

# Leff Bonney Podcast w/video

**Debbie Howard:** [00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to senior living marketing perspectives. I'm Debbie Howard co-founder and CEO of senior living smart. And today I am joined by Leff Bonney, who is currently an associate professor of marketing at Florida state university, where he teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in sales and sales management.

Welcome

**Leff Bonney:** Leff.

Hey, good morning. Good afternoon. Whenever time someone's watching this. Thank you so much for having me on and real pleasure to be with you today.

**Debbie Howard:** Wonderful. We've had some good conversations kind of preparing, and I was just so thrilled to know that the universities in general are starting to recognize sales and sales management as a legitimate profession, and actually having, a degree in sales, I would have loved that.

There wasn't that option when I was in school. And so I ended up going kind of the communications route because I thought, [00:01:00] well, what do we do all day? But communicate in one form or another. And it could apply to different, careers and it offered flexibility, but maybe you can tell us a little bit about the program or the evolution of a professional degree in sales and sales manager.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah, absolutely. The interesting thing is, academia tends to move slow. That's no secret. And, so back around, the early two thousands, the, some data started sort of flying around saying, Hey, where do college of business students really go to. And, some of the interesting findings from that data where that, 85% of all marketing majors, which is a really popular major across colleges of business, in fact FSU it's the second.

So we have finances, number one, and marketing is number two and it's, 4,000 kids are getting marketing degrees. Yeah. And where do these kids go to work? Well, 85% of these marketing majors were going into sales because, Proctor and gamble is not going to hire a 22 year old to come manage the [00:02:00] toothpaste campaign or the two portfolios.

You got to start it in sales, you need to understand the customer and the product and the competition and so on. And so I don't think that's probably a big surprise to a lot of people, but what was surprising was that data also showed 65% of all college of business. Students will go into a job where sales is a significant component of their role.

And so a lot of people, when I give you that stat or say that stat will say, how can that be? But, if you think of a finance major, who's going to work for Merrill Lynch as a financial advisor. That's a sales job. And, even our accounting majors who were like, I'm going into accounting and I never need to sell, what are you talking about?

And it's like, Hey, go ask a partner at, Deloitte, what do they do? The partner is out selling accounting services. They don't do it. They're not doing accounting. They're selling. So you had college of businesses that kind of came to this realization that wow, sales really is what our students are doing when they leave here, but we're not training it.

A few universities might've dabbled with a [00:03:00] course or two. I guess you could say the demand was so great and the pressure is so great that the deans finally said, okay, we, we need to start building sales programs. Right, right. So I was a beneficiary of that in 2008 was when I was coming.

So I tell people I'm a recovering salesperson. I was in sales for about a decade before I went back to grad school. Uh, and when I came out of grad school, I was lucky enough that Florida state said, Hey, we want to be one of those schools. That's one of the best sales schools in the country. So we need someone who has the PhD, but also has a hit, a track record and say it, luckily there weren't a lot of us out there.

So in some ways I got the job by default, maybe, but, but it's been fun. Since about, 2008, 2010, it went from maybe 10 schools who offered sales programs to now there's probably 85 that have formal sales programs. There's probably another close to a hundred that say, we don't have a program, we don't have a PR major, but we do [00:04:00] have several classes.

Where it's an emphasis students, can emphasize sales in their major. But at FSU, we actually do your, like you said, we offer a degree, so a student can graduate with a degree in professional selling, which boy I wish I had that would have been great.

**Debbie Howard:** We all instead, went to David Sandler's classes, like there's a million courses that we have.

To learn, either consultative selling or some other approach. So it's always a little bit kind of psychology. What did a Sandler say? It's psychology and in theater,

but I'm sure you have a curriculum. That's a lot more comprehensive with negotiations and, business, good business practices and pricing and positioning and all of those.

**Leff Bonney:** That's right. And these students are extremely successful when they leave. We've done some research on that. They tend to perform at about a 20% premium, right out of the gate, above students who got hired that didn't come from a sales program.

It is a successful, a successful endeavor we believe. And, the students benefit companies benefit. It's been a [00:05:00] great, a fun, initiative to be.

**Debbie Howard:** That's wonderful. Well, let's jump into senior living sales. I was able to know about you through smash and we loved this mash conference and what Bailey and her team do in terms of sharing thought leadership.

And they've invited you a couple of years, to present. So you have some experience and consulting projects that you've done for, senior living, major, providers. They define their sales processes and do a better job of really engaging with prospects and helping them through their decision journey.

