



***Marketing Senior Care:
Services to Help Promote and Sell Your Communities***

*Consulting Services for Retirement and
Assisted Living Communities and Nursing Homes*

DevonHill
A S S O C I A T E S

1535 El Paso Real, La Jolla, CA 92037
Phone: 858-456-7800 • www.devonhillassociates.com



Diagnosing Problems. Creating Excellence. Filling Communities.

Since 1987, Devon Hill Associates has been providing valuable insight and guidance to retirement communities, assisted living communities and nursing homes.

- We provide our clients with detailed and candid feedback about their current reputation and skill levels. We uncover problems in marketing, sales and relationship management.
- We offer guidance on how to improve and enhance marketing, sales and customer service performance. We help our clients create excellence and fill their communities through mystery shopping, satisfaction research, sales training and planning, and marketing and public relations services.

We hope this booklet provides you with a clear overview of our strengths and capabilities. We welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you might have about our services or experience.

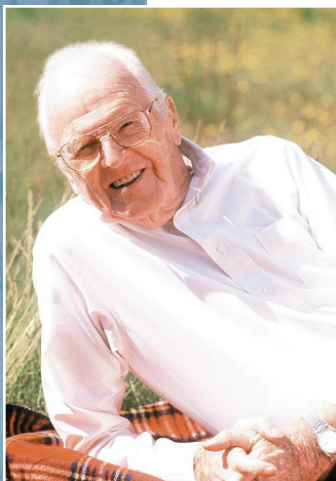
WHAT CLIENTS SAY ABOUT DEVON HILL ASSOCIATES

“We retained Devon Hill Associates to ‘audit’ how well we receive and follow through with incoming rental inquiries and tours of our senior-living apartments. Devon Hill far exceeded my expectations. They were extremely thorough and their observations were very insightful. Their report, documenting the work done and their observations and recommendations, was detailed, complete and now serves as a valuable tool for us in training our receptionist/marketing assistants and marketing directors.”

Kalman Wenig, CEO

Premier Care Centers, LLC • West Allis, WI

Devon Hill
A S S O C I A T E S



Devon Hill's Scope of Services

Devon Hill's nationally recognized and award-winning mystery shopping, marketing and sales training services have helped numerous organizations enhance performance and grow their bottom line — from major healthcare and senior care systems to free-standing retirement and assisted living communities.

- Our **Secret Visitor Service** evaluations and marketing and sales audits are powerful tools that help clients improve performance and increase occupancy.
- Our **custom satisfaction research** helps identify what key constituents really think about your communities.
- Our **marketing and public relations services** create a distinctive and compelling image of your organization's services.

WHAT CLIENTS SAY ABOUT DEVON HILL ASSOCIATES

"Your ability to both gather and particularly sort through the mass of information required for this task is truly remarkable. Not only did you know where and how to find the information necessary, your organization of this data and suggestions and presentation help to present us with the complete picture necessary to assure our success."

Bill Miller, Director of Operations

Sentara Life Care Corporation, Norfolk, VA

"Your customized and educated approach has generated superior information that will lead to the right decisions. The report is well worth the cost."

Richard Irwin, President

National Health Management, Pittsburgh, PA
(Now President of IntegraCare, Sewickley, PA)

Our focus: To help your organization become more competitive in today's volatile marketplace.

We bring you insightful — and otherwise unattainable — information about your reputation and performance in the critical areas of customer service, marketing, public relations and sales. We suggest practical strategies designed to enhance service, promote referrals and increase occupancy.





Secret Visitor Evaluations

Secret Visitor is an intimate, close-up look at the sales and customer service skills of your staff as seen through the eyes of consumers and professionals. Devon Hill recruits and trains qualified consumer evaluators and seasoned sales professionals to pose as real prospects to your facilities. These independent contractor mystery shoppers provide valuable feedback about first impressions of your building and grounds, and your staff's skill in qualifying, presenting, handling objections and closing the sale.

SECRET VISITOR evaluations can help you:

- Discover why you may be losing business to competitors;
- Plan training to improve marketing, sales and customer service skills;
- Track performance over time and across communities; and
- Build a positive community image.

In addition, you can use Devon Hill's SECRET VISITOR program to:

- Provide feedback about recruitment and interviewing practices — critical in today's tight labor market;
- Compare your organization to its competitors; and
- Identify causes of resident dissatisfaction.

Devon Hill Associates has more than 16 years of experience in delivering mystery shopping services. We are known for our well-executed projects and exceptionally thorough reports.

