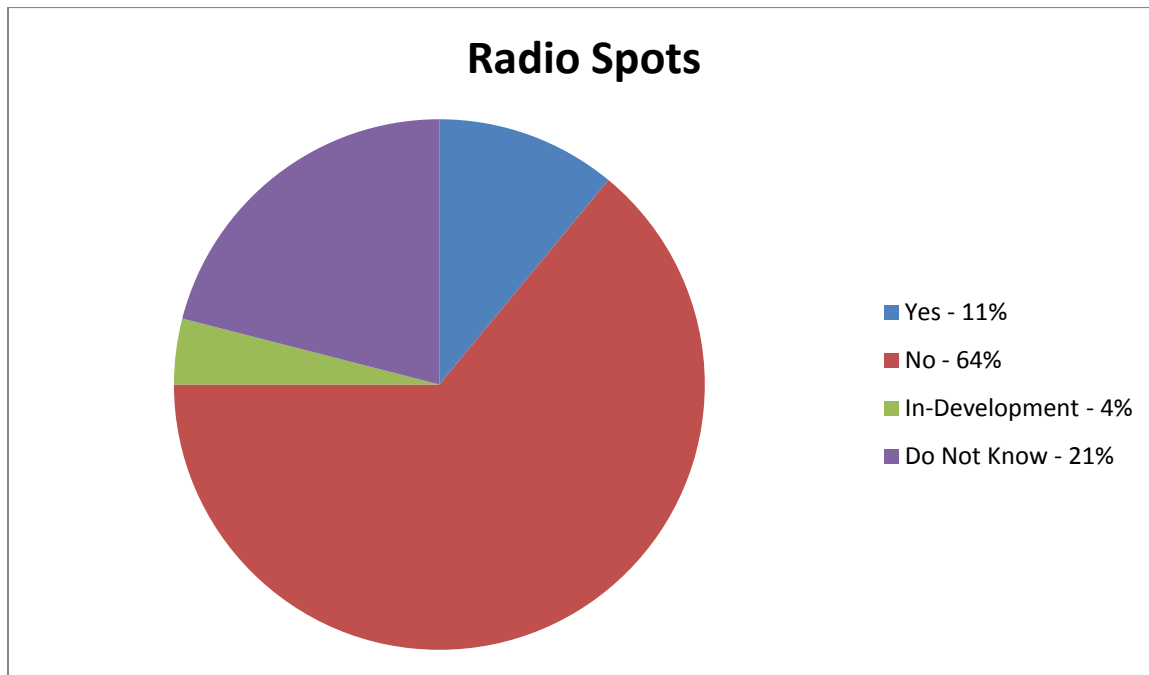
Figure 18



As noted in Figure 18, most (67 percent) of ALFs do not advertise via television, but 11 percent of facilities do, and another 11 percent will launch TV ads in the near future.

Figure 19 shows the level to which ALFs use radio spots in the local area to influence enrollment decisions and promote the community.

Figure 19



From Figure 19, it is clear that most (64 percent) ALFs do not use radio spots for public relations and marketing efforts.

Figure 20 depicts the reported use of a company blog to interact with health care professionals and current and prospective customers.