So I'd love to just start with an overview of, your thoughts. What did you learn about the senior living industry from a sales perspective?

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah, sure. In addition to teaching students, we do a lot of research, and consulting with companies. Another sort of kudos to the sales, world in academia is that we're one of the probably least ivory tower.

We believe most of us about the importance of getting out and seeing what's going on in the real world to [00:06:00] we're constantly doing research and consulting with. With real sales organization. So as you said, a very large senior living organization came to us, several years ago and just said, Hey, we believe we need our sellers to be more effective.

Can you come in? And this was when the sales transformation word was a phrase was so popular. I said, we're going through a sales transformation. Can you come be a part of it? And in know, good consultant fashion, we said, before we just start throwing out recommendations, let's really get the lay of the land.

And that's where we found, as you asked for in your question, though, lot of. Interesting insights, about the business and one, and I think the industry has improved on this over the years, but one was, the sort of the fallacy of the persona driven segmentation. When we first arrived on scene, so to speak, they were teaching their sellers about, we serve different personas and by persona, there's a very popular person that comes in our communities that they called Sally and Sally is the adult child of a grandmother who, can no [00:07:00] longer be at home independently. And so Sally is out shopping for her grandmother. And then you have the resident themselves.

The grandmother and they called her Betty or something. Right. And so they had these personas. And what we learned very quickly from our sort of research with customers is that's just really not a good way to think about this industry. Because Sally, let's just keep talking about her for a second.

She's coming through that door for different reasons and the, grandmother caught something on fire on the stove and didn't know it, or she's been leaving her doors unlocked or our home is really falling apart. Cause she just can't take care of it anymore.

Okay, that sort of one, journey that Sally's on to try to solve the problem of, it's really , just a bait, what I call basic independence issue, but then Sally could also be coming in that exact same person could be coming in or that same persona because, her grandmother actually fell and had a health that, she has a hip injury or a leg injury.

She's been in a hospital for, [00:08:00] X number of days, and now she's coming out. Sally doesn't feel comfortable moving her straight back to her house. So she believes that assisted living, become a, transition, a place of transition. And then the last one could be Sally's grandmother has literally severe memory care issues.

So it's not an independence thing in terms of physical home and care. A memory issue. So I say all that to say those are all very different situations with the same looking customer, sitting there. And so we, our big emphasis with this

company was you've got to get away from these persona driven sort of segmentation strategy.

You got to move to what we call the situation based, segmentation. What is the situation that's coming through the door? And then now let's go build a sales strategy that will cater to that. And the second part of the sort of aha was, and this is a problem that we see across all industry.

Sellers using a one size fits all approach, no matter whether it's Sally or, whatever the [00:09:00] situation, every time it comes through the door, somebody comes through the door, we go right into the same process every single time, in your end. Funny because I'd never heard of sit walk, sit before.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah. Yeah. Very common.

**Leff Bonney:** So as I was talking to this company and they said, oh, well, we're using this sort of sit, walk, sit process of what? And I said, what's this. And when they explained it, I said, well, I guess that makes some sense. But then, then I kind of said, well, does everybody do that? Every company, every community they're like, yeah, everybody.

and that doesn't help a customer because the customer is trying to look for a differentiated reason to choose you. And if everyone is doing the exact same thing, no matter what, even if it's a good conversation. In other words, if I go to five different communities and I have five good conversations, but if they're still all the same good conversation, then as a customer, Make a good decision.

So that was the other thing. So what we did is we married the situations, let's think about what are these situations then let's think about what do most people say to a customer coming in or potential [00:10:00] resident coming in, in these situations. And then how can we be. How can we actually sound different in each of those situations?

And ultimately that's the playbook that we built while we were there, very situationally based sales process, and then build training programs around it and so on. So, I don't know. And this has been several years ago. I don't know how much the industry has continued to evolve around that, but just through some conversations at places like smash and other things, I, I kind of smell. it sorta lingers around the, everybody sounds just, just alike. And everybody's using a one size fits. All approach is still very.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah, I, I would agree. And then if everything is very commoditized, it just comes down to location and price and you're never going to win any market share on location and price.

Even to the collateral that you bring home, everyone's got the same pocket folder with inserts and they all throw it on the kitchen table and say, we visited these five places, but they all look alike. So. Closest and which one can we [00:11:00] afford is kind of what you come down to.

But let's unpack a little bit about what you said, cause I love the idea of kind of these situational, segmentation and really the triggers of. Why people are looking, so you actually broke it down into, I think it was five kind of buckets. Do you want to go through, through them and talk about, how is that different or what would you do differently from one to the other.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah, sure.