WHAT CLIENTS SAY ABOUT DEVON HILL ASSOCIATES

"I have found Barbara's analysis to be the most "on-target" of any mystery shopping service we have tried in the past ... I would highly recommend Barbara's services to your company."

David Lewis, Vice President – Sales

The Forum Group • Indianapolis, IN

(Now Executive Vice President of Retirement Management Company, Carmel, IN)

"(I am writing) to simply personally express my gratitude for the very thorough work you did in mystery shopping ... Over the years I have observed several approaches to mystery shopping; none as thorough, objective and helpful as yours ... It was impressive work and helpful to our efforts."

Gary Wheeler, Co-President/CEO

Front Porch, Burbank, CA



Specialized Services for Senior Living and Long-Term Care Companies

Audits

Comprehensive, objective evaluations in marketing, public relations, communications and sales for senior living and long-term care organizations that are not achieving their goals — or that simply want to increase their competitiveness.

Brand Development/Marketing and Public Relations

Research, analysis, strategy formation, product development, pricing and other services designed to build and advance a senior living or long-term care organization's brand identity in the marketplace.

Marketing Campaigns

Research, analysis, strategy development and complete execution of marketing campaigns for existing and planned retirement and assisted living communities.

Referral Source Feedback

Telephone and personal interviews with key customers. You'll learn what these customers think about you and your competitors, plus uncover problems in referral source relationships.

Sales Training and Coaching

One to three days of onsite training for senior living and long-term care administrators and marketing/sales staff. Devon Hill's hands-on approach combines didactic and interactive workshops to improve skills and build confidence. Our coaching program provides on-going support for new and seasoned sales staff.

Satisfaction Surveys

Custom mail, telephone, focus group and personal interviews to identify resident and family satisfaction.

For information about our services for hospitals and other healthcare organizations, such as our Secret Patient Service evaluations, visit our website at www.devonhillassociates.com

WHAT CLIENTS SAY ABOUT DEVON HILL ASSOCIATES

"Everyone who attended the sales training felt they left with some new skills to experiment with for our ever-changing marketplace ... Bill Neff, our sales trainer, was dynamic and well informed about the continuing care process. He managed to keep the team involved ... Thank you for the tailored scenarios you created. They were very much on the mark ... and since they were familiar to them, they paid rapt attention."

Cindy Janssen, Vice President of Marketing
Presbyterian Homes & Services of NJ

Meet



Barbara Gerber, FACHE, is founder and president of Devon Hill Associates, headquartered in La Jolla, CA. Established in 1987, Devon Hill provides marketing, sales and mystery shopping services to the senior living/long-term care industries and mystery shopping to hospitals and clinics nationwide.

Devon Hill's innovative "Secret Patient Service" is considered among the leading hospital mystery shopping services in the country. It has been featured on national television and in articles appearing in the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *LA Times*, *San Diego Tribune*, *Health Executive*, *Hospitals and Health Networks*, *Trustee* and *Healthcare Forum Journal*.

Prior to establishing Devon Hill Associates, Barbara served as a senior executive at two hospitals. She brings relevant, hands-on experience in strategic planning, hospital operations and marketing, new program development, public relations, special events and physician recruitment. Her marketing programs have captured numerous awards, including the Marketing Excellence Award in Healthcare and Marketer of the Year from the Pittsburgh Chapter of the American Marketing Association, and the HCA Management Company's Northeast Marketing and Public Relations Conference Administrator's Choice Award.

Barbara has co-authored chapters on marketing communications for the University of Iowa 1989 *Series in Nursing Administration* and the American Hospital Association's book, *Occupational Health Services: Practical Strategies for Improving Quality and Controlling Costs*. She also has written articles on mystery shopping and customer service for *the Group Practice Journal*, *Contemporary Long-Term Care* and *Assisted Living Today*. Barbara holds dual master's degrees in public health (health administration) and library science and a marketing certificate from the University of Pittsburgh.

* * *

Tina San Roman, is founder and president of Coast to Coast Scheduling Services, Inc., which partners with Devon Hill Associates in recruiting top-level mystery shoppers. Coast to Coast Scheduling Service is the nation's second-largest mystery shopping recruitment company, with a database of over 250,000 shoppers nationwide and 40 recruiters and schedulers. Through its partnership with Coast to Coast, Devon Hill offers greater depth and enhanced resources for its clients.

* * *

Mary Kukovich, Devon Hill Associates' communications partner for more than 20 years, has helped to develop comprehensive, award-winning public relations and communications plans to launch the grand opening and promotion of several independent and assisted living communities, create materials for Devon's turnkey occupational health marketing program that was used by 11 hospitals nationwide, and provide branding and publication support.