Figure 20

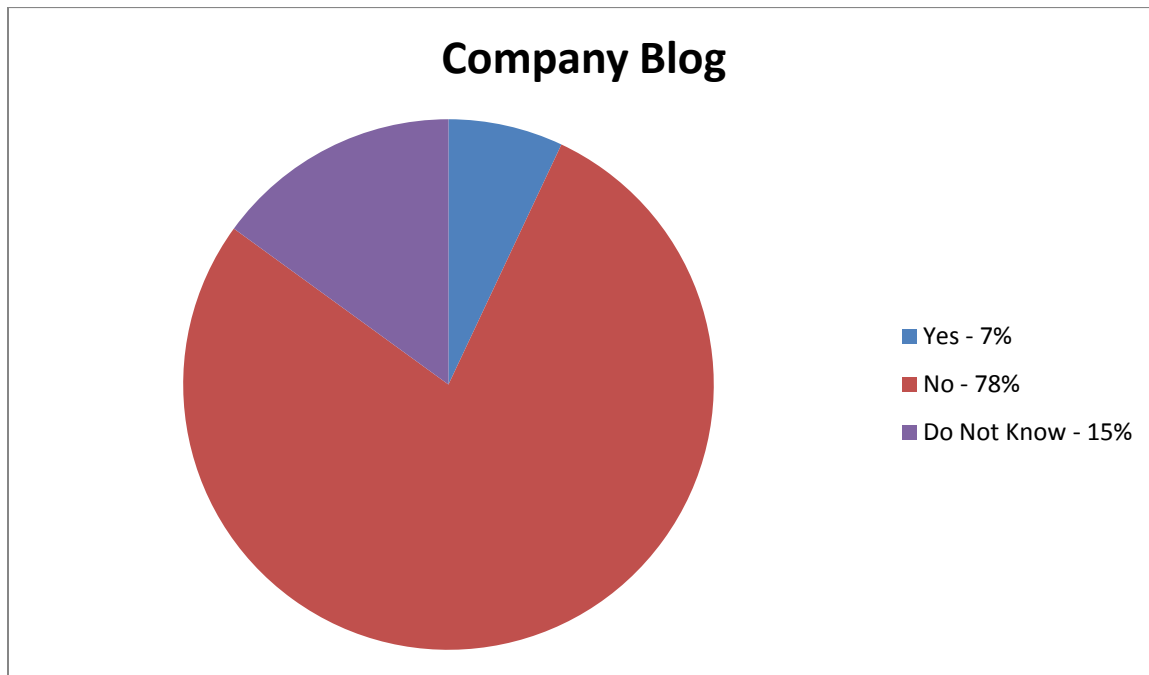
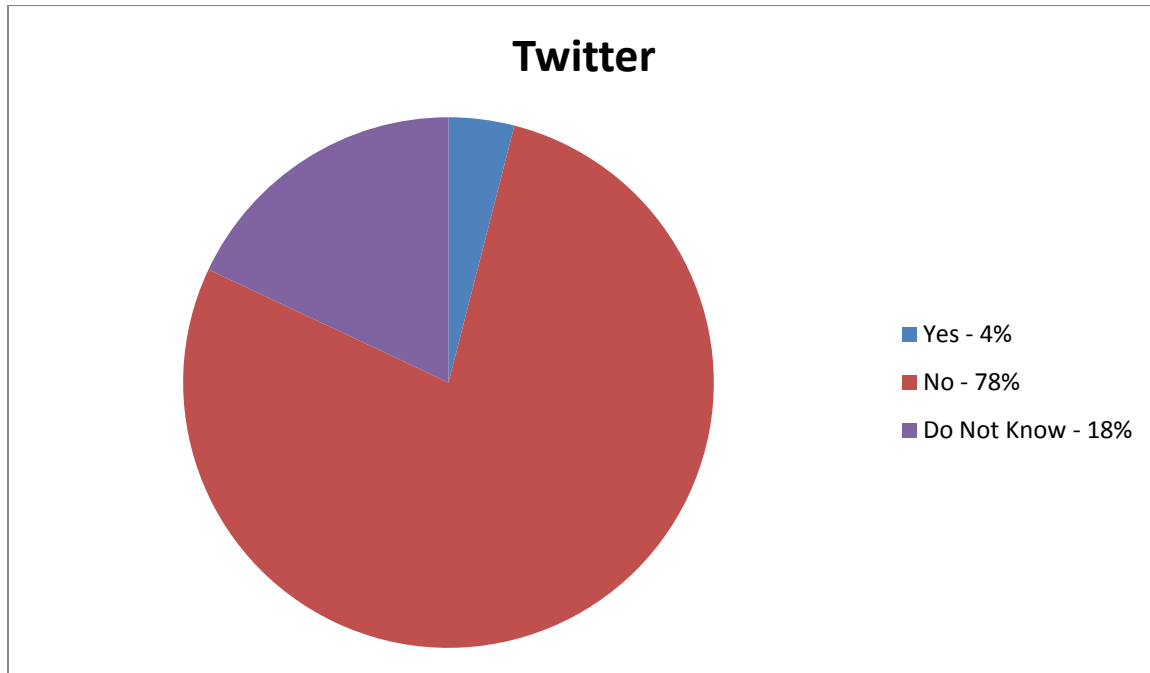


Figure 20 shows most (78 percent) of facilities do not participate in online blogging and respondents did not indicate a blog is in creation at any location surveyed.

Finally, Figure 21 illustrates the use of Twitter, the micro blogging site, at each of the communities in the study.

Figure 21



As seen above in Figure 21, a large portion of facilities (78 percent) do not have a Twitter account and administrators surveyed did not suggest Twitter is in-development at any community at the present time.

**H1: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities use more traditional or outdated PR techniques to impact enrollment decisions. *Supported.***

Again, survey respondents indicate news releases, brochures, newspaper advertisements, a facility website, direct mailings, guest speakers and special events (e.g. hired outside entertainers) are used at all locations, along with internal newsletters (96 percent), email (96

percent), health and wellness classes (96 percent), senior social events/outings (96 percent), open house tours (96 percent) and community events (96 percent).

