

Living better, longer

The new
narrative for
senior living



Outcomes from the ICAA Forum, Spring 2024

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The ICAA Forum Spring 2024

The ICAA Forum think tank gathers thought leaders from senior living and wellness-focused organizations to formulate philosophies and recommendations that benefit individuals and organizations. Launched in 2005, the meetings forge connections among industry leaders while promoting understanding and cohesive action around the ultimate goal: health and quality of life as people age.

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The International Council on Active Aging has led, connected and defined the active-aging industry since 2001. Founded in the belief that unifying the efforts of organizations focused on the health and wellness of older adults benefits both the people they reach and the organizations themselves, ICAA's vision is shared by over 10,000 organizations. ICAA's support of the active-aging industry includes industry research, program development, market development, education and research on healthy aging and wellness, public relations campaigns and recognition programs.

ICAA Education, Inc., a sister company, develops and delivers courses to help active-aging professionals build needed skills and knowledge to impact older-adult wellness and the business bottom line.

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Senior living shifts the narrative to wellness

As executives rethink how their missions and services can be adapted to the expectations and needs of younger-older adults, dated narratives emphasizing care without regard to lifestyle appeal only to a limited market of those who have health issues. The stereotype that senior living communities are the same as nursing homes does not reflect the reality of a broad range of services and lifestyle opportunities.

To craft a new narrative that explains how wellness can unite every person associated with a community and influence the business metrics of occupancy, length of stay and resident satisfaction, the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) gathered 50 thought leaders from senior living communities, healthcare organizations and industry suppliers at the ICAA Forum in April.

Wellness is a broad concept that overlays all the business units and services provided by senior living communities, from dining to engagement/activities, from fitness to healthcare. Using a rapid design process, ICAA Forum delegates drafted narratives for different audiences based on the new business model emphasizing wellness lifestyles with options for care. As the narratives were developed, key points emerged:

- The living better, longer narrative is a user-friendly wording that shows how the wellness philosophy—integrated across all operations—is the advantage senior living offers older adults who are living longer, and want to stay healthy as long as possible.
- Wellness is the empowering and inspiring approach that puts person-centeredness at the heart of all operations and programs.
- The well-being of staff members must be prioritized since people are the main ingredient for resident satisfaction and service delivery.
- Business partners and suppliers are important audiences to educate on the wellness philosophy. They work with senior living leadership to build a mutual set of goals and accountability.

- Consumer-friendly narratives for the media explain how senior living communities recognize older adults' capabilities and provide opportunities for the best possible life.
- When similar, consumer-friendly wording is used by all senior living communities, the new narrative overcomes the obstacle of the confusing, jargon-laden terms often found in senior living marketing.

Future-focused organizations need to reflect what is happening in society to make them more appealing to a younger, healthier population. A new narrative that emphasizes how wellness can support longer, healthier lives is the key to repositioning the perceptions of residents, staff, suppliers and the media from a negative to a positive.

PURPOSE

Wellness is derived from our ability to understand, accept and act upon our identity and capacity to lead a purpose-filled and engaged life. In doing so, we can embrace our potential (emotional, environmental, cognitive/intellectual, physical, social, spiritual and professional/vocational) to pursue and optimize life's possibilities.
—International Council on Active Aging

The wellness model is the new narrative

The map of senior living is being redrawn by the forces of demographics and economics. If executives try to fit new approaches into old models, it's like trying to force your foot into a too-small shoe. Potential residents, new revenue streams and updated services don't fit and the community defaults into the way operations have always been done.



There are solid reasons why senior living executives are scrambling to determine what will position their communities for the future. The average age of new residents is in the low-80s and they often arrive needing care. There will always be a need for healthcare and assistance for people with physical limitations or dementias. But not every person who could enjoy senior living needs that assistance.

Younger-older adults (aka boomers) are looking at senior living as one option if they move, and the size of that population is large (76.4 million in US, 9.2 million in Canada).^{1,2} People in boomer ages are looking at longer lives and want to maintain their health

as long as possible, even as they are aware they may need support as they age. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people 65+ in the United States rated their health as good or excellent,³ which indicates they believe they are able to fully engage in their lives. After all, they can expect to live an average 18.4 years, which is a lot of time to fill.⁴

When thinking about the current messaging, the ICAA Forum delegates confirmed that communities often are care-driven rather than wellness-driven. There may be a perception among leadership and staff that every older person is unable to do things—or can't or won't. This ageist assumption limits residents under the

guise of “safety.” In reality, for some it increases the risk of physical and cognitive decline. Current financial models emphasize care because of the revenue generated from private pay and health insurance reimbursement. As a result, current narratives reinforce long-standing need-based messages that senior living is for the oldest people who are ill or infirm.

That message is working. When asked what they think about retirement communities, half (50%) of 55+ adults said they think “old” and perceive communities as depressing (34%). More than one-third (38%) assumed all communities are nursing homes.⁵ Care narratives aren’t effective for showing how a wellness lifestyle at a senior living community has the potential to slow decline and enhance quality of life.