* * *

Patricia Searle, administrative assistant, brings exceptional administrative, organizational and office skills to her work with Devon Hill Associates, as well as computer programming and database design and management skills and experience. Patricia collects, assembles and provides initial editing and analysis of mystery shopper data. She is proficient in Word, Excel, Access, desktop publishing and multidimensional database design and management.



A Sampling of Past and Current Senior Care Clients

- **The Baptist Homes**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **ERA Care**
(now Era Living)
Seattle, WA
- **The Forum Group**
(merged with Marriott Senior Living)
Indianapolis, IN
- **Front Porch**
Burbank, CA
- **Grane Healthcare**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **Harborside Health Care**
Boston, MA
- **Hallmark Senior Communities**
Townson, MD
- **Jewish Association on Aging**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **La Mesa Care Center**
Yuma, AZ
- **Laurel Wood Convalescent Center & Personal Care Home**
Johnstown, PA
- **La Salette Rehabilitation Hospital & Convalescent Center**
Stockton, CA
- **Lakeshore Rehabilitation Center**
(Merged with Healthsouth)
Birmingham, AL
- **Manorhouse Retirement Communities**
Richmond, VA
- **National Health Management**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **Northwestern Services Corporation**
Berea, OH
- **Premier Care Centers**
West Allis, WI
- **Presbyterian Homes of Pennsylvania**
Camp Hill, PA
- **Presbyterian Homes of New Jersey**
Princeton, NJ
- **Renaissance Healthcare Corporation**
(now CPL Management)
Mechanicsburg, PA
- **Riverside Nursing Center**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **Samaritan Senior Services**
Phoenix, AZ
- **Senior Resource Group (SRG)**
Solana Beach, CA
- **Sentara Lifecare Corporation**
Norfolk, VA
- **Sunrise Assisted Living**
(now Sunrise Senior Living)
McLean, VA
- **Transamerica Senior Living**
San Jose, CA
- **United Methodist Services for the Aging**
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- **Weinberg Campus**
Getzville, NY
- **Weinberg Terrace**
Pittsburgh, PA
- **William Blair Capital Partners**
Chicago, IL

WHAT CLIENTS SAY ABOUT DEVON HILL ASSOCIATES

“Barbara, the work of Devon Hill Associates — both yours and that of Dr. William Neff — contributed greatly, I feel, to our success ... Devon Hill Associates was an integral and instrumental element in a successful project launch. The investment reaped, and will continue to reap, positive returns.”

John Zanardelli, Executive Director and CEO
United Methodist Services for the Aging, Pittsburgh, PA

Selected Articles

Make Customer Service Your Business

CREATING A TRULY CUSTOMER-FOCUSED, CUSTOMER-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION REQUIRES CHANGES IN CULTURE, VALUES, PROCEDURES, PROCESSES, AND PEOPLE, BUT IT'S WELL WORTH THE EFFORT **BY BARBARA GERBER**

How do you create a customer-service-oriented organization? Clearly, it isn't enough to just say you are a service-oriented organization. You must *be* a service-oriented organization. That means that customer service is *the* business of the organization; customer satisfaction is a top priority; top management is committed to service excellence; every employee is aware of the importance of customer service; and systems are designed to reinforce the delivery of excellent service, according to Houston-based consultant Diane Peterson in *An Overview of Service Strategy: The Key to Quality*.

If this sounds simple, it isn't. Experience indicates that creating a customer-service-oriented organization is a complex undertaking. Maybe that's why there have been almost as many approaches as there are companies engaged in customer service initiatives.

Some organizations look to the hospitality industry for their approach because long-term care communities and hotels share many of the same characteristics. Some organizations focus primarily on skills building by reinforcing interpersonal skills, such as techniques for meeting and greeting, anticipating needs, and listening to and coping with complaints. Other organizations focus on motivation rather than training, on the premise that people have the skills but have to be motivated to use them. This premise leads to programs aimed at inspiring employee com-

mitment to the community's future. Some organizations believe that customer relations are only for front-line people, while others insist it must include every person in the organization. Some see customer relations programs as finite campaigns with a beginning and an end, while others believe that customer service excellence is a vision that drives people's behavior and organizational policy forever.

With so many popular approaches to customer service excellence, it isn't possible to state, categorically, which one guarantees success. Nevertheless, it is probably safe to say that if an organization wants its entire workforce dedicated to delivering excellent service, three things must happen. First, there will have to be some change in culture, with values, new rhetoric, and new processes. Second, top management will need to define a service excellence vision so strong and so motivating that it will propel all of the people in the organization toward excellence. And, third, a service excellence strategy must be developed.

