



# how to evaluate your senior living dining ROI: 5 key questions to ask

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**The senior living landscape is rapidly evolving, as are the tastes and expectations of residents. But one element that remains the same is the importance of dining.**

Three times a day, residents evaluate the dining experience in their community. As a result, an operator's investment in dining — including a budget, staffing, technology, and menu planning — is significant.

In response to shifting dynamics concerning public health, sustainability and advancements in technology, emerging dining trends and new best practices are developing. COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of senior living, from staffing to sanitation. Yet these challenges bring opportunities to continually elevate resident experiences and return on investment (ROI) across operations.

In this eBook, you will learn the five key questions to ask to assess your dining program's ROI, along with a few red flags to watch for, all of which will help build better-informed decisions.

# 5 key questions

- 1

Are your dining operations running optimally while consistently meeting budget?
- 2

Does the dining team have the tools to raise the bar and identify opportunities for continuous improvement?
- 3

Are menus and food spending optimized for resident satisfaction and financial benefit?
- 4

Is it challenging to meet the demands for local sourcing and other sustainability objectives?
- 5

Is the resident experience structured around a seamless, holistic journey across operations rather than built around disparate moments and teams?







## area to watch: dining operations

### Key question #1

Are your dining operations running optimally while consistently meeting budget?

Developing and constantly refining systems is essential to improving quality and containing costs, says Don Bundren, Solution Design Director for Sodexo Seniors.

So, when community leadership senses they aren't optimizing their budgets, they'll look to his team for solutions.

"What are their pain points? Why are they looking at contracts in the first place?" he says. "We have systems that work from end to end with menu development. Sodexo provides menu portfolios, special diets, costs per plate, and nutritional information."

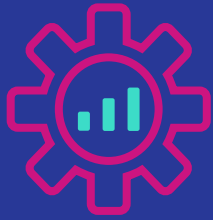
One surprise Sodexo Seniors found is that many dining programs are still wasting food, time and labor hours by continuing to follow meal planning and execution systems from the past. For example, some communities still work exclusively in Excel sheets or Word documents and pull recipes from dog-eared books.

"We have systems that will gather all the information and track it, including the menu preferences of residents and their dietary restrictions," Bundren says.

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Don Bundren, Solution Design Director, Sodexo Seniors





## area to watch: continuous improvement tools

### Key question #2

Does the dining team have the tools to raise the bar and identify opportunities for continuous improvement?

With service industry turnover at record highs, how can senior living communities recruit and retain dining staff? Operators must do a better job of recruiting, onboarding/training, appreciation and developing dining staff if they want to avoid the constant turnover rampant in senior living today, Bundren says, which is exacerbated by competition for labor stemming from other hourly employers, such as retail.

“It costs a lot of money to hire and train,” Bundren says. “Paying for ads, recruiters and so forth costs a lot of money. There’s also the issue of turnover in the way that it impacts residents. Their morale suffers when employees, especially front-line/food service employees, leave. Long-term employees take on more of the burden.”



### Recruitment and turnover — how to stop the bleeding and get employees to stay

There’s no quick fix, but Sodexo Seniors offers ways to improve the situation.

- **Recruitment** is a persistent challenge that requires constant innovation. Use all available technologies, QR codes and smart devices to get people to fill out applications while working directly with high schools and community colleges to recruit dining staff.
- **Development.** Offer delineated career paths and structured development programs, which is especially appealing to younger people. The initial goal is to increase each employee’s tenure: help change 1-2 year employees to 4-5 year employees, for instance.

“In dining, our staff come on board as hourly servers,” Bundren says. “They work one to two years and then wonder, ‘Where do I go?’ They get restless. The goal is to convey the message, ‘Stay here and grow with us.’”







## area to watch: menu planning

### Key question #3

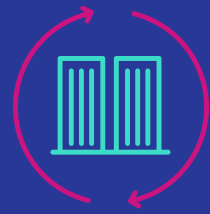
Are menus and food spending optimized for resident satisfaction and financial benefit?

To optimize quality while minimizing unnecessary spending, senior living communities must provide the right menu for the right level of care, from independent living to skilled nursing. Sodexo has four menu tiers for skilled to independent living, and each is priced out.

Overspending often stems from not having up-to-date systems or tracking. A third-party dining services provider can help in these key areas:

- **Size.** Everyone is coping with procurement/supply chain issues, but outsourced dining services partners have advantages such as size, reach, extensive procurement catalogs and a vast network.
- **More Options.** In terms of procurement, for example, an outsourced provider can offer contracts with different companies for items such as milk, produce and proteins.
- **Long-term planning.** Advanced planning down to the specific ingredients consistently benefits operators.





## area to watch: sourcing and sustainability

### Key question #4

Is it challenging to meet the demands for local sourcing and other sustainability objectives?

Honoring environmental and sustainability concerns is essential because it's the right thing to do. Residents demand it. It improves food quality and saves money, Bundren says.

"Even though we're global, Sodexo Seniors still sources a lot of food locally. We look at how far the produce has to travel, and we always have local vendors in our wheelhouse," he says.