So the five buckets were, one of the, more popular, situations that comes through a door is a dazed and confused is what we named it. Dazed and confused is, Hey, we think something needs to happen with mom or grandma or granddad. We're not real sure what it is.

Um, brother doesn't think anything should happen. Sister thinks she should be, or, the loved one should be in a community tomorrow. They're getting competing sort of information. So the brother is outsourcing information about how do you keep a [00:12:00] loved one at home longer? The sister is sourcing information about what should be looking for and senior living solutions.

And so you just have this just big mix of confusion. And so that situation, represented roughly 20% of everything that sort of came through the door at this particular company. I'm assuming that that would probably hold pretty similarly across other, senior living companies.

And so the thing to do there is a, Hey, it's not about PRI like throwing out, Hey, if you move in tomorrow, we can offer you a movement discount. That's the craziest thing to say to somebody like that, because they're still trying to even make sense to we even need it. This is where the smarter, more savvy or sellers turn into the true counselor.

Yeah. And almost therapist, right? How do we deal with the emotional side of this? How do we work through it? How do we deal with the conflict that's

existing within the family, that sort of scenario of selling and being a consultative seller, but on the family dynamics, not necessarily on why they should be walking, what do we have to offer here in the community [00:13:00] is, is what is the right play?

Another one was called the red alert. This was what we had talked about with the there's a health issue. It's an emergency, she's going to be released from the hospital tomorrow and we have to have a, there has to be a place. And that was also, that was actually almost 30% of the people coming through the door.

The mistake here, I think, is that these folks think a lot of them think it's temporary. Right. They're coming into a senior living solution, but it's just to get past the health issue and then we'll reevaluate and probably move them back to one of our homes or to, or to back to their own house.

And again, I don't think sellers get ahead of that very well. I help set the expectation that maybe it's more permanent than you think. And don't be looking for a place that's, easy and convenient because you think it's only going to be 90 days. Statistically, it's not, it's just, it's going to be much, much longer than that.

So [00:14:00] use a long-term criteria, not a short term criteria for making your choice and helping spin that around a little bit, would be very important there. And then just a couple of others, we had ready referral. This is the customer who already knows someone living in the community. They visited there.

They it's been appealing to them. I see what all is going on around the community, that actually had higher chances that it was the actual resident themselves was involved in the decision making process versus the family. And, and so they already know they're already leaning in toward that committee.

And so obviously the embracing that, and using that to your manager as a sellers are important. And then another was a prepared shopper. These were the residents for digital residents who say, their number one criteria, trigger for shopping is I don't want to be a burden to my family, but I don't know what that means yet.

Right? Like I'm still trying to do my homework to figure out, does that mean I should be, looking for a community that does the life progression model

[00:15:00] where I can move in now and be independent and then assisted and skilled nursing. Does that mean, I live at home for five more years?

What's it mean? So it's kinda like they had a vision of what they wanted. Sort of transition to look like, but they weren't sure how to make that, how to make all that work. And those people, they don't need education on the community.

Like they understand what usually independent versus assisted versus memory care. They get the features, what they need is the journey. What does the journey need to look like? How do I plan for the journey to be smooth for my kids and for us as we go to make this sort of, but as we start building the plan.

And then the last one was tire kickers. This is the, Hey, I'm not sure. Like we're just starting this and we're not seriously looking at this as an option now, but I'm just trying to learn a little bit about it. So that's a pretty common one. And the important thing here is when you think about this, I keep talking about this as sales, but I know your audience has a lot of marketing people as well, right?

The thing to think about here is, Hey, marketing plays a role across all those as well. First of all, even [00:16:00] starting from the very beginning, do we want to drive red alerts into our communities? What we found at this particular senior living location was they could convert a red alert to.

But the problem is they had really high move-outs and they also made very cost driven to these people, made a lot of cost driven decisions. And so the sellers were quick to discount to say, Hey, I know you're trying to make a decision in the next 24 hours. Here's my discount come on in. And, in our argument back to this company, was, is that who you really.

Right. Is that is, you should really be focusing more on finding more ready referrals, prepared shoppers and maybe even more dazed and confused? Is it confused and leave the red alerts alone, right? That their lifetime value in your community is actually not very high, right? So there's marketing, right?

They should be getting involved right out of the gate. This becomes a lead generation discussion. Right? What, which one of those five sort of situations do we want to drive toward our communities? I would imagine there's probably other communities or companies that is who they want. Right. And so marketing should be [00:17:00] focusing on healthcare providers and places that can be.