Before going further, it will be helpful to define the term "service," and make the distinction between service quality, service excellence, and service quality improvement. (For the purposes of this article, we will use the terms "service" and "customer service" interchangeably.) The term "service" represents the extent to which an organization meets its customers' expectations. Think of the term "service quality" as a continuum that ranges from poor service quality to

AT A GLANCE

- There are almost as many approaches to creating a customer-focused, service-oriented organization as there are long-term care companies engaged in customer service initiatives.

- A long-term care organization that wants its entire workforce to deliver excellent customer service must incorporate 10 key elements.

- Expect some people to resist service quality improvement efforts; it's natural to resist change. The best strategy is to anticipate and carefully plan for resistance as part of the service excellence strategy.

excellent service quality. "Service excellence" marks the upper end of the continuum and indicates that from the customer's point of view, the service has been flawless or almost flawless in meeting the customer's expectations. "Service quality improvement" is the process that moves an organization along the continuum toward service excellence.

Although different age groups have different ideas about the most important aspects of service, or its place on the continuum, when people talk about service quality or service excellence, they're usually referring to the interpersonal skills of the staff. In the long-term care industry, typically they're talking about employee behavior that demonstrates caring, compassion, warmth, friendliness, courtesy, attentiveness, and concern.

MORE THAN PEOPLE SKILLS

For the long haul, service excellence requires more than just people skills. To be a truly customer-focused, service-oriented organization, an organization must create a comprehensive service excellence strategy. Simply put, a service excellence strategy is a commitment of time, resources, minds, and hearts to becoming truly customer-focused. It is continuous, dynamic, multi-faceted, and woven into the fabric of the organization, says Peterson, whose company D. Peterson & Associates offers a service excellence training program. A truly customer-focused, service-oriented organization commits to ongoing improvements in not only people skills, but amenities, systems, the environment, technical and clinical competence, and cost. At least three levels of staff must be involved – senior management (owners/executive management/administrators), middle management, and employees. Although each level has different needs and roles in the service strategy, all are key to its success.

A service excellence strategy requires that at least the following 10 organizational elements become aligned, so that everyone's energies are moving in the same direction. These 10 elements do not represent the sequential or chronological steps necessary to develop and execute a successful service excellence

strategy. Rather, they describe the forces that must work together to bring about service quality improvement. Depending on where your organization falls on the service quality continuum, you can read these elements either with an eye toward identifying service quality improvement gaps in everyday prac-

actions of their staff into alignment with the service quality vision.

3. Customer-oriented people who are trained, recognized, and rewarded. A service excellence strategy focuses on raising people's performance standards, increasing the consistency of performance, and holding people accountable to

A service excellence strategy focuses on raising people's performance standards, increasing the consistency of performance, and holding people accountable to these high standards.

tices, or as an aid in planning a service excellence strategy.

1. A service excellence vision supported by dynamic plans, policies, processes, and high-performance standards. It is crucial that every employee share the vision of customer service excellence, and the need for systems, processes, and performance standards that are designed to reinforce the delivery of excellent service.

Regardless of whether top-level management alone creates the vision or involves other stakeholders in defining the vision, the vision needs to garner organization-wide ownership and support.

2. Personal commitment by top leadership and middle management. Administrators and department directors must know that top management expects their commitment to the vision of service excellence, and that they will provide tangible and intangible support, including money, training, moving things along, and holding people accountable. At the same time, middle managers must lead their own charge for service excellence by bringing their own actions and the

these high standards. It is a complex process that includes setting very explicit standards; designing job-specific service expectations; hiring the "right" people; role modeling by owners, managers, and supervisors; coaching, training, reminding, counseling, recognizing, and rewarding excellence; and running interference, removing barriers, and removing people who don't cut it.

It is vital that employees have the interpersonal skills to serve residents and families with caring, concern, and professionalism. In addition, you need people on board who have the competence to reliably and consistently carry out the processes and procedures necessary to deliver excellent service. Hire job candidates for their behavioral tendencies, as well as their knowledge, skills, and abilities. And ensure current employees continually hone their interpersonal and technical skills.

4. Customer-friendly and flexible procedures, protocols, and systems. Continuous process improvements and effective systems for handling complaints and systems problems lie at the heart of

service quality. Perfection may never be possible, but making service better and friendlier by experimenting with process and systems improvements is the responsibility of every person in the organization. Too often, behavior is blamed for customer service problems when the work process itself was never adequately designed to support the delivery of excellent service. For example, a friendly billing office employee will become frustrated by a computer system that cannot produce the itemized statement the resident or family member requests, or an information system department that dismisses the problem as too small or costly to produce.

