



PR Week

Outlets find fresh angles on senior living

By David Ward

Many Americans, especially baby boomers, are either facing or will soon face difficult decisions on how to best take care of aging parents, as well as how to plan for their own years as senior citizens.

Despite those numbers, consumers looking to the media for information about assisted living or retirement communities may be disappointed. While general-interest outlets do occasionally cover the topic, most titles have neither the resources nor the awareness of the important role these facilities play for both families and communities to provide coverage.

"There is no specific beat in the general-interest or business media," notes Audrey Knoth, EVP at Goldman & Associates. "That means you have to try a lot of angles to be successful, everything from identifying trends, to highlighting personal stories, to providing tips on smart ways to choose a senior-living center."

Until recently, most of the articles written about senior living centers in the mainstream press were offered as business or real estate coverage, focusing on what businessperson bought what facility and where, says John O'Connor, editorial director of *McKnight's Long Term Care News*, a sister publication of *PRWeek* under the Haymarket Media umbrella.

"But what's encouraging is you're now starting to see more stories about what's actually going on within senior living; what types of new services are emerging," he says.

Some seniors can live for decades in an assisted-living or retirement facility, creating growing opportunities to cover the entities as parts of lifestyle stories, O'Connor adds.

"One thing we're piggybacking on is the whole trend toward brain fitness and using the technology tools that preserve thinking abilities and help with dementia," he says.

Coverage of assisted-living facilities often contains an economic angle. Unlike nursing homes, many facilities aren't covered by Medicaid. That means the economy and cost-of-living issues are increasingly relevant in the coverage of this space, says Joanne Erickson, editor-in-chief of *Provider*.

"Our latest cover story dealt with the economy and its impact," she adds. "But we also look to mix in a lot of human interest. We recently did a piece on a facility that introduced a drum class, which surprisingly is helping many residents alleviate pain."

Maureen Mullady, creative group director and crisis communications specialist at the Chicago-based DickinsonGroup, says that communications professionals often use a market-by-market strategy. They focus on local print and TV outlets to overcome the lack of a dedicated national media focusing on the topic.

"Many senior-living centers are community hubs, with libraries, pools, and fitness centers, so we do a lot of alerts to the local media on activities that are open to the public," she adds.

Pitching... assisted living

- The demographic numbers are compelling, so stress not just the rising number of
- people entering senior-living facilities, but also families who play a role in that decision
- Human interest pitches are a great way to get local press interested in an assisted-living facility, providing a lot of feel-good angles around the holidays
- Many families are looking for help in dealing with an aging parent, so providing tips on topics such as finding good senior-living options can be a great initial hook