Overall, the generations of people senior living needs to fill their buildings want to be independent with the flexibility to choose the time and place of services. They also report wanting access to the activities, shopping and services they are used to. And an analysis of findings from the Health and Retirement Study showed that people are most satisfied with their lives when socializing, working, exercising and volunteering.^{5,6,7} These are the elements of the wellness lifestyle model.

Changing the culture of any organization can be challenging. But to position for new generations of midlife and late-life residents and customers, senior living needs a new direction. It’s the perfect time for the wellness model to be the north star guiding communities forward.

The wellness business model

Within the wellness model, wellness philosophy and actions deliver the brand promise, uniting disciplines and departments to support residents, staff and customers so all achieve quality of life. Organizations meet objectives and future-proof sustainability.⁸

The wellness model generates the return that both customers and the business seek. Because the wellness culture involves all disciplines and departments—culinary, housekeeping, administration, engagement, fitness, nursing—wellness flows among silos, emphasizes information sharing, focuses on person-centered wellness for residents and clients, and builds an employee-first organization. And communities with older buildings can activate wellness to add services and desirable lifestyles in current spaces.

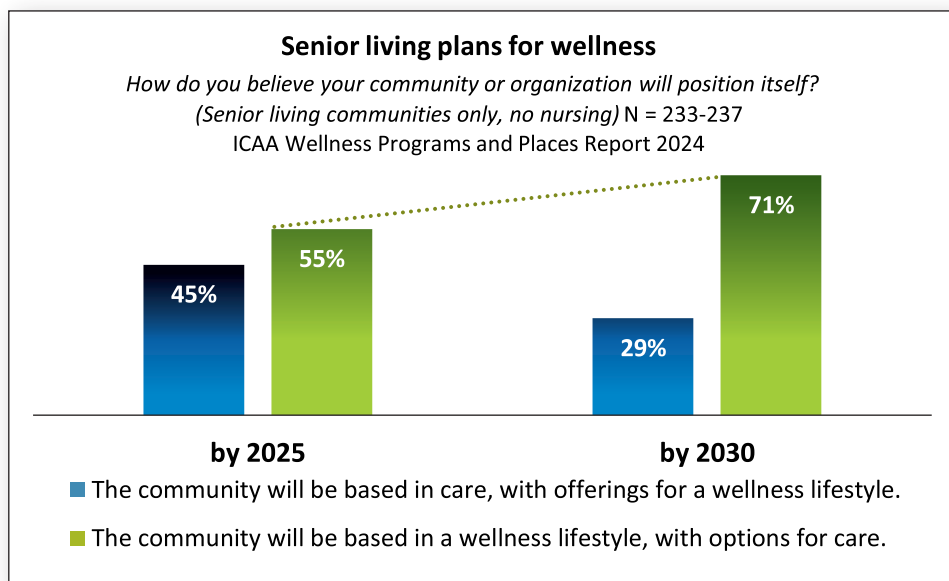
The wellness model is so powerful that by next year, 2025, more than half (55%) of managers and staff surveyed

by ICAA believe their senior living communities will be based in a wellness lifestyle, with options for care. That’s important as priorities and budgets are being prepared.

Integrating wellness throughout the community will have an even greater impact on the future. By 2030, all boomers will be 65 or older.⁹ Today, the oldest are in the late 70s. To prepare for this future, 71% of the survey respondents predict the community will operate from a wellness-with-care model by 2030.¹⁰

How does wellness-with-care implement the value proposition of senior living?

A **wellness lifestyle** means older adults choose the opportunities that enable them to experience life satisfaction and the best possible health. Residents are encouraged to take advantage of the dining, activities and fitness opportunities already being offered in communities. Preventive care collects nutrition, physical activity,



social interactions and thinking skills within the wellness culture.

The **wellness-with-care-model** and the medical model intertwine because a person needs both. Care is delivered through a wellness lens. Whether accessed inside or outside the community, healthcare checkups and chronic disease management are available. The responsibilities of staff in nursing, assisted living or memory care are carefully executed along with a smile, respect for each person's wishes and a few minutes of conversation. A variety of lifestyle activities are offered and encouraged, adapted to the individual's capabilities.

From the business perspective, residents who participate in wellness activities have a longer length of stay in the community, are satisfied with the wellness program and the community, believe the community gives them value for the money, and may improve their health after moving in.^{11,12}

We need a new narrative to promote the wellness model. The theme that captures demographics, current trends and longer health spans: "living better, longer."

Wellness sustains the new senior living model



“There is a care-driven, not a wellness-driven narrative out there. That you come to us when you need care. You don’t come to us to live.”

Change the language to change the model

“Narrative” is a description of a series of events that are connected to form a story. An updated narrative for senior living tells the story of how a wellness lifestyle leads to happier, healthier residents and customers which, in turn, drives sustainable occupancy.