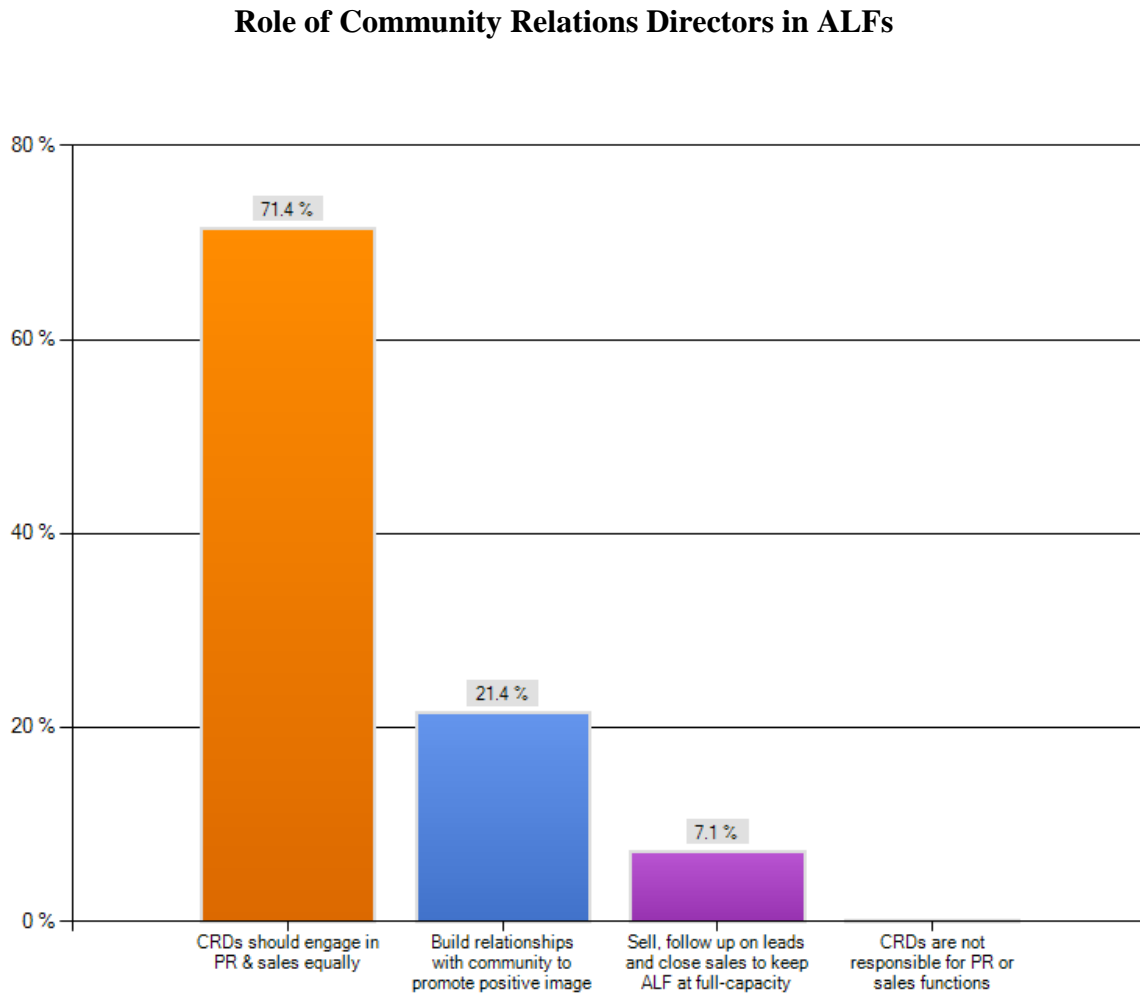
However, open-ended qualitative survey question responses reveal which activities are not only used, but also used most frequently to attract and retain customers. According to respondents, the most highly used tactics to attract new residents into a facility, in order of the most common answers given, are referral/professional development, community outreach efforts, community events (open house tours), newspaper advertisements, direct-mail marketing materials, facility website, internet and word-of-mouth publicity. On the other hand, the most often used techniques to retain current customers, in order of the most frequent answers provided, are quality service and care (reputation management), daily residents activities, internal newsletter, hired outside entertainment, special events for residents and family members, personal calls to communicate with and update family members and advisory boards for key publics.

**H2: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities lump public relations and marketing into one single function under the title “community relations,” which engages in both marketing/selling and public relations/relationship building to impact enrollment decisions. Supported.**

“Community Relations Director” is the title used in 100 percent of the communities surveyed to describe the individual responsible for building both community census and positive image. Additionally, 72 percent of respondents believe that both sales and public relations are equally fundamental aspects of ALFs to ensure residents enroll and remain enrolled.

Figure 22 exhibits the perceived role of community relations directors (CRDs) in ALFs according to survey respondents.

Figure 22



According to Figure 22, a majority of respondents (71 percent) believe CRDs must engage in PR and sales equally. However, 21 percent feel relationship building and PR efforts to promote a positive community image is more vital than sales duties, while 7 percent believe following up on leads and closing the deal is most important to the success of facilities because it keeps them at full-capacity.