Push those customers in. So I know I'm throwing out, I'm pulling my professors talk a lot, lecturing here, but the idea is, the situations were fairly stable. There were five of them, both sales and marketing need to react to them differently. But decisions need to be made around what's the idea?

Do we want more of one kind than another, coming into our communities.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah, it's interesting. We spend a lot of time identifying who is your ideal prospect? And it's usually not just one type, certain ones are going to come on their own. That's business that might fly in and fly out the door and it might be temporary.

The whole thing is how do you create efficiency around that? Sales team, isn't spending a lot of time doing that. So having a program, like a rapid referral program that you're partnering with your emergency move in, kind of referral partners, let's make that simple, easy and efficient.

So the sales team isn't spending a lot of time, but then how does marketing really invest in the ideal prospect that's gonna [00:18:00] come in, with less acuity, less need for care. Remain there longer have a better experience, and ultimately become a raving fan because they're not coming in highly compromised.

They're coming in early enough to make friends and engage and really enjoy in that lifestyle. So it's like how in a marketing do you allocate budget? How do you create different strategies for each of those five buckets and then really knowing where should marketing be more engaged? And then at what point do they qualify?

For the time and attention of the Salesforce.

**Leff Bonney:** That's right. Yeah, you're exactly right. And, we talk about it in then in the form of lead acquisition and lead nurturing, right? So the acquisition is that they've entered our pipeline. The nurturing is, Hey, there's going to be times when they're not engaging the sales person, but they are still actively in the decision-making process.

In other words, they're at home and we're not talking to them. Personally marketing needs to [00:19:00] step in and be the email campaign, the direct mail campaign, the, all the ways that we're going to nurture that lead, but based on

the situation, That nurturing might need a different message. Right. And again, this is where it is.

It has to be a nice dance between sales and marketing to say, we know sales is going to get heavily involved with this group at this point. And when they're not, here's what marketing is going to do in the meantime, until that person shows back up in our community to hopefully make a final decision.

It really has to be a very synchronized, conversation between sales and marketing.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah, it does. It really has to be, you have to create a roadmap. With all, that's been talked about the prospect journey and mapping the prospect journey and their path to conversion and it's complex, right?

Because it's not transactional. What we sell is very, emotional and relational is a product that people aren't going to buy over and over. In their life. So there's any familiarity in how to buy it. And I know I'm going to buy [00:20:00] Hellmann's cause my mom bought Hellman's and I grew up with that brand.

So I don't really think that there's much brand loyalty. So when you think about, and when you assess like the best salespeople, the really high performers, what were some of the attributes, and what did they do better in different that really gave them that, that additional edge in their closing conversion.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah, there were a number of factors. Probably the most important is still dancing around the theme that we're talking about, which was adaptability, right? The ability to first accurately assess what kind of situation is. And not really necessarily taking the customer at face value, because we all know that what they say to us in the first 30 minutes may not be what the real story is.

So we call that scouting scale. I'm not really trying to understand your needs necessarily yet. I'm not trying to think about how do I position our services or what we can do [00:21:00] for you yet. I'm just trying to read the situation. What we found is high performers tend to go a little slower on that and they end up with a much more accurate picture of what is actually going on, with this potential resident.

And then aligning a sales strategy. That makes sense. So now being able to say, it's kinda it's just an if then kind of statement chart, right? That says, if it's this,

now that I know it's this situation here is my, okay. Now run this sort of play the high performers. We're figuring this out, right?

This is by the way, to your audience, your high performers, they get this already. This is a very natural thing to them. The problem is how do you get everyone else doing. And, and that became the, okay, now you've got to build training that sort of reinforced it, that emphasizes this adaptable approach and so on.

But the high performers can do this sort of, nah, they figure it out naturally.

**Debbie Howard:** Just an innate skill to be able to quickly read the situation. I think you talked about being curious in our previous call, like a high level of [00:22:00] curiosity that might allow them to get a little bit deeper. Tell me more, how long has this been going on? What have you tried to do about it?

Those are all questions. When I was in the sales role, that I would ask, so it's very easy if somebody says, well, I'm here because my mom is falling. And so often the salespeople will say, we have a great sales. We have a great fall management program. So she'll fall less here than there.

Instead of saying something like, how long has she been falling? When does she fall? Where does she fall? How often, what have you tried to, what adjustments have you made to the layout of the home or assistive devices that might, Medicaid, maybe looking at medications, there's something making her dizzy.