A compelling wellness narrative is everyone’s job. Although an organization may have marketing or public relations departments, wellness advocates must reach out to these colleagues to build a working relationship. How can they describe the wellness lifestyle if you don’t give them the language? Assure colleagues you want to help them succeed, not take their jobs.

The goal? A wellness narrative that inspires team members and the corporate office, engages current and potential residents and customers and excites suppliers. ICAA Forum delegates crafted a narrative for six audiences, adapting it to meet the interests of each. There are two parts for each audience:

The written narrative. This is a brief summary that shows the impact and end result of wellness, and includes key points of how wellness benefits the listener (what’s in it for them). Don’t get sidetracked with a lot of adjectives and expressions. Verbs for actions and nouns for descriptions are effective. Spend time refining the narrative, then use it to craft the very brief elevator pitch.

The spoken elevator pitch.

Use the verbal pitch to grab attention when you have a short amount of time. Include one or maybe two key points that can be delivered in 30-60 seconds in a hallway, an elevator (of course) or during a meeting. The pitch is the tool to use when contacting the media.

While the pitch is derived from the longer narrative, the order is reversed when presented. The pitch is delivered first (short with key points) followed by the narrative.

Build the wellness narrative

Just like person-centered wellness respects an individual’s wishes and interests, so does a narrative center on the needs and interests of the audience. You are trying to persuade listeners that wellness is important and state how it can benefit them.

Do the preliminary work to learn more about the issues your listeners are facing. Speak with the financial officer to discover how money flows into and out of the organization. Take the human resources person to lunch; connect with staff influencers. Spend time with marketing staff to discover what pressures they are facing. What do they care about? Do you need to be more formal or more casual to appeal to the listener(s)?

Here is a format^{13,14,15} for building a narrative:

Form a team. Invite staff and leadership so they own the result.

Know the audience. What are their needs, what is meaningful to them?

Craft a simple message. Translate complex concepts into a simple message.

Structure the narrative. The problem, the opportunity, the solution.

Be concise. Make the wellness story concise and clear.

Inspire interest. Use the power of emotion to grab attention.

Add details and facts. Show value, but too many details create noise instead of clarity.

When thinking about presenting the wellness narrative, consider how to overcome assumptions about what wellness means to each listener. For example,

- Wellness is every person and place in the community, it is not a department.
- Wellness is everyday life, not solely medical care.
- Wellness is about what individuals can do, not what they cannot do.

The written narrative gives you the opportunity to rewrite, edit and work with the team to identify the message that is most important to share.

Pull out the elevator pitch

Once the narrative is drafted, select one or two key points for the spoken

pitch. An elevator pitch is short (30-60 seconds), focused on the most important point(s) you want the listener(s) to remember. What wellness can do for the listener, why it is important, and the next steps to learn more.¹⁶

Practice in front of a mirror or record yourself. The pitch should be something easy to say clearly and with confidence. Time the pitch because you may lose attention if it is longer than one minute.

Finish with a call to action

What is the next step after the pitch or sending the narrative? Will you ask the listener for a time to schedule a meeting, invite questions and suggestions, ask for advice on implementation? Or, ask the listeners what they need to see to make decisions that favor wellness? What

are the obstacles they know about that you may not have thought of or addressed?

Find your voice

You understand how wellness infuses each person, and how it can bring value to the community. But the narrative will likely be heard or read by skeptics who don't know what you mean by wellness or understand why it is valuable. The way you deliver the pitch and the written narrative will affect how your message is received.

Practice the verbal pitch and refine the written narrative so you speak with confidence and assurance. Know what you will say so there's no stumble or too-long pauses. You are the authority on wellness, and know how wellness can help the organization, the staff and the residents. Speak with assurance, and follow up with certainty.



“Quality of life is different for different people. How do we make sure that our customers see us as a place to come to sooner, where it's really about supportive living and building community and building relationships?”

Reinforce the living better, longer narrative

Integrating the narrative of “living better, longer” across all aspects of the senior living community is essential to ensure that every stakeholder—residents, families, staff, executives and the broader community—understands and experiences the community’s values and goals.

The core message of how the community is wellness-based is the constant. You will adjust it to meet each of the audiences “where they are at” so they can grasp how wellness benefits them.

The core narrative might:

- Emphasize the community’s commitment to inclusivity, wellness and a vibrant lifestyle.
- Include wording from the wellness definition, such as “purposeful,” “engaged,” “potential” and “optimize life’s possibilities.”
- Adopt living better, longer as a value.

Examples of the core that could be built upon for each audience:

Our community is...dedicated to creating a vibrant and fulfilling environment for our residents. We prioritize each person’s preferences, based on their unique needs, to ensure comfort, joy and a sense of fulfillment.

Our community is...synonymous with thriving. This community is about empowering a

lifestyle of wellness and fulfillment, then offering care if it is needed.

Our community is...based in the values that each person is unique and special, and you can make your life here what you want it to be. Social or quiet, adventurous or calm, with access to what you need to live as well as possible, as long as possible.