**H3: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities believe their PR/marketing efforts are effective in attracting and retaining residents in a highly competitive market. Supported.**

Table 2 represents the perceived effectiveness of PR and marketing techniques to drive new enrollments into AL communities.

Table 2

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
0%	7%	7%	39%	47%

As seen in Table 2, a total of 86 percent of administrators agree or strongly agree that their facilities PR and marketing efforts effectively attract customers.

Table 3 shows the perceived effectiveness of facilities PR and marketing efforts in terms of keeping current residents in place.

Table 3

**Our facilities' PR and marketing efforts are effective in retaining current residents**

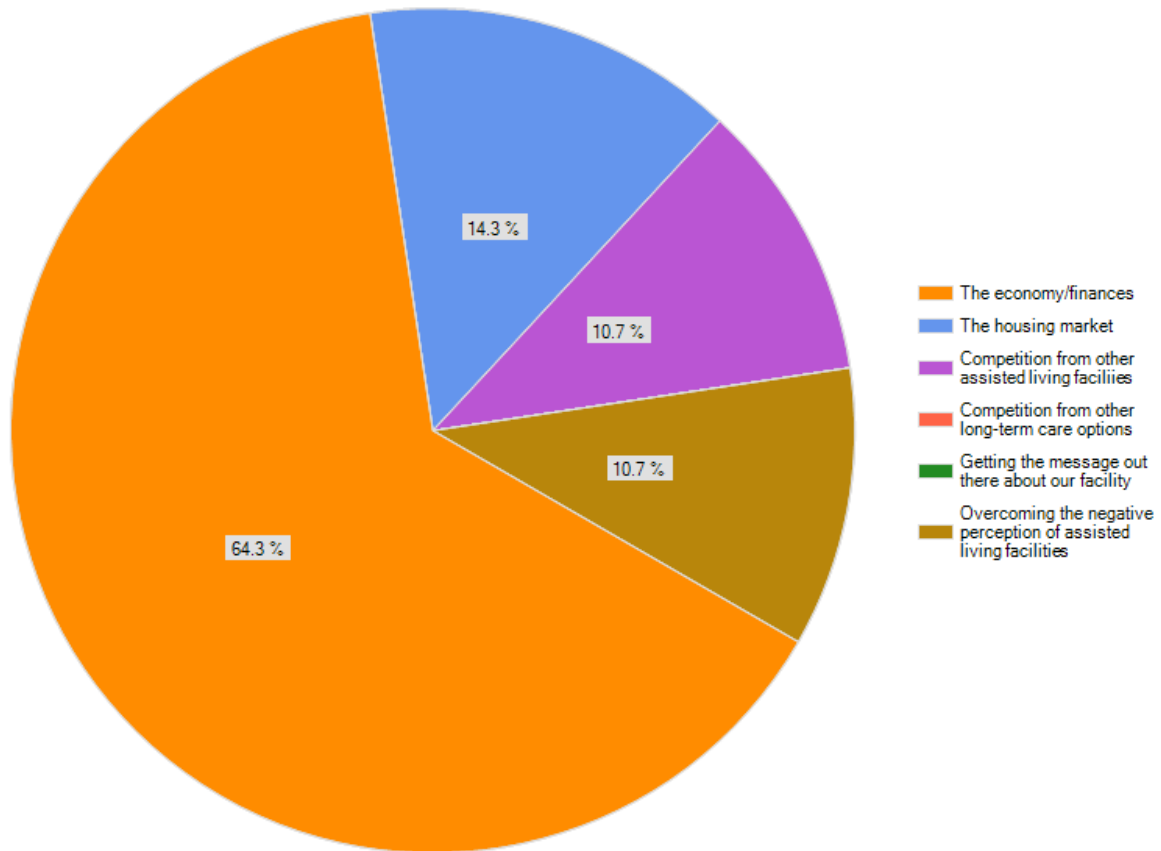
Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
0%	3%	11%	54%	32%

As noted in Table 3, a total of 87 percent of survey respondents believe their ALF engages in effective retention PR and marketing efforts.

Figure 23 shows the reported current challenges respondents see in the ALF sector.

Figure 23

### Current Challenges in the Assisted Living Industry



As shown above in Figure 23, perceived competition from other AL facilities offering comparable services is low (11 percent), while concerns about the economy/finances and the falling housing market account for nearly 80 percent of survey responses.

*General Findings*

Table 4 depicts respondent's perception of marketing and PR efforts in terms of being up-to-date and current.

Table 4

**Our facilities' PR and marketing efforts are up-to-date and current**

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
0%	4%	7%	43%	46%

As seen in Table 4, most (89 percent) of ALF administrators believe their facilities' efforts are up-to-date and current.

Table 5 shows the level to which participants agreed with the idea that word-of-mouth is more powerful than any PR activity.

Table 5

**Word-of-mouth promotion is more effective than any public relations effort in an ALF**

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
3%	11%	4%	32%	50%

As noted in Table 5, 82 percent of respondents strongly agree or agree with the idea that word-of-mouth promotion ranks higher in importance than public relations efforts.