Like I found that the more that. I would just ask out of curiosity. The more that it made it real to them and they had to hear themselves saying, she's been falling for six months and that happens every week and we've tried this and that. And it was almost like hearing themselves realize maybe for the first time out loud.

That [00:23:00] this is serious, this isn't just mom falls every now and then. But now that I think about it, now that you're asking me, we have done everything and she's still falling and it's been a long time. So maybe you can speak a little bit. Is that, was that kind of some of the findings that you had.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah.

Yeah. And again, you're like you said, the high performers do this naturally. The everyone else's needs need help. And so the need help is, take, build the checklist, create almost like a scoring guide for the seller to say, Hey, before you

start talking about the food and the activities and the run-through, this sort of, situation assess.

And let the points, tell you, okay, is this a red alert or is this a days that confused or is this a, and so when we were working with that company, we did that. We created for the everyone else. Hey, you're not going to read this situation natural. You don't have the question bank naturally ready to go.

All right. And by the way, we took it from the high performers, right. We go to the high performers and we watch them enough to say, look at these [00:24:00] questions. They're asking that everyone else isn't, let's build that into this sort of situational diagnostic that someone can fill out and then sit back and go, oh, okay.

I see. Now this is definitely a prepared shopper situation. Here's the play I need to run. Just creating a system that allows people to give that, to get that if then sort of guidance is what, is what I think not only senior living, every company is starting to go to this and the AI technology and this sort of on-demand coaching technologies that exist in the sales world are really helpful for this because, with the right kind of upfront research, you can program them.

So to say, To be able to guide the seller through some questions and then it comes back and says, okay, based on those questions, here's your play. Here's the things you need to make sure you do opportunity. Again, your senior people don't need to do it. They just need to be a part of the building.

Which, by the way they really appreciate, your best salespeople are the ones who re they, I don't need the reward anymore. I'm good at the reward. What's rewarding [00:25:00] now is that I'm actually helping other people in the sales organization do what I do. And so they need to be a big part of this from a, how do you build out these sort of scouting questions and then the scenario plays.

**Debbie Howard:** I would think it would be challenging to pull that out of them because it's so intuitive and it's so innate to them. Like they don't even realize that they're doing

**Leff Bonney:** Right. Yeah. It's like the psychology called. They call it unconscious competence. They don't, they're doing it and they don't know they are, but that's where you just need, market.

I think that's our skill. Our skill is to sit back and watch. Sort of look for those things that people are doing, that they don't realize they're doing. We also have some sort of cert we've built over the years, a survey, assessment where we can give to salespeople where it pulls out here's things you tend to do that maybe you don't even realize you tend to do them, in sales meetings.

I think that's where outside help comes into play in terms of what really are these high performers doing, compared to everybody.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah. There's been a lot of, talk and I'm sure you've heard it at smash since you've been there over the last several years around two topics.

[00:26:00] One is personalizing the experience down to the individual. So things like pre tour planning. So I know. I moved my mom into a community, um, over the summer. And if they've taken the time to, to know that she was a master gardener, that, she was a volunteer, a church volunteer, the Piskel church and that she loved, doing these certain things.

He was a French teacher. She was a big tea drinker, like all of these little things that I know about my mom, no. If they taken the time and discovery to know that. And I know when I was doing sales, I did crazy personalization stuff. It's simple, but it's not easy.

Right? Right. So what, what could have happened is cause I was bringing my mom in to make her part of the decision process is they could have written bullshit on a sign. When she walked in both Georgina Howard. And she would have been re immediately been [00:27:00] like, oh, they were expecting me.

And they're connecting with me knowing that about me. Right. And then when I went to the discovery room from my sit walk sit, which is what they did, they would have had a cup of tea. And, if you give my mom a cup of Earl grey tea, she'd follow you home began. It would have once again, say I see you right.

I recognize you and I've taken the time to do something special for you instead of offering a cup of coffee in the styrofoam cup, which is, and then going to the Episcopal church to get a church bulletin and putting it on the bulletin board in the apartment and having, her favorite flowers or talking about the gardens that she could still continue to do that.

Cause that was really important to her. We talk a lot about personalizing the journey. People really just don't take the time to have those little personal

touches, but I think it's incredibly impactful. I think part of the reason is that if you dump every [00:28:00] lead into the sales CRM, they all look the same and you don't really, you can't really recognize the ones that you do need to take the extra time with.