Be open to evolving the narrative based on feedback and changing community needs. The narrative should be a living story that grows and adapts with the community, ensuring relevancy over time.

Adapt the example narratives

The narratives developed at the ICAA Forum are based in an understanding of wellness as encompassing all areas of a person’s life and infusing all operations.

These narratives assume the speaker is the person in charge of wellness or community life who is responsible for implementing the concepts and values of wellness. When you adapt the wording suggested here or write your own, consider who will be delivering the message.

Your knowledge of the listeners’ issues combined with your expertise in wellness culture can form the backbone of a powerful wellness narrative that will help everyone associated with the community.

The vocabulary of wellness

Delegates described the emotion they hoped listeners would feel when hearing the living better, longer narrative.



Wellness advocates ask for change

“We need to shift from treating others how *you* want to be treated to treating others how *they* want to be treated. Not everyone wants to be treated the same way. How do we create that harmony in communities?”

“You know, when we talk about wellness with care, we’re not saying that care with wellness is not good. Far from it. How we deliver the care is part of what needs to change. How do we deliver care with a wellness touch as opposed to a medical touch?”

“A lot of times care teams focus on the things residents can’t do. They can’t do this, they wouldn’t want to do that. Really? Did you get a signature from every single one of your residents that says they don’t want to do that? How do we balance wanting to be safe and caring for a resident, but also letting them do something?”

“Our systems are very siloed a lot of times. They don’t speak to each other and that’s a constant challenge on heavier lifts in the community. It makes more challenging work for all of us. How do we get the staff that are operating those systems to talk more and better together?”

Scratch pad

Narrative

Elevator pitch

THE NARRATIVES

“How is the narrative matching or not matching the ROI? And is it qualitative or quantitative? How do you put your argument forth in a way where people with the money are going to follow through and help you out?”

Community investors...the finance-focused narrative

Audience: Capital providers, investors and bankers need to earn a profit from their investments. They may see senior living buildings as real estate rather than as a home, and seek short-term returns instead of the long-term stability that wellness supports. Since wellness is not a physical asset, it is regarded as a cost center, along with other services and staff.

Wellness vision: Sustained return on investment through increased length of stay and lower levels of care.

Mission: Build a sustainable wellness model that appeals to every generation.

Benefits of the wellness model: stable revenue growth, investment return, appeal to the new generation of residents, less regulatory control, less potential for litigation, care-with-wellness positioned as part of healthcare continuum

Key words: return on investment (ROI), sustainable, revenue

Challenges: the medical/care model, payors, insurers, government regulations, board members, investor perceptions, capital providers' business models, department silos

Payoffs: communities appeal to younger and older people, diversified revenue streams, sustainability, monetization of a la carte services, long-term profit potential

30-second pitch: In senior living, we're driving growth with inclusive, vibrant communities. Because of wellness-centric strategies you can expect increased ROI, longer lengths of stay and stabilized properties. Your investment in the wellness business model is the future of senior living.

Narrative: We are at the forefront of a new model of senior living that will drive growth and redefine care. Our community is inclusive to all ages, fostering a vibrant environment where everyone thrives. Investors, expect increased ROI and longer stays with a shift from a care-based model to wellness-centric strategies. We're flipping the script, prioritizing wellness upfront to attract younger customers, mitigate risks and reduce regulation. Trust, inspiration and passion are creating a generationally sound model that's not just about living longer, but living better. Healthier residents with longer lengths of stay control costs and give you a long-term, stable return. Join us in shifting to the wellness model that is the future of senior living.

Structure the narrative

Structure	Think about ...	Start planning
Audience	Who are you speaking to? What is the job or role? What is that person's priority?	
Team	Who will help you craft the narrative? Who can you recruit from the intended audience?	
The problem	What is the biggest challenge the listener is facing? There may be more than one, but choose one or two.	
The opportunity	How will wellness help solve that problem?	
Message	How will you describe wellness to the listener? How will the wellness opportunity help the listener?	
Facts, details	What statistic or fact supports the value of wellness?	
Emotion	How do you want the listener(s) to feel upon hearing the message?	
Key point	What is the one, single point most important to get across?	
Next steps	What is the call to action? What happens after the pitch and narrative are sent?	

“There are incongruencies in messaging among staff and between the target market and [how the community operates]. What we’re doing is not matching what we say.”

Executive leadership...the strategy-focused narrative

Audience: Executive directors are responsible for everything in the community: residents, staff, services, administration, regulations. They must meet financial projections and hire managers to support all the operations. Executive leaders are concerned with competition, trends, limitations of staff, space and money, and meeting the demands of regulators and owners.

Wellness vision: A community that is future-oriented, innovative and focused on the goal of healthful longevity.

Mission: Provide a sustainable wellness community where residents experience quality of life.