*In-depth Interview Results*

**RQ: What PR techniques do assisted living facilities use to attract and retain residents?**

*Techniques to Attract*

The following are techniques 100 percent of respondents indicate their ALF uses to attract new clients: newspaper ads, facility tours, community events, word-of-mouth promotion, direct-mail marketing, facility website and professional referral development.

Respondents cite newspaper ads in local community newspapers as a primary method to increase awareness and drive new residents into the building. From these ads, facilities hope to

get inquiries and interest in facility tours—another noted activity to attract. According to interviewees, facility tours are most successful when the inside and outside of the building is clean, luxurious and welcoming.

In addition, all interview participants believe tours and community events create positive word-of-mouth publicity that the facility website and direct-mail marketing efforts—two other commonly discussed attraction devices—further develop. All interviewees believe tours provide the necessary “meet and greet” to build relationships and close the sale. According to the marketing administrator, tours provide time to listen to needs and communicate benefits to the prospective client.

Participants cite positive word-of-mouth reputation as one of the most important success factors for ALFs along with professional network development—strong relationships with doctors, hospitals, rehabilitation centers and social workers. According to the executive director, ALFs can expect 50 percent more closings through professional networks.

According to the marketing administrator, word-of-mouth is most effective because it provides credibility. “When current and past residents recommend an ALF to friends, family, neighbors and people from church, it is more believable and trustworthy,” says the marketing administrator. However, the marketing administrator also warns word-of-mouth buzz is not always enough and ALFs must focus on multiple techniques to reach key audiences.

*Techniques to retain:*

All respondents believe high quality care, exceptional customer service, internal relationship-building, image of the building, resident activities and the happiness of both staff and residents are the key factors in retaining residents in an ALF.

Each administrator stresses the importance of high quality care in assisted living homes. Without it, residents will most likely move out. According to the executive director, high quality care is the basis of ALF success—ALFs must deliver and maintain this fundamental promise to keep buildings at full-capacity. In addition, interviewees think good customer service keeps visitors and residents happy and 100 percent of respondents feel “above and beyond” customer service is the job of all staff, regardless of job description or title.

Additionally, 100 percent of interviewees mention relationships between staff and residents as the primary decision making factor for leads. According to the executive director, residents must feel connected to staff and facility managers must highlight those relationships during tours and open-house events.

During on-site events, the building premises must maintain luxury standards and a certain high-quality look and feel according to 80 percent of participants. According to the human resource director, the decorations, landscaping and cleanliness of the building that makes people proud to move in and reluctant to leave.

Furthermore, administrators mention resident activities as the key to eliminate boredom and ensure resident satisfaction. More than half of respondents mention mental stimulation activities as important for the health and prosperity of residents. As a result, directors believe activities should incorporate cognitive exercises in games and trips to retain residents for the longest period of time to promote the idea of “aging in place.” In other words, physically and mentally residents live longer and can easily transition to independent care and more monitored care within the same facility, which contributes to the bottom-line.

Finally, respondents all indicate strong internal PR must precede strong external PR. In other words, ALFs must work to maintain staff happiness through recognition programs and fair treatment to create a positive atmosphere in the building. According to the executive director, all employees must be happy for residents to be happy—good PR starts on the inside.

**H1: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities use more traditional or outdated PR techniques to impact enrollment decisions. *Supported.***

All interviewees indicate their facility does not use social media to attract or retain residents. According to 60 percent of respondents, social media is seen as a threat to what the company stands for and is “too dangerous” and “too trendy.” The activities director believes social media can negatively impact an ALF’s image and reputation. According to the marketing administrator, the facility only has a website and steers clear of Twitter and Facebook because it is “one step above advertising on the back of a bus” and that is not how the company promotes itself. “We are an upper-level, high-priced service, so we must stay above social media and fill beds fast without using it,” says the marketing administrator.

However, 40 percent of interviewees believe social media use is beneficial if used correctly. The executive director believes social media may have its place for professional marketing purposes and hints that a task force will look into it in the near future. “We can use social media networks as external PR to keep in touch with professional organizations, but not for families because it creates vulnerability. If a person broadcasts one bad experience, it ruins all the good experiences and threatens our image,” says the executive director. In addition, the human resource manager hopes the company will begin to use email blasts and social media soon to get “with the times.”



According to 80 percent of interviewees, their ALF uses newspaper advertisements as a primary method to influence target audiences. However, 100 percent of administrators believe newspaper ads are no longer effective for the following reasons: the expense is greater than the benefits, newspaper readership is low and more people now get their news online. According to the community relations director, it makes more sense to invest in a new hire than pay for expensive newspaper placements. A new team member becomes a community representative that can build personal connections with staff and influence visitors in a way newspaper copy cannot.

