



## **Brand Names and Better Budgets: Preparing for Senior Living Tech Implementation**

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As senior living providers look for new ways to gain a technological advantage over their competitors, they would do well to examine their processes down to the details—including whether they use Amazon or Google devices, and how much financial leeway they allot for technology infrastructure development.

Those were among the top takeaways shared by experts with three well-known senior living providers during a panel at the Senior Housing News 2018 Summit in Chicago last week.

### **Amazon vs. Google**

Voice-activated assistants and devices, like Amazon Echo’s Alexa and Google Home, are among the biggest upcoming technology trends in senior living. Already, some sizable senior living organizations—like Glendale, California-based senior housing provider Front Porch—are investing time and energy into the budding trend.

“Voice-activated devices have a tremendously huge potential within senior living care,” said Kory Nadeau, security officer and head of IT infrastructure at Roseville, Minnesota-based Presbyterian Homes & Services. “Independent living seniors are bringing them into their homes, and they’re using them to ask questions.”

Much of the voice-activated tech on the market today isn’t HIPAA-compliant, or therefore compatible in higher-acuity senior living settings. To help overcome this roadblock, Presbyterian Homes & Services has sought help from Amazon Web Services in getting its Alexa devices to work better in the senior living environment.

But as they seek out assistance, providers should also be slightly wary of some tech manufacturers’ ulterior motives, said Moulay Elalami, vice president of information technology at Waltham, Massachusetts-based Benchmark Senior Living.

“Amazon is a commercial platform. They want to sell you things,” Elalamy said. “The very essence of Amazon is not making seniors’ lives better or taking care of them, it’s just selling them things. It’s a fundamental issue that I have with them versus Google.”

While Google isn’t perfect, it’s also not an online marketplace, making it more suitable for senior living providers, at least in Elalamy’s eyes.

“It’s more geared toward services than trying to commercialize everything you do all of the time,” he said.

In the future, residents might bring their own voice assistants from home, and the senior living community would simply network with them. On the management and operations side, there might come a day when voice technology—paired with artificial intelligence—plays a crucial role.

“It would be amazing for us if we had things like an AI that knows what a problem is, finds out a device is faulty, [and] orders it from Amazon,” Elalamy explained. “We’re trying to move away from paper right now, but I’d like to try to move away from devices altogether and just talk to the computer.”

### **Consider a technology development fund**

As senior living developers plot new communities, some are taking extra care to ensure there’s room in the construction plans—and the budget—for new technology.

Presbyterian Homes & Services, for example, now thinks about technological infrastructure every time it sets out to rehab one of its communities. LCS does something similar.

“You need to at least have an active discussion around what your infrastructure at these communities is going to be to support these technologies. It should be an annual investment,” explained Marc Gaber, vice president and chief information officer at Des Moines, Iowa-based Life Care Services. “We’ve seen so many cases where communities don’t invest in that... and now they’re playing catch-up.”

Benchmark, meanwhile, thinks about what technology it wants to implement today, as well as what it might use two or three years down the road. To achieve their goals from a budgeting standpoint, Elalamy recommended setting aside a kind of rainy day fund that could be used on new technology as needed.

“I don’t know exactly what TV model we’re going to buy in three years... and I don’t know exactly how much it’s going to cost,” Elalamy said. “So you need to have some kind of leeway.”

### **Big data collection ‘not there yet’**

It's long been a pipe dream in the senior living industry to track a resident's every action, from how many steps they take in a day to how much sleep they're getting at night. By collecting a wide range of data, providers can use it to predict larger trends, like when a resident is at risk of falling or going to the hospital.

The way in which data is collected has a long way to come, too. Though wearable devices like Fitbit and Apple Watch are gaining prominence with some large senior living providers, those devices come with their own challenges.

"[Seniors] want things that don't stand out and say, I'm wearing a wearable for a medical reason," Nadeau said. "Once we can get that, and we can start capturing this data... then it's going to become useful. But right now, it's just trial and error."

Similarly, tech companies and senior living providers still need to tackle some big-picture concepts, like how data is collected, which health markers are most relevant, and where that information is stored.

"We absolutely are not there yet, obviously, because we're still trying to get the hardware to work," Elalamy explained. "It's really combining this with the EMRs and EHRs to make sure the data is relevant and flows through there."

Then there's the question of security. A senior living provider needs to cover all of its bases, including training its associates to safely handle sensitive resident information. And people tend to be the weakest link in the security chain, so to speak.

"How do you manage that and make sure they understand that everything they do potentially impacts everything else? That's a step I worry about," Gaber said. "I can educate you as much as I possibly can, and there still might be an issue."

For example, when families place cameras in residents' rooms, it could open up a proverbial can of worms for a senior living provider, Elalamy said.

"Who's responsible for the privacy—is it us, is it you? If the data is going over our network, is it our responsibility to make sure it's secure? What if there's a hack?" he asked. "We're trying to figure out exactly where the accountability lies."