Benefits of the wellness model: reduced costs, less regulatory constraints on non-medical wellness services, healthier residents with longer lengths of stay, improved staff recruitment and retention, improved productivity and morale, utilization of available space

Key words: operations, reputation, move-ins

Challenges: business as usual, fear of risk, fear of expensive mistake, investors and owners, regulatory resistance, budget, perception of wellness as a cost center instead of a revenue producer, family member resistance, executive disbelief in wellness, department silos

Payoffs: deliver on the promise (people want to live and work here), referrals and reputation, longer lengths of stay, cross-department cooperation, improved image, increased revenue, recognition of community’s success

30-second pitch: Picture a future where this community stands out as a leader in operational excellence by adopting the wellness model. You can transform the community to the place where older adults want to live, costs are managed, revenue is stable and jobs are sought after. Are you ready to lead the charge towards a brighter future?

Narrative: Your community can stand out as a leader in operational excellence by adopting the wellness business model that values the resident experience, whether the person lives independently or needs care. Wellness is another name for all the services: dining and fitness, engagement activities and concierge, healthcare and transportation. Hospitality and wellness go hand-in hand by merging healthcare with active lifestyles. Older adults today know they can live longer, healthier lives. Potential staff members want a positive work experience. Your investment in operating through the wellness model creates a vibrant community that entices move-ins and encourages people to work here.

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“What does a community offer? Often wellness areas or fitness areas are hidden. How do we bring them forward so that they’re seen? Maybe they’re in the lobby instead of downstairs behind a door and through a gate.”

Current residents and members...the programming-focused narrative

Audience: The people who live in the community already are familiar with the rhythm of daily life and may prefer how dining, engagement activities and other services are offered now. They may be comfortable in a structured environment and may or may not take advantage of the wellness-oriented programs and services available to them. Current residents may not see the need for change.

Wellness vision: A place to experience life with a focus on what you *can* do instead of what you *have* to do.

Mission: Engage residents in shifting the culture to a wellness-based community.

Benefits of the wellness model: delivering the marketing promises, person-centered programs, increased benefits for residents, current resident wants/needs balanced with anticipated future offerings

Key words: empowered, energized, engaged

Challenges: leadership/ownership, negative culture, negative staff, department silos, family members believing loved one “can’t do that anymore,” investor business model

Payoffs: happy and healthier residents, contagious positivity, good reputation, strong foundation to build from

30-second pitch: You are invited to help shape the lifestyle at the community. There’s a lot to imagine and plan to make the community not only a place to live, but a place where you and all the residents can live better, longer. This community can address your health and care needs, and as important, elevate your spirit, engage your mind and empower you to continue shaping your story.

Narrative: Residents like you are designing a more individualized approach to your lifestyle—will you join them? We are looking to create a wellness-centered approach to senior living. The wellness approach isn’t a department, it’s everything that affects your life. That means looking at engagement, lifelong learning, physical activity, dining and healthcare as a whole, not separately. We’re not talking just about physical health, we’re encompassing emotional well-being, intellectual stimulation and a sense of belonging and purpose. Each person’s voice is valued, fostering a positive community spirit. Will you join us in developing your community of wellness?

Structure the narrative

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“How do you shift a community without staff buy-in? Not just aligned staff, but everyone. How do we help them understand what the changes are, and include them in the change process?”

Community staff...the workforce-focused narrative

Audience: Staff members in middle management and line positions work with the residents and visitors every day. They have the most contact with the people who are the reason for the community’s existence, and navigate between the medical model and the wellness model every day. Staff members may be overworked due to insufficient staffing, scheduled at awkward times, be unclear about their duties and not trained well. They may enjoy the residents but not be satisfied with the way the work is managed.

A second audience for the staff narrative will be the executive director, human resources staff and senior managers who are recruiting and determining how the work will be performed. For this audience, a separate narrative will need to be composed.

Wellness vision: Wellness is integrated throughout the staff culture.

Mission: Build relationships within the community between management and all staff members.

Benefits: improved recruitment, retention is prioritized, empowered staff, development of leadership skills, family-like atmosphere, staff are valued, residents and staff build relationships

Key words: empowered, recognized, purposeful

Challenges: department silos, limited understanding of roles, “us” versus “them” mentality, ideas and issues ignored, task-centered versus person-centered management, rigid managers, lack of management transparency, inflexible regulations or processes

Payoffs: staff members have a sense of purpose with avenues for growth and development, higher morale and reduced turnover; ideas are listened to and implemented, recognition is individualized, recognition as a best place to work

30-second pitch: Imagine you are in a workplace where your well-being is a priority, your ideas and concerns are acted upon, and you feel a genuine sense of belonging. You are invited to create a wellness-centered environment ripe with open communication and respect. Together, we can confront the challenges, unlocking possibilities for growth and shared success.

Narrative: Imagine what would happen if you worked in a community where your well-being is a priority, and you have a voice in shaping the workplace. Now, think about the sense of community we can build together. This isn’t just a job—it’s your community, too. Your ideas, your insights and your voice matter. You have the power to influence change, improve our environment, and shape the future of our senior living community. It’s about more than just work; it’s about creating moments that matter, fostering relationships that last, and experiencing the joy of making a real difference. In this wellness-centered workplace, we can forge a community where everyone feels a genuine sense of belonging and connection, not just with the residents but with each other. Let’s make it happen, together.