In addition, the human resource manager believes direct mail marketing, although widely used, is too pushy and “in your face.” Other administrators also feel brochures that push features rather than benefits are out-dated and not useful for an ALF marketing team because they come off as rude.

However, administrators mention many useful traditional techniques such as tours, community events and programs to give people a reason to come in. According to 100 percent of participants, in-person tours give people face-to-face interaction that social media and electronic communication do not provide. Finally, 100 percent of interviewees believe word-of-mouth is still one of the most powerful marketing tools available to any long-term care facility.

**H2: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities lump public relations and marketing into one single function under the title “community relations,” which engages in both marketing/selling and public relations/relationship building to impact enrollment decisions. *Supported.***

According to 100 percent of respondents, community relations administrators in ALFs are responsible for both PR and sales (marketing) functions. Furthermore, 80 percent of respondents believe marketing should be done with a long-term approach, which is why public relations is integrated into sales/marketing efforts. In addition, interviewees believe integrating PR and marketing into a single function creates professionalism and consistency for ALFs.

According to the community relations director, CRDs must increase census, establish professional referral networks, create market strategies and maintain a positive image in the community they represent. According to the executive director, the “CRD must promote the ALF to the community to increase referral development and assist potential residents and their families with the move-in process.”

**H3: It is expected that a majority (51 percent +) of assisted living facilities believe their PR/marketing efforts are effective in attracting and retaining residents in a highly competitive market. *Supported.***

According to in-depth interview results, 80 percent of interviewees believe their facilities' PR and marketing efforts are “average” and 20 percent believe their facility engages in “above average” PR and marketing campaigns. According to the activities director, the facility “goes above and beyond to reach out to the surrounding communities and companies to ensure support and understanding of assisted living exists.”

In addition, 80 percent of administrators interviewed cite the highly competitive market as a main obstacle to attracting residents. “Huge competition exists between facilities so everything becomes a price battle rather than who can provide the best care and what is the best

fit,” says the executive director. Furthermore, the marketing administrator believes decisions made may not necessarily reflect which ALF can provide the best care, but which can provide the lowest price.

Nearly all participants mention competition as it relates to reduced profits for all ALF communities. According to the marketing administrator, decisions to move-in become a money game for families that want the cheapest without regard for individual. Finally, the CRD believes competition not only comes from other ALFs, but also from unemployed family members who choose to care for seniors at home, and home care agencies that allow seniors to remain at home. Therefore, it is important for ALFs to stress the importance of socialization—a benefit the home care option cannot provide.

### *General Findings*

#### *Role of PR in ALFs*

According to the community relations director, public relations efforts within ALFs bring awareness to the building, keep facilities in the fore-front of the industry, assist with referral development and create a strong reputation for prospective families. According to the activities director, public relations activities build a level of trust and understanding of what ALFs do in the nearby community and the health care networks. Finally, the human resource director feels PR sets the tone and creates messages that convey compassion, care and quality to attract new clients.

### *Who Handles PR in ALFs*

According to the community relations director, every staff member affects the image of an ALF and while in uniform PR is everyone's job. According to the marketing administrator, every person that works at an ALF is the front line because they have direct contact with visitors and residents and must build relationships and engage in basic and important PR efforts—smile, be friendly, be helpful, listen and represent the company well. However, according to the executive director, the “key players” are the department heads. It is the job of organizational leaders to spread the word about good deeds within the community and all employees must do their part, even low-level employees. “Marketing directors tell people what we can provide and then all staff proves it. Therefore, ALFs must provide a clean, welcoming setting with high-quality services and engaged residents. Remember, ALFs sell a service—but it is the relationships between staff and residents allow ALFS to stand out from competitors.”

### *ALF Industry Challenges*

According to 100 percent of administrators, the economy is the number one obstacle to ALF growth because homes are not selling and people are losing investments—two primary resources to fund long-term care. Because of economy challenges and tight budgets, 100 percent of respondents believe seniors are staying in their homes longer and waiting until last minute to move in to ALFs. As a result, seniors come into ALFs with more problems and more dependencies that make them more qualified as nursing home patients, which means ALFs lose out on the chance to make an impression.

According to the activities director, it hurts ALFs and residents when enrollment decisions are made so late in life that clients cannot fully enjoy the features of independent living. Nearly all interviewees believe the best way to overcome this financial hurdle is to use PR to get people to understand the value of assisted living. According to the activities director, assisted living is not an “institution” to dump relatives; it is a safe healthy place for the elderly to enjoy life rather than being alone at home. “But unfortunately, the negative perception of ALFs is not easy to overcome,” says the activities director.