5. A “customer concept.” Use of the word “customer” to refer to different groups such as residents, families, visitors, referral sources, physicians, and employees is important. Using the term “customer” may offend some professionals when referring to residents or families because the term may seem cold and inappropriate to the special mission they are there to accomplish. Others may think that using the word “customer” fuels the perception that top management is only concerned with the bottom line. But the word “customer” is the clearest and most all-encompassing term that links each constituent group’s expectations with service excellence.

6. Viewing the employee as a customer and a partner. Employees, universally, want to be needed, heard, and cared about — just like any other customer. Owners and managers need to treat employees as both customers with needs and expectations, and valued partners with some authority to take independent action to satisfy customers. It is axiomatic that extraordinary customer service can only be accomplished when employees feel good about themselves and their jobs first. Attempts to sandwich customer service around disgruntled, uninspired, unenthusiastic employees will likely fall apart. Employees will see this sandwich approach as another “flavor of the month” or view customer service as just another customer service “program” top management is pushing on employees.

7. A shift from “we vs. them” to organizational teamwork. Service excellence demands teamwork across lines. It requires organizing and empowering effective teams with the skills and drive to solve problems, design processes, and get things done. Managers must give employees the freedom to pursue ideas, be open to recommendations, and encourage employees to work with other departments to uncover problems and develop cooperative solutions.

In addition to formally constituted teams, employees need opportunities to interact with each other frequently and consistently. In some instances, managers will need to subordinate their own interests to those of the organization in order to foster teamwork. It may even be necessary to metaphorically tear down walls between departments and among all levels of management.

8. Tracking and evaluating process and performance. Because accountability is the engine to sustainable improvement, it’s important that there be baseline and ongoing measures against which service quality improvement progress can be measured. These measurements should be installed for all of the key customer groups in the form of surveys, focus groups, interviews, complaint tracking, etc.

9. A sufficient budget. Dedicate sufficient resources of time and money to avoid the problem of providing lip service rather than real service. Invest in training, rewards and recognition, evaluation, problem solving, process and environmental changes, and in removing barriers to service, to name a few.

10. Communication. Because of its ongoing nature, the service strategy relies on constant communication to educate, reinforce the vision, motivate staff and participants, and recognize accomplishments. Without adequate communication about their performance and what changes or results are occurring due to their efforts, middle managers and employees may find it difficult to stay focused on customer expectations.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

Along the path to creating a customer-focused organization, you will encounter people who will resist service quality improvement efforts. Resistance may take many forms — from employees who don’t see themselves being involved in service improvement because they don’t directly serve residents to hard-line managers who live by a “do as I say and not as I do” philosophy. But resistance is normal and inevitable. Striving for service excellence requires tremendous change, and change breeds resistance.

Some employees may be insulted by the idea of a service excellence strategy. They consider themselves to be professionals, already delivering excellent service to residents and families. Other employees may be cynics who doubt the commitment of the organization to a long-term service strategy, or who believe people’s behavior can’t be changed. Finally, there are employees who won’t cooperate because they resent the organization or are angry with the owners or managers.

While a discussion of short- and long-term tactics to confront and minimize resistance is beyond the scope of this discussion, here are a few tactics that have been known to help.

- Create and communicate the service excellence vision repeatedly until it has been embraced by a critical mass of the organization’s leaders and/or managers. These individuals will be the missionaries who carry the message down to the next level of employees.

- Make sure, early on, that everyone sees that positive change is achievable by educating staff about service-quality improvements at other organizations.

- Start slow and small. Be patient. Develop and communicate small wins that create positive expectations, and that build confidence and skills.

- Anticipate resistance all along the way and prepare plans to deal with it.

- Develop crystal-clear, uniform service standard performance expectations and incorporate them in your policies, job description statements, and performance appraisal system.

- And, finally, back up your performance expectations with enforced consequences, both positive and negative.

MEASURING THE PAYOFF

Senior living organizations have questioned the costs and benefits of the time and energy required to achieve service excellence. While there's general agreement that service excellence leads to increased revenues because of satisfied customers, there is no specific proof of such a correlation.

Experts in industries other than assisted living have quantified a relationship between service excellence and profitability, however. For example, Needham, Massachusetts-based Strategic Planning Institute (www.pimsonline.com) demonstrated the relationship between service excellence and profitability during a 20-year study. According to the study *Profit Impact of Market Strategies*, "relative perceived quality" is the factor most highly related to market share and profitability — relative perceived quality being quality from the customer's

perspective (i.e., service quality). Using the profiles of more than 3,000 strategic business experiences at 450 companies, the Strategic Planning Institute's data indicated that companies that were extremely customer responsive could measure their success by financial indicators. These customer service-focused companies were able to charge higher prices, expand more rapidly, and gain market share over their competitors.

