

Dietary Manager

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Survey Reveals Foodservice Trends and Dining Preferences for Seniors



Dietary Managers Association and Olson Communications teamed up last fall to conduct a research survey on food service and other characteristics of senior living facilities (SLF). The resulting report reflects responses from foodservice professionals, and from consumers who have investigated SLFs for themselves or loved ones. A total of 237 foodservice professionals (all DMA members) responded to the internet survey, which contained questions about dining and food service in senior living. The volume of information was great, so we're focusing on the section of the report featuring DMA members' responses. How is this research important to you? Use this data to compare your foodservice offerings with that of other facilities, and to learn more about residents' wants and needs in terms of menus and dining.

Survey Respondents

Two-thirds of DMA respondents described their place of employment as a skilled nursing care facility. Eighteen percent work at an assisted living facility, and 13 percent work at a lifecare facility. Remaining respondents work in independent senior communities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and facilities that offered more than one type of care. Respondents represented facilities of various sizes. Almost half (48 percent) identified their position as a dietary manager. Thirty-seven percent said they are the foodservice director of their facility. Most (91 percent) said they are a CDM, CFPP. Now let's explore their survey responses.

Importance of Dining and Foodservice Characteristics

Foodservice professionals rated three dining and foodservice characteristics as being the most important to their residents. Ninety-six percent said the ability to dine with guests is important or very important to their residents. Access to snacks and the décor of dining facility were rated by 92 and 91 percent of respondents, respectively, as important or very important to residents. Type of tableware was rated by 88 percent as something that's important or very important to residents. Menus for special diets and theme meals were both rated by 84 percent as important or very important to their residents. Approximately 80 percent of foodservice professionals said the type of tabletop décor, involvement in menu planning, and room service are important or very important to residents. Having a CDM, CFPP on staff and a variety of dining style options was rated by 73 and 71 percent of respondents, respectively, as being important or very important to their residents.

Availability of Dining and Foodservice Characteristics

Respondents rated how available the same dining and foodservice characteristics are to their residents. Three-fourths or more of respondents said a CDM, CFPP on staff, ability to dine with guests, and menus for special diets are available to residents to a great extent. Sixty-one percent said snacks, and 50 percent said room service are available to residents to a great extent. Special theme meals and an RD on staff are available to a great extent according to 45 and 43 percent of respondents, respectively. Two characteristics were rated as being only somewhat available. Forty-five percent said residents' ability to be involved in menu

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planning is only somewhat available. Fewer respondents (37 percent) said a variety of dining options is somewhat available. Approximately 40 percent said two things, a chef on staff and access to alcohol, are not available at all.

Décor of Dining Facility

Most respondents described the general décor of their facility in positive terms. Styles ranged from country and homey to modern and contemporary. Negative descriptions included drab, boring, institutional, and outdated.

When asked about tableware, most respondents (95 percent) said permanent tableware is used. Only 3 percent use disposable tableware. Seven percent indicated they use trays and a mix of permanent and disposable tableware.

Meal Service Types

Restaurant and in-room dining service are offered by most respondents, 71 and 64 percent, respectively. Twenty-nine percent offer buffet service, and 27 percent offer a la carte service. Family style service for residents is offered by 19 percent of respondents, and only 5 percent said they offer fast food service.

Survey participants rated how much their residents enjoyed different types of meal service. Restaurant service was chosen by 70 percent as the meal service their residents enjoyed to a great extent. Forty percent said in-room dining, and 30 percent said room service are the meal service types their residents enjoyed to a great extent. Only about one-fourth of respondents said their residents enjoy buffet, family style, and a la carte services to a great extent. Fast food service is not offered by almost half of respondents, and of those who offer fast food service, only 6 percent said residents enjoyed this service greatly.

Favorite Food Items

Survey participants were asked to write in their residents' favorite foods. For breakfast, eggs and bacon were clear favorites. Biscuits and gravy and sausage were also top choices. For lunch, residents requested chicken the most, followed by sandwiches and soup. Salad and potatoes were also favorites. Soups, sandwiches, and chicken were the most frequently requested dinner items by residents. Respondents said ice cream and cookies were the most popular snacks, followed by fruit and crackers.