The summary and conclusions are discussed in Chapter 5 under the sections, *summary, conclusions, recommendations and future research.*

## **Chapter 5**

### **Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Summary**

This researcher determined the public relations and marketing techniques used by assisted living facilities (ALFs) using personal interviews and surveys. Through an identification of channels used and techniques employed, the researcher contributes to the body of knowledge on long-term care health care public relations by determining industry trends and common PR practices within the ALF sector—an area that currently lacks research. In addition, the study investigates the perception of effectiveness in PR and marketing practices within ALFs and identifies the role of “community relations” and newer techniques in the industry.

At the present time, limited research exists on what ALFs do to persuade publics in terms of marketing and PR tactics. However, this study presents a comprehensive look at specific tools ALFs use and an in-depth analysis of why administrators believe these techniques remain effective or ineffective and used or unused. With this information, the researcher can recommend ways to enhance current efforts and expand to newer, more creative techniques in an ever-changing, competitive environment.

#### **5.2 Conclusions**

Interviews and surveys with highly experienced assisted living professionals reveal that in 2011 these facilities still integrate marketing and public relations functions and rely on traditional vehicles to influence target audiences. And while those involved with PR and marketing activities maintain an overall positive outlook on their individual facilities’ efforts, their view on the overall assisted living industry contains concerns for future challenges

involving the economy, the housing market, the misunderstood perception of independent care and the trend of seniors to wait longer to enter long-term care.

The most popular PR and marketing techniques and channels administrators report using are newspaper ads, facility tours, community events, word-of-mouth promotion, direct-mail marketing/materials, newsletters, facility website and professional referral development. The web as a marketing tool is virtually nonexistent besides facility websites, which for most communities, are nothing more than a static and basic online brochures. As a result, two-way strategic communication via social media and new media is highly underused by ALFs.

Interestingly, surveys and interviews with administrators reveal confidence and satisfaction with PR efforts, although most admit practices remain similar to what practitioners used in the 1990s when ALFs first emerged. There seems to be extreme hesitation to dive into the online world of social media based on fear of the unknown and how it will reflect back on the industry. In general, administrators do not see the value in newer techniques and live by the “if it is not broken, do not fix it” way of thinking.

However, times are rapidly changing—people rely on the internet for news, information and socialization. But ALFs still do not take advantage of the opportunities present in terms of new ways to reach people. As a result, a majority of ALFs operate using the same worn-out techniques that fail to differentiate one ALF from the next. In fact, only 26 percent of ALFs report a presence on Facebook or LinkedIn, two of the most popular and well-known networking sites. Only 19 percent use YouTube to stream videos, 7 percent blog as a tool to attract and retain clients, and a mere 4 percent Tweet as a communications tactic.

## **Recommendations**

The researcher believes certain techniques ALFs use, although traditional, are still effective in attracting and retaining residents. They include special events, resident activities, professional networking and open-house tours. These tactics provide necessary relationship-building and face-to-face interaction necessary for ALF success. However, other commonly used traditional methods are outdated and less effective now than when ALFs used these techniques 20 years ago. They include newspaper ads, facility websites, newsletters and marketing materials such as brochures.

While nearly 100 percent of ALFs report use of newspaper ads, websites, newsletters and promotional materials, virtually no ALFs report an online version for any of these extremely common activities. It seems these tactics have become habit for many ALFs rather than proven ways to reach key groups. However, the researcher believes these outdated methods can be easily updated using new media.

For example, ALFs can advertise online rather than or in addition to current newspaper placements. They can expand their websites to include videos (virtual tours), live photo feeds, testimonial pages, blogs that discuss the benefits to long-term care and links to any social media sites the ALF chooses to join. In addition, ALFs can publish newsletters and marketing materials online to increase awareness and readership beyond current residents and regular visitors. As a result, not only will more people see the publications, but ALFs can save money when they limit the direct-mail of these materials and transfer to an online version.

As of now, ALFs do not successfully target internet savvy customers. And while some seniors may not use the internet, nearly all baby-boomers and Gen Xers do. These two groups,



born between the 1940s and 1970s, are the next group to enter long-term care or make the decision for a parent in the near future. Therefore, it is imperative for ALFs to meet their communications needs.

In addition, ALFs rely on community relations directors to fulfill both a sales and public relations role. Because their primary responsibility is to maximize community census, public relations activities, some as simple as news releases, are often neglected. Community relations directors are expected to wear multiple hats, and while many understand the importance of PR, it often comes as an afterthought to marketing activities. The researcher believes sales and PR are integrated into one this one position primarily to reduce costs. However, a team approach to PR and marketing with individuals with strong skill sets in different areas can go a long way in maximizing profits in ALFs. In fact, it is as simple as hiring a community relations assistant to complement the abilities of the director and prioritize communications efforts.

### **Future Research**

The researcher believes future studies should focus on other regions of the country besides the Northeast U.S. and New Jersey area to compare industry trends and techniques. In addition, because the current study used convenience sampling, a representative sample of long-term care across the country may produce an even more comprehensive look at the entire U.S. long-term care industry. If representation from each state is not possible, future researchers can expand to other regions of the country and replicate the current study.

