VARSITY
ROUNDTABLE
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SALES AND MARKETING ROUNDTABLE #259
Reflections From the Front Lines of Senior Living with Howard Braxton

Thank you to everyone who attended our 259th Sales and Marketing Roundtable!

NOTE: To provide anonymity during the Roundtable discussion, participants and their communities will not be identified.

ABOUT OUR GUEST

On this week's Roundtable, we were joined by Howard Braxton, retired SVP of Marketing, Sales and Communications at The Kendal Corporation.

Howard shared insights from his decades-long career in senior living, offering hard-won lessons on leadership, brand-building and creating meaningful connections with older adults and their families. It's a conversation rich with wisdom, strategy and heart.

"People want what they want, when they want it, the way they want it. If you can't provide that, someone else will."
(Howard Braxton)

FRESH PERSPECTIVES

- **RELATIONSHIPS STILL CLOSE THE DEAL -** Senior living isn't a fast sell. It's built on trust, time, and personal connection. In a world full of emails and automation, the communities that take the time to truly understand prospects will win.
- **LIFESTYLE IS THE NEW VALUE PROP -** Healthcare isn't the headline anymore. Today's prospects walk in focused on lifestyle, amenities, and how the place *feels*—not clinical care. Sell the experience first, then back it up with support.
- **DIGITAL FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE LASTING ONES -** Websites and social media are today's front doors. If your online presence doesn't shine, you'll lose leads you never even knew you had. Curb appeal has gone digital.
- **TECH ISN'T JUST FLASH—IT'S FUNCTION -** From operations to outreach, tech boosts efficiency. Whether it's digital systems or hallway robots, the ROI isn't just financial—it's in time saved, staff supported, and resident experience elevated.
- **DENIAL IS A FORMIDABLE COMPETITOR -** Seniors are aging healthier—and delaying care decisions. The key is proactive education: showing prospects why planning early pays off before a health crisis makes the decision for them.
- **BUILD WHERE THEY *ARE*, NOT WHERE YOU WANT THEM TO BE -** Comfort and familiarity drive decisions. Prospects don't want to uproot—they want to stay close to what they know. Successful communities are rooted in the neighborhoods people already love.
- **55+ ISN'T THE END—IT'S THE ON-RAMP -** Active adult communities are a powerful feeder—not a competitor. With the right partnerships and presence, they can become your best long-term referral pipeline.

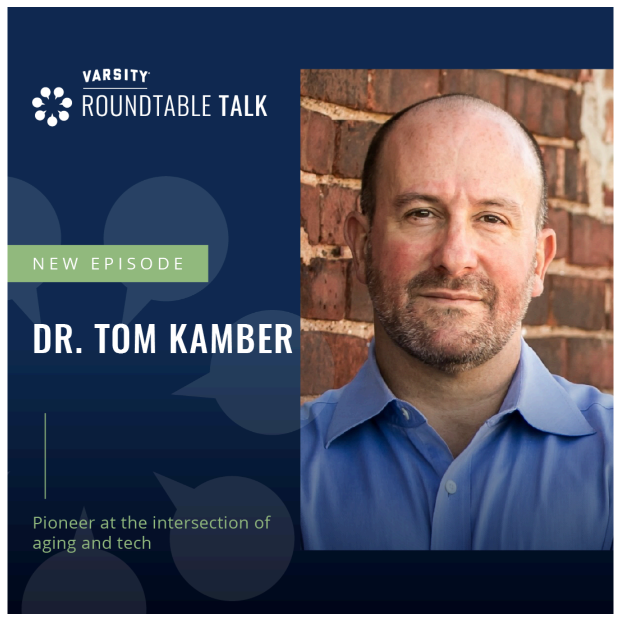
LINKS & CONTACT INFO

Howard Braxton (Linkedin)

COMING UP ON VARSITY'S ROUNDTABLE!

Please join our next Roundtable gathering on Thursday, June 5 at 12 p.m. ET, 11 a.m. CT and 9 a.m. PT. We will be joined by Denise Boudreau, President of Drive. She'll be sharing perspectives on the impact of organizational culture on sales and marketing.

THE NEWEST EPISODE OF VARSITY'S PODCAST



Varsity's podcast, Roundtable Talk, is about longevity and aging. Each episode features a discussion with an industry expert about how to solve the many mature market challenges facing brands today.

The most recent episode features a conversation with Dr. Tom Kamber, founder of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) and Senior Planet, shares how he's helping older adults thrive through digital connection, education, and empowerment.

He discusses the evolution of OATS, the power of community-centered tech education, and how tools like smart homes, AI, and telehealth are reshaping what it means to age well in the digital era.

Tell us about your history in the field of senior living?