Management guru Tom Peters reported on the same phenomenon in his books, *In Search of Excellence* and *Thriving on Chaos*. Companies dedicated to service excellence and innovation were, in turn, those with outstanding success stories.

Creating a truly customer-focused, customer-oriented organization is a challenging proposition that typically requires changes in culture, values, procedures, process, and people. It is a dynamic, ongoing process that demands

an enormous commitment of organizational time, resources, minds, and hearts. While direct profit or market share benefits of delivering extraordinary service have not been explicitly demonstrated in senior housing and care, it seems clear that organizations that invest in "being" customer service-oriented will be rewarded with improved operations, plus elevated reputations based on satisfied customers who, in turn, will refer other customers to their communities.



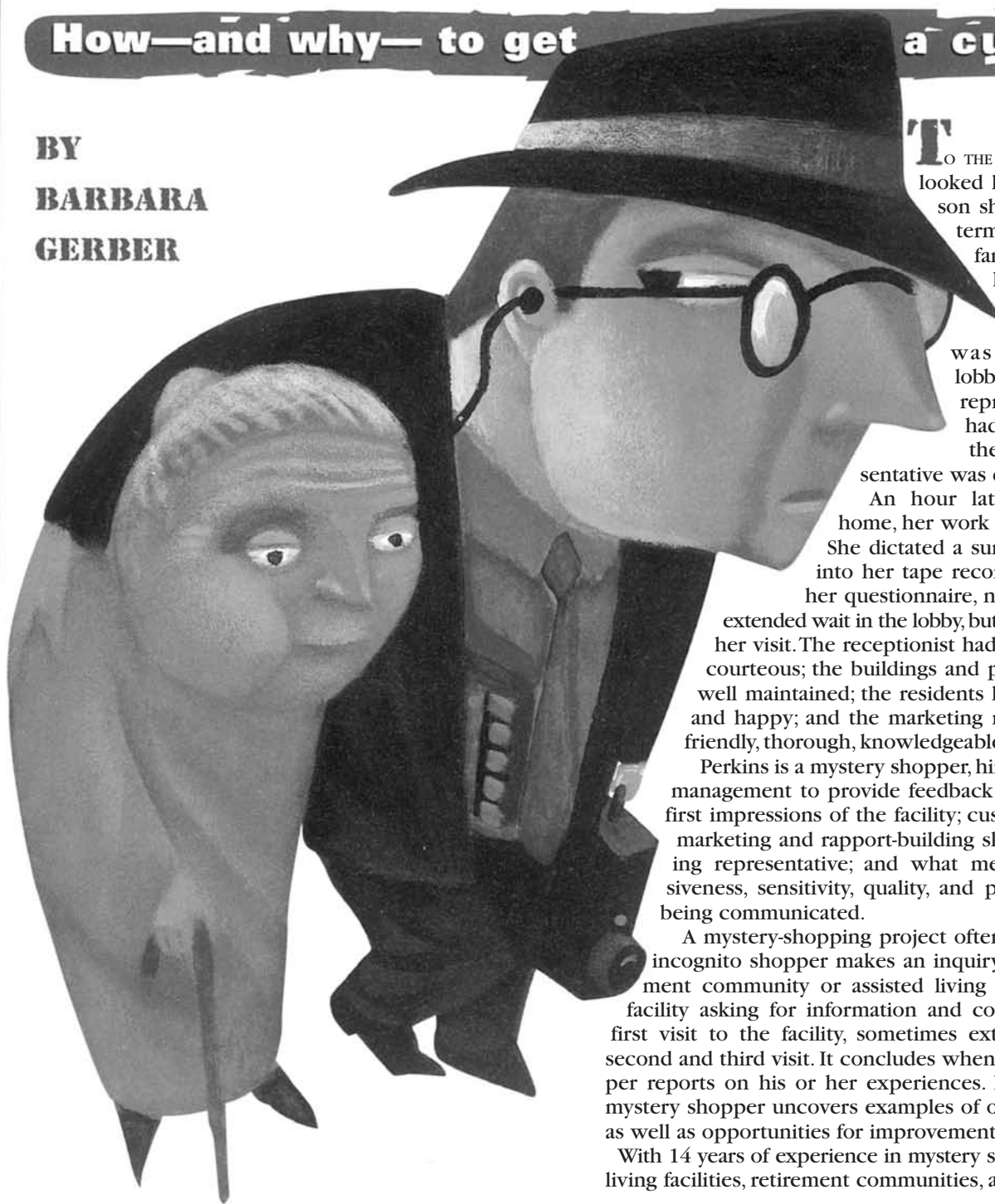
Barbara Gerber is president of Devon Hill Associates in La Jolla, CA. Reach her at 858/456-7800 or barbara@devonhillassociates.com.