Structure the narrative

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THE NARRATIVES *Continued*

“To go from being in a home by yourself to being in community is a big shift. We need to meet the customer’s needs where they’re at and bring them in now rather than in 10 years.”

Prospective residents/consumers...the marketing-focused narrative

Audience: As they imagine the future, people at older ages want to make the most of their remaining years in a place where they can manage daily challenges at the same time they live on their own terms. Those who plan ahead think about a forever home without concerns of maintenance or transportation. They are probably a bit leery of senior living because of the negative stories they read in the press or the bad experiences of an acquaintance.

Wellness vision: A community that meets you where you are today and where you could be tomorrow.

Mission: Evolve life’s next chapter by offering choice and meeting expectations.

Benefits of the wellness model: new residents move in, occupancy stabilizes, individuals live their best lives, people feel they belong, family members have peace of mind, residents experience new and favorite pursuits, new friendships are formed

Key words: value, family, anticipation

Challenges: staff buy-in, leadership disconnect, lack of shareholder support, ageist beliefs, family pressures, current narrative of “do it all for you versus do it yourself”

Payoffs: added value for individuals, functional abilities maintained or improved, accurate marketing messages, increased occupancy, appeal to younger-older adults

30-second pitch: Welcome to our community, where you will find a vibrant and fulfilling lifestyle. You will feel at home here, and we’ll listen to and respect your wishes. You will find opportunities for growth and engagement, and feel pride in what you accomplish. Come and be part of a place where you are not just a resident, but a valued member of our family.

Narrative: Welcome to our community, where we are dedicated to creating a vibrant and fulfilling environment for you. At this community, you’ll find personalized care, tailored to your unique needs. You can feel at home because it’s comfortable, and you may be surprised by the enriching experiences that spark joy and create lasting memories. You can be as creative as you like in deciding how to use the activities and services, and build a life at the community without us telling you what you have to do. By moving in, you can meet your practical needs and nurture your well-being, living life to the fullest. Come and be a part of a place where you are not just a resident, but a valued member of our family.

Structure the narrative

Structure	Think about ...	Start planning
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Team	Who will help you craft the narrative? Who can you recruit from the intended audience?	
The problem	What is the biggest challenge the listener is facing? There may be more than one, but choose one or two.	
The opportunity	How will wellness help solve that problem?	
Message	How will you describe wellness to the listener? How will the wellness opportunity help the listener?	
Facts, details	What statistic or fact supports the value of wellness?	
Emotion	How do you want the listener(s) to feel upon hearing the message?	
Key point	What is the one, single point most important to get across?	
Next steps	What is the call to action? What happens after the pitch and narrative are sent?	

“How do we meet expectations, customize programs and use technology to collect data that we can use to show results?”

External service providers...the supplier-focused narrative

Audience: A diverse group of suppliers partner with senior living communities. They may provide linen service or fitness equipment, medical services or online programming. Companies often have deep knowledge of the products or services they sell, and may or may not be experienced working with senior living communities. Both suppliers and communities need revenue to stay in business, which means the relationship must be positive for both.

Wellness vision: Form partnerships that are goal-oriented with mutual expectations and accountability.

Mission: Merge the talents of community leaders, partners and suppliers to provide the tools for residents to live their best lives, as residents define it.

Benefits: products and services provide long-term value, alignment between company’s and community’s vision and beliefs, shared business intelligence, resident satisfaction

Key words: aligned, trusted, motivated

Challenges: competing priorities, decision-making process, product saturation, operator buy-in, money and resources, appropriateness for people with physical or cognitive limitations, distinguishing differences between communities

Payoffs: long-term relationships for mutual benefit, staff satisfaction, resident satisfaction, increased referrals, growth mindset, accountability, budgets met

30-second pitch: By aligning our wellness vision with your goals, we can form a mutually beneficial partnership. You supply the products and services staff need to be the best in their jobs, and that each resident needs to enjoy the best possible life. We benefit from a long-term relationship and products that are effective and adapted to our business. Let’s see how well our priorities and values match.

Narrative: We’re inviting you, our valued service providers—equipment and software providers, physicians, vendors, home care agencies—to join us in a transformative journey. Our goal is to establish our senior living community as the leader that empowers a lifestyle of wellness and fulfillment, not only care. Your expertise and services are integral to this vision. By aligning our vision with your goals, we can form a mutually beneficial partnership. You supply the products and services staff need to be the best in their jobs, and that each resident needs to enjoy the best possible life. You’ll not only expand your reach; you’ll gain valuable information for future business development. This is where trust meets opportunity—where you can grow your business with senior living at the same time we grow the value of our community.