We're not separating out early enough. The marketing qualified leads that can be better served through nurturing and marketing and touch points. Versus the ones that are really sales ready and, that should be a much smaller subset, but it should also allow the sales team to spend more time doing those little things that would make that difference.

So if I do take my mom to five communities, I am sure going to remember the one that had done all those personalized touch points. Right. So I'd love your feedback on that.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah. I totally agree, that I think the personalization is important. I think. Important to like you said, it's a simple, but not easy thing to do.

We go back to that. We have to be careful sorta saying every customer that comes through the door is going to appreciate personalization and, again, it goes back to that reading the [00:29:00] situation, I would argue in an, a red alert scenario. Yeah. Personalization's maybe not that important here.

Right. What they need to know is about the urgency, the level of care they're going to get while they're there. But it's not about the church service in that scenario, right? That's not a meaningful criteria that's on there on the front. So again, it goes back to that personalization, but in what scenario, like w what part of the personalization needs to happen?

I would argue in a red alert in a community that has some rehab services, the personalization needs to be, or the creative personalization would be, Hey, I know you're in a red alert situation. I want you to meet our director of rehabilitation. She's already late. She's looked at the chart and she's already laid out what a potential rehab schedule might look like here.

That's personalizing to the situation. And I think that's important because again, Eventually trends start to move over all communities. The personalization thing is moving, but now we have to make sure we're not all doing one size fits all around the personalization.

The other thing you mentioned the criteria of [00:30:00] people who are good at this. I do think there's a certain level. we don't talk about creativity in sales. As much as I think we should. I think, the personalization is a good thing to do, but again, it has to not only be good, it has to be differentiated.

And I told the story at smash about a working. I'll never forget her name. Her name was Alyssa and she was, one of the top performers of this company. We were doing the research on and, we were, I was spending the day with her, watching her do her thing. And she said, My next appointment, I think just pulled up.

I want to meet her in the parking lot. We hadn't done this all day, but so she jumps up, we go to the parking lot and she introduces herself and, does a little summary of the normal glad you're here. Here's what we're going to do. But, and she said, come on in. And as they start to walk in Alyssa points at the van and said, oh, by the way, did you notice you parked right next to our time?

And the customer is just befuddled right there. They're looking like what? And she said, yeah, we actually, we haven't, we own a time machine here. And [00:31:00] again, the customer finally is almost gotten the courage to say, what are you talking about? And Alyssa said, listen, on the phone, you said to me, the biggest struggle you're having.

Is your time is getting completely sucked away from your family and your job because you're having to spend so much time caring for your grandmother, going to doctor appointments, whatever that van is going to handle, all that for you. And it's going to get you your time back. And I thought that's brilliant.

So there's personalization, but it's also personalized in a way that is very differentiated. Right because I have a hard time believing that customer went to four other communities and they talked about their time machine. So instantly Alyssa has personalized it, but she's also done something that other people aren't doing and that's making it memorable and different to the customer.

And so creating that level of surprise and maybe even a little bit of the unexpected, which is why I don't like sit walks sit, because it creates a pattern of expectations that really, if we're just going to, if we do it, then we're just falling into the trap of [00:32:00] looking like everybody else.

I would argue. You should actually look to do something different than sit walks sit as a way of saying, Hey, I know four out of five communities did it that way,

but we didn't do it that way. And now we're memorable. We're instantly more memorable. That experience was when they came in. Anyway, so I love, I love that example.

**Debbie Howard:** Also instead of sit walks, sit, you could right away out of the gate address something that's most important or most meaningful to them. From my mom, she was having trouble, she needed a special diet. So instead of sitting in that, discovery room, Going through the same thing as I've been through taking her directly into the dining room and talking about special diets and softened diets.

And introducing me to the dining director to talk about how they were going to help meet her needs would have been far more memorable than yet another, conference room or discovery room. I really love that example. The other theme that's coming back around is maybe you can talk about it.

It is the role of empathy in selling. [00:33:00]

**Leff Bonney:** Well, I mean, almost surprised to hear the word coming back around. It should've always been there.

**Debbie Howard:** No, there are empathy conferences and learn empathetic selling. And so this seems to be. I don't know why it's new, but it seems to be a focus.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah. I agree with you completely. And what another sort of exercise we do with people is, Hey, take a look at your own website and look to see how many times do you use the word us and your company name and we, and our. Versus you, your family, and usually what you find is the proportion of conversation is way out of whack, right?

It's all us conversation and not a lot of you conversation, that customers would appreciate. I think The other aspect of that's similar. And this is, we have a lot of research to back this up. Customers don't react to the word solutions. They react better to the word problem. Right?