Or visit www.devonhillassociates.com.

LTC CONF

How—and why—to get a customer's-

BY
BARBARA
GERBER



TO THE STAFF JANICE PERKINS looked like any other person shopping for a long term care facility for a family member. She had scheduled an appointment to take a tour and was waiting in the lobby for the marketing representative. No one had informed her that the marketing representative was delayed.

An hour later, Perkins drove home, her work having just begun. She dictated a summary of her visit into her tape recorder and filled out her questionnaire, noting not only her extended wait in the lobby, but all other aspects of her visit. The receptionist had been friendly and courteous; the buildings and property clean and well maintained; the residents looked neat, clean, and happy; and the marketing representative was friendly, thorough, knowledgeable, and professional.

Perkins is a mystery shopper, hired by the facility's management to provide feedback on things such as first impressions of the facility; customer service; the marketing and rapport-building skills of the marketing representative; and what messages of responsiveness, sensitivity, quality, and professionalism are being communicated.

A mystery-shopping project often begins when the incognito shopper makes an inquiry call to the retirement community or assisted living or skilled nursing facility asking for information and continues through a first visit to the facility, sometimes extending through a second and third visit. It concludes when the mystery shopper reports on his or her experiences. In most cases, the mystery shopper uncovers examples of outstanding service as well as opportunities for improvement.

With 14 years of experience in mystery shopping at assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and skilled nursing

ILLUSTRATION BY WILL TERRY

IDENTITY

eye view of your facility

facilities, I can offer the following suggestions and ideas for new and experienced mystery-shopper users. Whether you love or hate the concept, it's important to understand what mystery shopping can and can't do for your organization.

Be clear about your goals

First and foremost, you need to know what you want to accomplish by mystery shopping. Most people working in long term care organizations think of mystery shopping as merely a marketing tool for evaluating customer service and sales effectiveness. Its fundamental principles, however, make it useful for gathering objective opinions and intelligence for a variety of projects (see "What to shop for," page 20).

One unique assignment was prompted by responses to a satisfaction survey sent to families of residents at a nursing home that suggested the residents had to wait too long for assistance. The mystery shopper, pretending to be an interior designer, observed staff members' responsiveness to residents' call bells and requests for help. The objective was to find the reasons why the residents had to wait too long for assistance.

Be realistic in your expectations

Mystery shopping can be compared to a close-up, instant snapshot of one or more parts of your organization at specific points in time. Snapshots don't always capture us looking our best, but they do capture the immediacy of the moment. They're a slice of life, full of emotion, vitality, and reality. What mystery shopping does best is take a close-up look at what visitors who come to your facility encounter and document each moment.

You should keep in mind that mystery shopping should not be expected to determine *consistency* of performance in a specific area or take a comprehensive look at your facility as a whole unless it is done often, using a large volume of mystery shoppers. If you decide to conduct mystery shopping once or twice a year using a few mystery shoppers to make calls or visits to each facility, you will gain valuable feedback on individual performance, but you will not be able to gauge the consistency of the staff or facility's performance.

Never approach your first mystery-shopping experience

with the thought that it will be your last. Mystery shopping is most effective if it is ongoing, or conducted on a periodic basis, so you can see real patterns of progress. If you only intend to conduct a mystery-shopping project once, remember that there are limitations to the comparative or trend information you can collect.

Decide what, when, and whom to tell

In nearly every case, mystery shopping brings good and bad news. One question that is always asked is, "Should we tell the staff they'll be observed?" Even more importantly, "Should I tell them what was seen?"

Although every communication decision should be made on a case-by-case basis, it is frequently suggested that all employees be told that mystery shoppers will be visiting their facilities, but not when these visits will take place. Formally announcing a mystery-shopping project to employees minimizes breach of trust issues between management and employees.

To encourage employees to "authorize" the service, mystery shopping must be presented with a positive focus. It's better to emphasize the merits of mystery shopping for improving systems rather than monitoring people. I also recommend that the results of the mystery shopping not be communicated in their entirety to all employees. It's more personal and effective to communicate individual findings to specific employees and departments or to use the findings to develop future training and mentoring programs.