Howard's 44-year career in senior living wasn't exactly what he (or his mom) planned—he was originally on track to become a physician. But after a long college internship in healthcare turned into a full-time job, he never looked back. He stayed in the field he loved, even if he didn't expect to end up in sales and marketing.

His first real experience was in what was then called "geriatric care," working at a senior center where he coordinated services and served meals. That role led to management, which required him to step into marketing—something he knew nothing about at the time. But once he found out it meant getting out in the community and talking to people, he was all in.

From there, things moved quickly. He became an admissions coordinator at a skilled nursing community, then took on a series of leadership roles: director, senior director, regional leader, VP, and eventually senior VP. About eight years ago, he joined Kendal. Through it all, he's grateful he started from the ground up—it gave him a real understanding of the industry and a deep appreciation for the journey.

What are the biggest challenges facing the field?

Things are starting to feel a bit full circle. Back when Howard got started, it was common to meet prospective residents in their homes, have face-to-face chats, even walk into hospitals and get referrals directly from nurses with no HIPAA hurdles and no eyebrows raised. While that world's long gone, there's now a shift back toward more personal, at-home engagement.

He's seeing a growing interest in aging-in-place models and home-based care. It's no longer just about CCRCs or rental communities, it's about creating a sense of connection and community wherever people choose to live. With more medical and social services being offered at home, this new wave is becoming a major competitor for traditional senior living.

Howard likens it to the old-school country doctor making house calls. The home is once again becoming the hub, and that brings big challenges for the industry, especially in convincing people why they should still consider moving into a community setting.

Another constant challenge? Attracting talent. This isn't a flashy industry but it's incredibly meaningful work. You're impacting lives in deep, often unseen ways. And on top of it all, making sure services are financially sustainable and getting reimbursed properly continues to be a heavy lift, especially for CFOs.

What makes you optimistic for the future of senior living?

Howard is hopeful and a big reason is people like him: the baby boomers. There's no shortage of folks hitting 55, 60, 70, and beyond, and many are staying healthier longer. These days, he sees himself not as an industry exec, but as the customer – a "focus group of one." That perspective helps him stay grounded in what older adults actually want in their lifestyle.

Even if only 12 to 15% of seniors can afford to move into communities like CCRCs or independent living, it's still a large number. And really, no one's trying to fill 10,000 units overnight. The key is understanding each individual. What matters to them, what they're looking for.

What gives him even more optimism is how tech-savvy seniors are becoming. Websites, not drive-bys, are the new curb appeal. A strong, up-to-date, and engaging online presence is crucial. If someone doesn't like what they see online, they won't call, won't email, and worst of all, you'll never know they were even looking. That digital experience is make-or-break, and getting it right is one of the biggest opportunities (and challenges) in the years ahead.

What are the biggest changes you've seen in the field?

Howard sees technology as the biggest shift in senior living, especially in sales and marketing. It's transformed everything from how information is stored to how prospects find and evaluate communities. The binders full of policies are gone, replaced by digital systems that streamline management.

Marketing has evolved, too. While face-to-face outreach is starting to return, much of the action now happens online. Howard admits he was once a skeptic, but over the last decade, he's come to appreciate just how critical digital marketing, social media, and strong websites really are. If your online presence isn't up to date and engaging, you're likely losing prospects without even knowing it.

Today's seniors are highly educated consumers. They're reading reviews, researching online, and making decisions well before reaching out. Ignoring that is a big mistake.

But at the core, what people want hasn't changed: a clean, well-run, welcoming place to live. The tools have changed, but the goal remains the same.

How have you seen the application of sales and marketing change over the last 40 years?

Marketing in senior living has undergone a major shift. It used to be all about case managers and social workers explaining healthcare quality, care levels, and survey results to families. Now, that dynamic has flipped. Prospects and their families often come in asking nothing about healthcare. They're focused almost entirely on lifestyle, and they view the community through a real estate lens.

That mindset presents a challenge, especially since communities aren't selling property—they're offering care, services, and a way of life. But many people don't see assisted living or memory care as healthcare anymore. Instead, they perceive them as residential options. So even if care is being delivered, the marketing approach needs to emphasize lifestyle over clinical services.

Howard believes that framing these services more like housing while still providing clarity on the support offered can help connect with today's prospects. It's less about selling in the traditional sense and more about educating, informing, and guiding people through a complex, emotional decision.

How did you find balance in your career?

Howard got personal for a moment, reflecting on his family and how he's tried to balance work and home life. He joked that his wife made the right decision marrying him back in 1990, even if she didn’t know what she was getting into. With three well-mannered sons, he gives full credit to her, especially since his career had him on the road often.