Structure the narrative

Structure	Think about ...	Start planning
Audience	Who are you speaking to? What is the job or role? What is that person's priority?	
Team	Who will help you craft the narrative? Who can you recruit from the intended audience?	
The problem	What is the biggest challenge the listener is facing? There may be more than one, but choose one or two.	
The opportunity	How will wellness help solve that problem?	
Message	How will you describe wellness to the listener? How will the wellness opportunity help the listener?	
Facts, details	What statistic or fact supports the value of wellness?	
Emotion	How do you want the listener(s) to feel upon hearing the message?	
Key point	What is the one, single point most important to get across?	
Next steps	What is the call to action? What happens after the pitch and narrative are sent?	

“The perception outside of the community is a care model with wellness. We need to emphasize a wellness model with care.”

Build the future on the wellness model

The need has never been greater to transform senior living by influencing perceptions, policies and practices to enhance quality of life for residents and staff. Right now organizations are rethinking how to do business.

Healthcare or hospitality? The wellness model is both of these merged into a flow of people, places and services. That’s what allows residents and customers to live better, longer.

The new narrative of living better, longer reflects contemporary lifestyles. While no statistic can include all the people in midlife and late-life, it’s useful to consider that “older adults” do not live in the same environment as their parents and grandparents.

About one in five people 65 years and older in the US are working because they need to or want to (75 and older is the fastest-growing age group among workers).¹⁷ Older adults use computers and mobile devices often and 75% use the Internet.¹⁸ And they have hours of leisure time to fill (7.5 hours/day for people 75 years and older in the US).¹⁹ For more healthy, engaged people, the choice of senior living will be influenced, in part, by the space and technologies that are available along with a vision of how they will fill those leisure hours.

No one will deny that senior living has a poor reputation. Part of this is the result of all the jargon and inconsistent

descriptions that are used by local communities and corporate offices. It’s confusing. On top of that, the news that grabs media attention generally swings between the tragedy of being older and the wonder of an 85-year-old parachuting. Who wants to be perceived as a neglected person with serious illness or a super-senior?

In a survey, 83% of women and men 50+ agreed that the media/culture doesn’t realize how much they stereotype older people.²⁰ Are the same stereotypes in the minds of executives, staff and family members?

The thought leaders at any ICAA Forum are the professionals influencing the corporate executives and executive directors who control priority, budget and marketing. Leadership tends to look at short-term gains, while wellness brings long-term, sustainable returns. That’s a key consideration for occupancy and length of stay—two points that resonate with decision-makers.

A new narrative to explain the value of the wellness model can inspire residents, potential residents and their families, staff and suppliers. We can be proactive in championing the evolution to a wellness-with-care model. All the areas that wellness influences—activities/engagement, dining, fitness, healthcare—work together. Demand your place at the table to share your narrative of the advantages the model brings.

ACTION PLANS

Action plan for community operations

To do	Done	
Brand narrative and alignment		
		Define clear brand values, mission and unique selling points that differentiate the senior living community from others.
		Craft a compelling brand story that highlights the community's strengths, values and commitment to residents' well-being.
		Include a consistent message of inclusivity, wellness and shared purpose in all communications.
		Integrate the narrative across marketing, operations and resident engagement to foster trust and confidence in the community's mission.
		Ensure that everyone involved—staff, residents and external stakeholders—delivers a consistent message about the community's vision and values.
		Ensure operational policies and daily schedules reflect the wellness philosophy, with structured activities and amenities that promote physical, mental and social well-being.
		Ensure that leadership consistently champions the narrative in all aspects of community operation, from strategic planning to daily interactions.
Marketing actions		
		Revamp marketing messages to tell the story of the community—not just the services, but the people and the vibrant life within.
		Train staff involved in marketing to communicate the narrative effectively.
		Update all marketing materials (brochures, websites, social media) to reflect the community's commitment to a wellness lifestyle.
		Use images and stories that showcase active, engaged residents; highlight diverse, inclusive activities.
		Use staff testimonials and stories to highlight the impact of the staff's empowerment and dedication to resident satisfaction.
		Host wellness events and open houses for the public to experience the community's lifestyle first-hand, strengthening ties with local health and wellness organizations.
		Develop targeted marketing campaigns that highlight the benefits of investing in the wellness model, such as increased ROI, longer stays and resident satisfaction.
Staff development		
		Establish staff wellness initiatives that prioritize mental, physical and emotional health.
		Revise management procedures to encourage staff to engage in wellness initiatives by giving staff members time to do so.
		Conduct training sessions for all staff members, including caregivers, administrators and marketing personnel, focusing on the key elements of the narrative. Emphasize the values of inclusivity, empathy, person-centered wellness and creating a vibrant environment.