[00:34:00] Psychology tells us that people tend to want to take action and we'll take greater risks and put more effort into things. If they think they're losing something. And then if they think they're gay, they could gain something right now, when we put that in marketing and sales speak, what do we always do?

We talk about the upside benefits of moving into our community, but that actually isn't the most effective way to do it. The most effective way to do it is to empathize with what they're losing. Right. We empathize with your loss of time. We empathize with your mother's health decline we empathize with lack of social interaction and maybe even seeing, starting to see some mental health issues it's talking in terms of the problem. Before you start talking about here's how we solve it. Because when you lead with the solution, you sound like everybody else. Right? And that's another one of those.

You're just noise. But if you say, Hey, I need you to understand customer. We understand what you're going through. We understand the problem. We've seen it. We know [00:35:00] what you're losing in your life and your loved ones losing any of that in their life because of it. Now let's talk about how we fix it.

But people move through that empathy stage so fast and it becomes almost so insincere. And again, it sounds like everybody, you, they do it in a way that sounds like everybody else. My coaching to sales and marketing, I guess I'll end on this topic. Let's just talk about the problem, right.

Just talk about the problem so that the customer understands these people get it, they get what I'm going through. The other nice part. If you do that, by the way, if you talk about the problem, but not your solution, it creates create curiosity in your customer, right? Because what happens is the customer hears that you're talking problem, problem, problem.

And all you have to end is we think we have a way to fix it. I don't have to do anything else. And if I've talked about, Hey, I understand your problems. If I've done a really effective job of that. And I end with a, but we also think we have a way to help. The customer calling you, tell me more like, [00:36:00] yeah, how quick can you come?

Tell me your solution to the problem that you clearly understand. A lot of marketing folks don't think that way, it's like, Hey, let's dump our let's talk solutions right up front on our website. Let's talk solutions. Again, back to the industry, even outside the industry, I tell people all the time, why don't websites have to me, every marketing website should have, what's the problem you're coming to us for today, right?

Like it should be a PR it should be a set of problem choices for us customers. And no matter what it is, this is the problem I'm struggling with. And when I

click, I get this sort of, Hey, we understand this problem. And then way down below in our website is our solution or at least a conversation about.

Ever looks like that. Right. Here's how great we are. And it's a, the customer's going, oh boy, here we go again.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah. And they all look alike. That's a pet peeve, in the industry, it's the same, stock art images that you see all over the place with the same, very aspirational.[00:37:00]

Re-imagining senior living the best is yet to come. People don't really believe that.

**Leff Bonney:** To make it worse, we did an exercise at this company. We brought every set, every seller that came through the sales training to prove this point that, Hey, we have to be different. We turned, we went and grabbed a, this their website and five competitors websites.

We deleted the name and the logo and we made on black. Right, because obviously colors could give it away, but then after it, so we made it black and white deleted names and logos. And we said, now find your website, which one of these is your website? Wow. We only had a 50% accuracy rate. Everybody else was like, oh God, if you strip off colors and logo, We really do, it's the grandmother on the bench next to the next to our grand that, it's, they all look exactly the same.

So from the get-go, the customer is confused.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah. Oh, it's interesting. Well, we're working on a couple of senior living websites now, so maybe we will try some of your, problem [00:38:00] navigation. It gets simple with buttons, I need to move in. Quickly, we're having trouble deciding as a family, the right solution.

I mean, probably if you take each of those buckets, uh, don't want to be a burden, trying to plan for the future. Each one of those could have, be a simple button on a website that leads you to a page. And then maybe the bottom of that page is a call to action to learn about the solution.

So you might have helped us outline.

**Leff Bonney:** The analytics are so much better too, right? Because the very first thing they click on tells you what their biggest problem is. Right. And you don't always get that kind of insight when you're just dumping a bunch of solutions on a customer. Literally the very first thing they clicked on should get.

And that is an awful big sort of, signal that, okay, this is the hot button, or this is the situation this person's in. The analytics get better, I believe when you think about it this way too.

**Debbie Howard:** Yeah, absolutely. We tend to [00:39:00] capture. Try to capture a lot of that information on landing pages, as people convert so that, and we can tell a lot by the content they're, they're downloading, right?

So if somebody is downloading a senior living options guide, which is a very high level top of the funnel, I just need to understand what senior living is and what my options are and what they call it. That somebody who's very much in awareness and then we're. Question, not only who are they downloading, this on behalf of just so we can speak more personally to them.