Still, no matter where he was or what kind of business meeting he was in, he made a point to call each of his boys at 8 p.m. every night. If that meant stepping away from the dinner table in the middle of a deal, so be it. His kids appreciated it and that mattered more than what anyone else thought.

He admitted that finding balance has always been a conscious effort. He rarely took long vacations and hadn’t truly gotten away in three years. But that’s changing and he’s finally planning a trip “down the shore” this August, a classic escape for folks in the Philadelphia area. It’ll be his way of celebrating the start of retirement.

What advice do you have for people in sales and marketing positions in senior living communities?

First, truly understand what you're selling. Don’t assume it’s just a place to live or just healthcare. Get to know the services your community offers, how they stack up to the competition, and where your strengths—and gaps—really are.

Second, build real relationships with your prospects. Today’s seniors know what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. If you’re not offering it, someone else will. So it’s not enough to send out emails or make calls, you have to understand what each person is looking for and connect with them on a personal level. This isn’t a quick-turn sale; it’s a long game, built on trust.

Third, be sure this industry is right for you. Some salespeople come in expecting big commissions and quick wins—but senior living is more heart than hustle. It’s about serving people, not just meeting quotas. Know the tools at your disposal, use them well, and stay rooted in purpose.

For operators, make sure you’re backing up your marketing with real support. If you're spending to attract people, you also need to invest in staffing, services, and infrastructure. As Howard puts it, don’t ask your sales team to sell the Taj Mahal at Taj Mahal prices unless it actually looks and functions like the Taj Mahal. Great marketing needs great substance behind it.

QUESTIONS

DO YOU SEE TECHNOLOGY IMPACTING OPERATIONS TO ANY LARGE DEGREE?

Howard sees a lot of potential for technology to make a real impact on senior living operations. He's worked with communities that have started dabbling in robotics, from basic tools to more animated robots roaming the halls. One robot even gave him a surprise interaction that started off a little spooky but ended up being pretty funny (though that story's for another time).

The big takeaway? Technology offers real opportunities for efficiency. Sure, there might be a higher upfront cost, but over time, it can actually save money and streamline operations. It's a different kind of investment and one that pays off in the long run.

AS PEOPLE ARE AGING HEALTHIER DO YOU FIND THAT DENIAL IS BECOMING A PRIMARY COMPETITOR TO CCRC'S AND CCAH'S?

Howard points out a big shift happening in senior living: as people stay healthier longer, they delay seeking healthcare. That sounds great on the surface but it means that when folks finally do move into a community, they tend to be much frailer. Instead of a spry 70- or 75-year-old settling in, it's more likely to be someone in their mid-80s who's already dealing with significant health issues.

The challenge, he says, is helping people think proactively. No matter the type of community—CCRC, assisted living, or otherwise—it's about encouraging folks to plan ahead and look at their lifestyle as a whole. That means positioning themselves five or ten years out, rather than waiting for a crisis to hit.

Whether it's moving into independent living while still active or choosing assisted living before a fall forces the issue, the goal is to make these decisions while people still have the ability to enjoy the lifestyle, not after it's too late.

SINCE YOU'RE NOW AT THE AGE OF THE CUSTOMER, WHERE AND WHEN WOULD YOU CONSIDER MOVING AND WHY?

Howard admits he'd be a tough customer because he knows the industry too well and holds high expectations. That said, there are a few communities he's worked with that he'd move into "in a blink." For him, it's all about the feel of the place. From the moment he walks in, he's asking: does this environment feel comfortable? How's the energy? What's the vibe from the staff?

Assuming he moves in while still healthy (and not too late in the game), he's looking for variety in lifestyle options and a community that genuinely feels welcoming. Location matters, too. He loves southeastern Pennsylvania, close to the beach, New York, and DC, with mild weather and no major natural disasters. So he's not planning to move far.

Howard also stresses the importance of placing communities where people already live and feel connected, rather than trying to lure them to idealized destinations that may be great for vacations but not for everyday living. In the end, comfort, familiarity, and connection will be what guide his choice, not just amenities or flashy features.

HOW MUCH DO YOU SEE THE ACTIVE ADULT SPACE COMPETING WITH LIFE PLAN COMMUNITIES OR COULD THEY BE A FEEDER INTO LIFE PLAN COMMUNITIES?

Howard sees 55+ communities as a great referral source for Life Plan Communities and independent living. They're often the first stop in the aging journey—not the last—and should be treated that way in marketing efforts.

He suggests tapping into their social structures, whether that's sponsoring events, presenting at clubhouses, or targeting them through direct mail and email campaigns. The key is making sure these communities are included in outreach.

The biggest hurdle is that people often stay in 55+ housing longer than they should, which can lead to resistance about moving again. But with the right messaging, they can begin to see that a Life Plan Community may be the better long-term fit.