Additionally, because the study only looked at a variety of assisted living facilities, follow up studies should include an equal representation of luxury, regular and skilled nursing

assisted living facilities in its sample. Future research also should expand the scope to include nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities and more assisted living companies that were left out.

Finally, future research on the marketing and PR tactics used in ALFs should aim to gather the options and knowledge of long-term care marketing experts through an online Delphi Study method. This research technique can create consensus among industry thought leaders that represents different parts of the country on the most useful new and old PR and marketing techniques. With this information, future research can further survey ALF administrators along with regular staff, current clients and prospective families to enhance long-term care marketers and PR practitioner's communications efforts in today's highly connected and mediated environment.

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## Appendix A Personal Interview Instrument

### Topic 1: General Questions

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you been with your current facility?
3. How many years of experience do you have in long-term care?
4. What is the highest level of education you completed; what degree(s) do you hold?

### Topic 2: Perception of PR effectiveness.

5. How would you rate your facilities' PR and marketing activities; do you feel that they are above average, average or below average in terms of attracting and retaining residents?
6. In your own words, explain the role of public relations in an assisted living facility.

### Topic 3: Who does or should handle PR activities in assisted living.

7. Explain your involvement with PR and marketing activities at work.
8. Which staff members handle PR activities within your organization?
9. Who do you believe *should* handle PR efforts at work?

### Topic 4: PR activities to attract new residents.

10. What do you believe is the most effective PR technique to attract new residents? Why?
11. What PR techniques does your organization implement most frequently to attract residents?

### Topic 5: PR activities to retain current residents.

12. What do you believe is the most effective PR technique to retain current residents? Why?
13. What PR techniques does our organization implement most frequently to retain residents?

### Topic 6: Newer PR techniques used or not used by facilities.

14. Does your facility use any social media or newer forms of PR? Explain why or why not.

Topic 7: Traditional methods of PR in ALFs

15. In your opinion, are there any PR techniques that are out-dated and not useful for an assisted living marketing team?
16. What traditional PR efforts does your facility use regularly?

Topic 8: Current challenges in the long-term care industry.

17. What is the biggest challenge to get new residents into your assisted living facility?
18. What other industry trends or challenges do you see within assisted living today?

## Appendix B Survey Instrument

This survey seeks to determine the public relations and marketing techniques used by assisted living facilities. All the information and responses you provide are strictly confidential. You can decide to stop taking this survey at any time. This survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

*Please fill in the following information:*

**Job title:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Please put a check mark in front of the most appropriate answer:*

### Age

18-25  26-35  36-45  46-55  56-65  66+

### Number of years of experience working in long-term care

0-2  3-5  6-8  9-11  12-14  15-17  18-20  20+

### Number of years at present facility

0-2  3-5  6-8  9-11  12-14  15-17  18-20  20+

### Highest level of education

High School or equivalency  RN certification  Associate degree  Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  M.D  J.D  Ph.D

Please specify any degrees you may hold here: \_\_\_\_\_



*Choose the most appropriate response below each statement on a scale from 1-7 with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree:*

I am heavily involved with the public relations and marketing efforts at work.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Our public relations and marketing techniques are effective in attracting new residents.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Our public relations and marketing techniques are effective in retaining current residents.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Our public relations and marketing efforts are up-to-date and current.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

We primarily use traditional forms of public relations and marketing such as brochures.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

We use newer forms of public relations and marketing such as social media regularly.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Assisted living facilities must engage in public relations and marketing activities to attract and retain residents.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Word-of-mouth promotion is more effective than any public relations effort in an assisted living facility.

Strongly Disagree 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 Strongly Agree

Please indicate the activities of your facility by choosing **yes**, **no** or **in development** for each of the following:

Public Relations/Marketing Technique	Yes	No	In Development
Open house tours with prospective residents/families			
Internal newsletters (staff/residents)			
External newsletters (insurers, referrers, families)			
News releases			
Brochures			
Newspaper Ads			
Magazine Ads			
Radio spots			
TV spots			
Billboards			
Yellow Pages—listing and advertisement			
Facility Web site			
Facebook			
Branded Online Community			
Twitter account			
Company Blog			
YouTube			
LinkedIn			
Long-term care forum monitoring			
Email			
Email marketing (e.g. Constant Contact)			
Direct mailings			
Health/wellness classes			
Senior social events/outings			
Open house tours			
Guest speakers			
Outside hired entertainers			
Community events (e.g. community bingo)			
Special events (e.g. facility anniversary party)			
Advisory boards for residents and/or family members			
Satisfaction surveys with residents			
Satisfaction surveys with family members or payer			
Surveys with referrers (discharge planners, medical professionals, home/health/hospice/assisted living coordinators, clergy, etc) to solicit feedback			
Written PR Marketing Plan			
Written Crisis Communication Plan			