"Many communities we work with have their gardens and are doing hydroponics and aeroponics. And residents have become more vocal. They want to know where their food is coming from and whether it is organic."

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Don Bundren  
Solution Design Director  
Sodexo Seniors



### Simple Tech Improves Experiences for Everyone

Technology won't solve all the challenges dining programs face in senior living communities, but it can provide effective and impactful results.

"Simple can be better. Throughout COVID, simple engagement programs across all levels of care were most useful," Bundren says. "We found ways to create connections while residents were stuck in their rooms, like communal TVs."

That said, seniors of all ages are much more comfortable with — and open to — the benefits of technology.

"They're willing to review menu options online and even make dinner reservations remotely, without having to speak with a staff member," Bundren says.

For example, the easy-to-use "Happy or Not" app lets residents and employees share feedback about everything from the quality of service to the overall living and working experience.





## area to watch: resident experience

### Key question #5

Is the resident experience structured around a seamless, holistic journey across operations rather than built around disparate moments and teams?

While it seems simple, probably the biggest obstacle to developing and maintaining successful programs is a lack of communication between leadership and staff, residents, suppliers, and others involved in the process of delivering seamless dining, Bundren says.

“We’re still dealing with the impact of COVID and now, flu season. But, for independent living, many communities are now allowing outside guests inside. And frequently, it’s a matter of understanding what the community is comfortable with. We have communities that are doing large events but carefully controlled.”



### Safely Reopening — and Remaining Open: Effective Strategies from the Front Line

Sodexo Seniors District Manager Brent Ridenour works with 10 properties across North Carolina, where he’s helped his communities work through many challenges over the past 18 months, from issues relating to COVID to staffing shortages, supply chain blockage, and more.

He stresses the importance of clear communication with clients and ensuring residents know what’s happening throughout, making sure dining is safe.

Before COVID, many of his communities had formal dining with tablecloths, an option that wasn’t possible during COVID (and sometimes afterward) because of restrictions and employee shortages.

Ridenour reports that a few of his communities reopened communal dining in May and June 2020, just three to four weeks after COVID protocols were introduced. Others didn’t reopen until May 2021.







# best practices & creative solutions

## Vital food-service issues include:

- **Sanitation** Constantly improving sanitation to protect residents and staff from COVID, flu and other contagions is essential, as is ensuring residents see the improved measures in action.
- **Sanitation Stations.** Dining rooms now feature highly-visible sanitation stations.
- **Gloves.** Waitstaff not only use table wearing black gloves, but change into blue gloves before cleaning.
- **Disinfecting.** Earlier in the pandemic, dining areas were closed while staff sanitized every surface. As efficiency has improved, staff constantly clean and sanitize dining and food service areas while residents are eating, which provides a greater sense of reassurance.

Sodexo Seniors' Reassure Infection Control program provides a proactive, resident-centric approach to protecting against germ spread and assuring community standards are keeping residents and staff safe. Not only does the program work with providers to meet regulations, but it also works to mitigate the spread of pathogens, including COVID, which can lead to greater retention, more move-ins and risk-related savings.



**Salad Bars.** Some self-serve salad bars were removed during the pandemic, and others converted to full-service, an adjustment that is expected to continue after COVID concerns subside.



**Outdoor Dining.** Since many residents remained uncomfortable with the concept of indoor dining, a few communities added outdoor patio dining, an option that remains popular even as dining rooms reopen.



**Deliveries.** With dining rooms closed, communities introduced meal delivery, usually offering fewer options, which staff delivered to rooms at set times, with in-person dining afterward.



**Staggered Mealtimes.** In communities where communication between residents, front-line staff, and management was clear and consistent, deliveries worked out well. However, some properties introduced scheduled mealtimes for communal dining to avoid overcrowding and to respect the necessities of social distancing.



**Staffing Shortages.** COVID has only intensified the senior living and food service staffing shortages that existed well before 2020.

"It's up to us to keep them informed through email, newsletters, conversations, and meetings," Bundren says.



**Limited Supplies.** Well-publicized supply chain shortages have impacted some communities. Examples include a lack of sanitation supplies to paper shortages that forced dining communities to use Styrofoam containers.





## dining ROI comes down to communication.

Sodexo Seniors District Manager Brent Ridenour stresses the importance of clear, firm, and consistent communication with residents, adding that, in general, they understood the importance of COVID-driven changes. Problems only arose when residents were left out of the loop, received mixed messages, and when last-minute changes were sprung on them.

“The additional communication between Sodexo Seniors teams was crucial during the pandemic,” he says. “We were able to troubleshoot and problem-solve with each other, and that contributed to our successful communication efforts with our residents and families.”

To learn more about how to evaluate your dining program’s ROI, and for strategies to maximize and increase, visit [us.sodexo.com/seniors](https://us.sodexo.com/seniors), send an email to [Seniors@Sodexo.com](mailto:Seniors@Sodexo.com), or call **1-833-977-1759**.

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