But also so that we understand, what is the one thing that you're looking for in this guide? What is the most important thing, or if they download the community brochure, as you're trying to, looking for the perfect community, what's most important to you? Is it lifestyle and amenities?

Is it socialization and activities or, quality. Care or dementia. And there's probably more that we can do is don't confuse people, but then you can use marketing automation to branch off and then personalize [00:40:00] that lifestyle Leonard is going to get, different, content than acuity Anne is going to get so somewhat.

I think marketing can assist sales because if we wait until the prospect gets to the sales team to try to figure this out, we've lost a lot of time. We haven't used marketing to its advantage, which is also personalizing the content delivery to that person. And maybe we give a sales person who maybe is not intuitive about reading the solution.

We give them a little bit of. We'll also ask stage questions like which best describes where you are in your journey and they can self identify. Look, I'm just beginning my research or I'm trying to understand my options. I'm ready to

tour, or I'm ready to choose a community ready to ready to choose the community, get pushed to, to the sales team.

Those are your red alerts. And then the people who say, look, I'm just beginning my research. I'm just trying to consider my own. They should have different journeys and get [00:41:00] different content. So that's where we're going, is trying to align sales and marketing. But mostly how do we meet the prospect where they are, and walk alongside them to help them make an informed decision?

How do we make it easy for prospects? Find the provider, engage with the provider and ultimately choose the provider. And it's a 22 touchpoints. I don't know what this is that I keep this next to me. Cause I'm so interested in it. But this was a research from a, CRM company. This came from inquire, sales cycle is 38% longer for independent living than it was pre pandemic.

203 days assisted living is up 19% from a 145 days to make a decision, memory care hasn't been impacted because it's usually so urgent a life plan community. CCRC is in campuses up 36% of 400 days to make a decision. And 22 individual touch points. Salesperson can not do [00:42:00] 22 touch points that are personalized and empathetic and all those other things without the support of marketing.

I think it's so interesting to have these conversations because the industry, even from when you did your wonderful work and research with them, the pandemic has. Impacted, prospects in the buying journey. Wouldn't you think?

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah. Yeah. As you were talking through that, I would imagine like dazed and confused probably has gone up in terms of the number of those situations only because COVID throws that extra wrench of, that just gave my brother even more ammo to say, we shouldn't make this decision.

And somebody else could be looking at it from another perspective that says, yeah, but COVID has also kept them from going to their weekly bingo game and having their, so actually I argue COVID push it. Should, it should get us into, because now we can get them into a safe, protected place, but they do still get the social interaction, like the interpretation of COVID.

And what it means is just to me, probably caused [00:43:00] a lot more confusion for families trying to make the system.

**Debbie Howard:** And we just are getting red alerts. People who have no choice who people in crisis. And so we have shorter lengths of stay and more acuity and more care and more expense. And that impacts, revenue, lifetime, resident value and all those other things.

It's a complex, industry, and I appreciate your insights. Thank you for sharing your senior living marketing perspectives with us. And if people wanted to find out more about your program training, consulting, research what's what would you recommend that what's the best way for them to find.

**Leff Bonney:** Yeah, I'm an easy person to find, in the sense that not too many people named left, which is spelled L E F F I tell people it's like Jeff with an L and a, and then Bonney is B O N N E Y. And if you Google that, you're probably gonna see me right away. I guess I'm lucky enough that my parents gave me an instantly recognizable brand because, I don't know how many others are going to come up in a Google search, but, and then if you tacked FSU or Florida state university onto.

You're [00:44:00] going to land on something that gets you to me very quickly. I'm on LinkedIn. My email is just L bonnie@fsu.edu. So I I'm easy to find, if people would like to, to further a conversation around this and I, and by the way, I love it. I love the industry I'm at a stage in life where we're going through this personally with multiple family members and it has been, it's been eye-opening to have that empathy of, okay, now I did all these things.

Salespeople at several years ago now my customer. Wow. And it really all comes to life. And then my last thing I'll say is, I just appreciate your audience. Like I think if you, when done well, this is such a helpful thing to families who are going through such a tough decision. And, it's one of those true, Hey, Salespeople truly are adding value here, to, to people as they're trying to make and navigate this decision.

So I just appreciate, and I'm thankful that there are people who get up and do that job every day. It is a true difference maker out there.

**Debbie Howard:** Absolutely. Well, thanks so much for stopping by and I [00:45:00] hope we will see you at smash in-person next year.

**Leff Bonney:** I hope so. Thank you. All right.