Residents' Dining Experience

Foodservice professionals were asked how their residents' dining experience compares to home cooking, a casual dining chain restaurant, and their favorite independent restaurant. Half said the residents' dining experience is a great deal like home cooking. Forty-nine percent said it's somewhat like a casual dining chain restaurant experience, and 41 percent said it's somewhat like their favorite independent restaurant. Other terms and phrases respondents used to describe their residents' dining experience were: resident-centered, cuisine from comfort to international, social, and kosher.

Over half of respondents (57 percent) said mealtimes are structured at their facility with breakfast, lunch, and dinner only available at specific times. Thirty-two percent said food is always available to residents. A mixture of structured mealtimes with some food items or specific facilities always open is the setup of 11 percent of respondents' facilities. Most respondents (80 percent) said snacks are always available to residents. Thirteen percent said snacks are only available at specific times or for specific events (2 percent). Six percent said snacks are available at specific times and by request.

Healthy Eating

Whole grain and low sodium were rated by the most respondents (84 and 79 percent, respectively) as being important or very important in eating healthy. Seventy-two percent said low fat is important or very important in eating healthy. Approximately two-thirds of respondents said sugar free, low calorie, and local produce are important in eating healthy. Organic/natural was rated by the fewest respondents (45 percent) as being important or very important for healthy eating.

Respondents rated the same foods in terms of their importance to menu planning along with having ethnic variety and getting high nutritional density in small portions. None of the foods seemed to impact menu planning to a great extent.

Perceptions of Gourmet Fine Dining and Comfort Foods

What came to mind when respondents thought of "gourmet fine dining" and "comfort foods"? For gourmet fine dining, different cuts of beef and seafood dominated the list. Steak (50 responses), filet mignon (18), and prime rib (12) were top vote-getters. Lobster (21 responses), shrimp (19), and seafood (15) were also top picks. Sauces used to complement food items were also frequently mentioned (15 responses). Phrases and words associated with gourmet fine dining mentioned by 10 or more respondents were: expensive (12 responses), wait staff (12), elegant presentation (11), and linens (11).

Respondents wrote in many food items, but three items clearly emerged as capturing their perceptions of comfort foods: mashed potatoes and gravy (56 responses), macaroni and cheese (45), and soup (45). The word the most respondents (20) associated with comfort foods was "home-made."

Challenges

Respondents were given a list of seven items and asked how much of a challenge each poses in providing meals to their residents. Fifty-four percent and 48 percent of respondents rated residents' dining satisfaction and budget, respectively, as being a great challenge. The remaining items were rated by the most respondents as being somewhat of a challenge. Planning menus for special diets was rated by

48 percent as somewhat challenging. Healthy menu planning and labor issues were each rated by 42 percent of respondents as somewhat challenging. Space and equipment issues were rated by 38 and 34 percent, respectively, as being somewhat challenging.

Desired Changes From Food Manufacturers

Respondents could write in what they would like from food manufacturers to make providing meals to residents easier. Five ideas topped the list. Keeping costs down was the top request to food manufacturers (25 responses). Offering more low sodium items and having packages and items in smaller portion and in different sizes were each desired by 14 respondents. Eleven respondents said they would like food manufacturers to ensure quality and consistency in their products. More information such as nutritional, cooking, allergen, and dating printed directly on each package was desired by 10 respondents.

Dining Experience as Enhancing Residents' Quality of Life

Respondents were asked how the dining experience at their facility enhances the residents' quality of life. Overwhelmingly (71 responses), they said the dining experi-

ence is a time and place in which residents could socialize with one another and the staff. Many (38 responses) also described menus that provided a variety of food and gave residents the freedom to choose what they wanted to eat. Along with the social aspect, several mentioned the dining experience gave residents something to look forward to (31 responses) and provided a family, home or community-like atmosphere for the residents (20 responses). In addition, 16 respondents said the dining experience added to residents' quality of life by providing them with high quality, nutritious meals.

Using the Survey Results

These survey findings highlight the products and services that dietary managers rate as being most important to residents of senior living facilities. Share this information with your administrator and facility marketing director in an effort to give residents what they want and deliver the best possible quality of care. [DM](#)

Data collected and compiled by Olson Communications, Inc., Senior Living Foodservice Director Survey © 2008

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