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ACTION PLANS *Continued*

To do	Done	
Staff development		
		Develop comprehensive training programs for new staff members on the community's vision and values, focusing on the importance of the wellness-with-care model.
		Provide training modules on communication skills to ensure that staff members effectively convey the narrative to residents, families, investors and other stakeholders.
		Implement regular refresher courses and workshops to reinforce the narrative and keep staff members aligned with the community's mission and vision.
Resident engagement		
		Align activities with the wellness narrative of living better, longer through social gatherings, workshops on healthy aging and opportunities for residents to contribute to the community in meaningful ways.
		Engage residents in co-creating and participating in engagement activities to foster a sense of ownership and belonging.
		Establish resident councils or advisory boards to provide a platform for residents to contribute ideas, feedback and suggestions for improving community engagement and overall well-being.
		Identify and nurture brand ambassadors among residents and staff who are passionate about the community's vision. They can help spread the narrative organically, both within and outside the community.
Control the narrative		
		Conduct regular strategy reviews to ensure all community aspects remain aligned with the core narrative.
		Regularly solicit feedback from residents, staff and other stakeholders to ensure that the narrative resonates with them; address any concerns or misconceptions promptly.
		Designate individuals or teams to monitor and manage the community's online presence and reputation, responding to reviews and addressing any inconsistencies in messaging.
		Adapt communication strategies as needed to ensure that the narrative remains relevant and engaging to current and prospective residents.
		Share updates, successes and stories that reinforce the narrative through newsletters, meetings and social media, ensuring everyone is part of the ongoing journey.
Monitor and evaluate		
		Implement a system for monitoring the effectiveness of the action plan, including key performance indicators (KPIs) of resident satisfaction, investor engagement, marketing ROI and community involvement.
		Assess the effectiveness of training programs, marketing strategies and engagement activities.
		Conduct regular surveys and feedback sessions with residents, staff, investors and other stakeholders to assess their perceptions of the narrative and identify areas for improvement.
		Use data analytics and feedback insights to make data-driven decisions and adjustments to the action plan as needed, ensuring continuous improvement and alignment with the community's goals.

Action plan to shape public perception

To do	Done	
Engage in thought leadership		
		Position key leaders within the organization as thought leaders who share insights, opinions and expertise through articles, blogs and speaking engagements.
		Share success stories, best practices and innovative approaches to lifestyles in senior living to showcase expertise and establish credibility.
Build relationships with the media		
		Proactively engage with media outlets to share positive stories, community events and resident successes.
		Cultivate relationships with journalists, editors and influencers to ensure accurate and balanced coverage of the senior living community.
		Launch campaigns featuring stories from residents who embody the living better, longer narrative through blogs, social media and local media outlets.
Leverage marketing		
		Use digital marketing channels such as social media, blogs and email newsletters to share the community's narrative directly with the target audience.
		Implement targeted advertising campaigns to reach potential residents and families with messaging that aligns with the community's values.
Harness the power of testimonials and reviews		
		Encourage satisfied residents and their families to provide testimonials and reviews that highlight the positive aspects of living in the community.
		Feature testimonials on the community's website, social media platforms and marketing materials to build trust and credibility.
		Tell compelling stories about residents, staff members and community events to humanize the brand and connect emotionally with the audience.

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ACTION PLANS *Continued*

To do	Done	
Create engaging content		
		Develop videos, podcasts and infographics that showcase the vibrant community life, personalized care and resident engagement initiatives.
		Collaborate with local organizations, schools and businesses to create partnerships that support the community's values and initiatives, such as joint events, volunteer opportunities and educational programs.
		Offer workshops and seminars on topics relevant to older adult wellness, such as nutrition, exercise, mental health and technology use.
		Encourage residents to engage with the local community through volunteer opportunities, fostering a sense of purpose and connection.
Monitor and respond to feedback		
		Monitor online reviews, social media conversations and media coverage to stay informed about public perception of the narrative and the community.
		Respond promptly and constructively to feedback, addressing concerns and highlighting positive experiences to manage the narrative effectively.

DETAILS

ICAA Forum

The ICAA Forum was held in April 2024 in the Washington, DC, area. Twice a year, the International Council on Active Aging brings together thought leaders in the senior living industry to collaboratively generate creative solutions for specific industry challenges.

Organizer:

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With partners:

Capitol Light, Keiser, LifeLoop, Matrix, Seca, SportsArt, Vimient

Quotations

Unless attributed, quotations are anonymous statements made by delegates at the Spring ICAA Forum.

Resources

Going all-in for wellness

ICAA Forum 2022
https://www.icaa.cc/conferenceandevents/forums/reports/2022_06_allin.pdf

Funding the new wellness model in senior living

ICAA Forum 2022
https://www.icaa.cc/conferenceandevents/forums/reports/2022_06.pdf

ICAA Wellness audit

https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/audit_promo.php

Person-centered wellness is the key to the future

ICAA Forum 2023
https://www.icaa.cc/conferenceandevents/forums/reports/2023_06_future.pdf

Quick Start Guide and Communication Best Practices

National Center to Reframe Aging
<https://www.reframingaging.org/resources>

Reframing Aging Through Images: Recommendations from Research

AARP and Frameworks Institute, October 2022
https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/life-leisure/2022/aging-media-representation-recommendations-report.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00546.001.pdf

Unlocking the future: Closing the gap between consumer expectations and community offerings in senior living

Age of Majority and International Council on Active Aging
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