Choose your mystery shoppers carefully

A good mystery shopper will pass on valuable information about your facility and how it is meeting the needs of its customers. Well-trained mystery shoppers will be thorough, yet anonymous. Their reports will be detailed and compre-

Barbara Gerber is president of Devon Hill Associates, La Jolla, Calif., a firm that specializes in marketing and mystery-shopping services for skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, retirement communities, and other health care providers nationwide. For more information on mystery shopping, call her at 858-456-7800 or e-mail her at <barbara@devon-hillassociates.com>.

hensive, but, most importantly, objective and insightful.

In choosing a mystery-shopping firm, you should look for an organization that will respect and protect your facility's privacy and its reputation, screens its mystery shoppers for their skills and reliability, and prepares them with detailed

ty or community being shopped knew who the mystery shoppers were.

Decisions must be made about who will manage the volunteer- or employee-shoppers and whether or how much the company will pay for their time. The manager will be

A good shopper can pass on valuable information

scenarios and performance criteria. Intelligence, excellent powers of observation, and the ability to think on your feet are important qualities for the individual mystery shopper, as well as a strong sense of ethics and objectivity. You want a firm that inspires your trust and confidence and that has experience in your industry. Above all, don't hesitate to ask in-depth questions about a firm's mystery shoppers. In addition to their background and training, you want to know about their knowledge of, and experience with, long-term care facilities. You're depending on the mystery shopper to remain anonymous, to know what to look for, and to be able to record it as accurately, objectively, and comprehensively as possible.

Be aware that there may be trade-offs between the usefulness of the mystery-shopping firm's reports and the price of the service. Although the cost of mystery shopping is an important factor, you don't want to compromise the reliability of the report for a lower price since you will undoubtedly base operational and training decisions on the mystery-shopper reports.

Another question that is frequently asked is, "Should we use volunteers or staff from other facilities to conduct the mystery shopping?" Similar to internal communications, the decision about whom to use as a mystery shopper should be made on a case-by-case basis. However, there are a few things that need to be carefully considered if you're thinking about engaging volunteers or company employees for mystery shopping.

It's important to recognize the fact that not everyone makes a good mystery shopper. Whether you decide to use an outside firm, volunteers, or your own employees, the mystery shoppers should be selected based on the criteria previously mentioned. The mystery shoppers must also feel comfortable playing a role (read: telling a lie) so they can remain anonymous. We often hear that the mystery-shopping project wasn't successful because the facili-

responsible for the production of the rating questionnaires, individual scripts, and scenarios for the mystery shoppers, and for ensuring that each mystery shopper is committed to the execution of the project and its timetable. Volunteers may not be reliable because the mystery shopping is not "a real job" and they are not being paid for their time. If you do decide to use volunteers for the project, have a flexible timetable for the calls and visits.

Employees are not always good candidates for mystery shopping within their own organization because they may lack objectivity about the company itself. Even when employee mystery shoppers work in a facility or community across the country, their attitude toward the company, particular employees, or the concept of mystery shopping itself (or even hidden agendas) can influence their feedback.

Decide in advance how you will use the information

At the end of each mystery-shopping engagement, you should receive a detailed report complete with an analysis of key findings and specific information about the mystery shoppers' encounters with systems and staff. This information helps you to both identify and prioritize staff and areas for future improvement. But for mystery shopping to be truly effective, it is not enough to review the report. Your organization must develop procedures to process the feedback and take action on the information.

Mystery shopping plays an enlightening role in helping to improve marketing, enhance a facility's reputation, improve systems, and keep staff on their toes. Mystery shopping suggests how visitors really feel about their experiences with long-term care facilities and helps administrators learn what systems and procedures are not working as well as they should. Successful mystery-shopping projects are realistic in their expectations, well planned, and carefully executed by well-qualified mystery shoppers. [CLTC](http://www.cltc.org)

WHAT TO SHOP FOR

Mystery shopping is more than a tool for gauging customer service and sales effectiveness at your facility. The information gathered can provide insight useful for numerous projects, such as:

- identifying the first impressions visitors have of your facilities;
- monitoring whether the proper information is being communicated to visitors;
- checking adherence to marketing standards, protocols, procedures, etc.;
- clarifying areas of poor performance indicated in other forms of research;
- identifying how prospective employees are treated during an interview;
- determining training needs;
- monitoring how the telephone is handled during business and non-business hours;
- checking for consistency of format, standards, and appearance from facility to facility (an asset for regional and national long-term care systems);
- acquiring an "inside view" of how well your competitors perform.