

DESIGN FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER

Interview with Cynthia Thurlow, founder of 3rd3rd Marketing + 12 Ingredients to Elevate the Dining Experience, as published in McKnights.

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Cynthia Thurlow, founder of 3rd3rd Marketing, is a branding, advertising, & strategic leadership expert with over 30 years of experience across hospitality, technology, healthcare, financial, nonprofits, and consumer brands. She is known for challenging ageism in marketing & helping organizations build identity-driven brands rooted in purpose & aspiration rather than age.

Success in 2026 demands both a clear financial vision and a design partner truly dedicated to your residents' well-being. In this issue, we analyze why specialized, boutique firms often outperform larger generalists in delivering the agility, superior ROI and resident outcomes and accountability your projects require. We also tackle the broader development landscape—from interest rates to mixed-use strategies—ensuring you have the expert intelligence to navigate the year ahead. To provide these critical market insights, I sat down with Mark Andrews and Bud Green from Greystone.

What does 3rd 3rd offer to senior living organizations?

3rd 3rd was founded in 2015, evolving from a branch of a general agency in Seattle, Washington, where I was previously a partner. We formalized 3rd 3rd as a full-service, holistic consulting and advertising agency specializing in aging services. What sets us apart is that we apply the principles of mainstream brand marketing to senior living, giving clients a deeper and more strategic brand approach than traditional senior living agencies. Today, we provide brand development, repositioning, consulting, research, public relations, lead generation, digital marketing, and direct mail services for senior living communities. We also partner with technology companies, nonprofits, and other organizations within the aging services sector.

What are the biggest challenges in senior living today, that owners are bringing to you?

One of the biggest challenges facing the industry is workforce. Savvy organizations are realizing there is a real return on investment in branding their workforce promise to attract

employees and strengthen retention. That means building a clear culture program that aligns teams around a shared vision and creates a stronger employee experience.

At the same time, senior living has become a mature market, and communities that fail to evolve often struggle with occupancy. The key is staying ahead of the market by designing and operating for younger baby boomers, Generation Jones, and Generation X. In reality, older generations want many of the same things as well. Communities that keep pace with these changing expectations are far better positioned for long-term success.

Where are senior living communities falling short in their positioning, & what does it take to truly differentiate in today's market?

I think positioning often comes back to operations and a willingness to be different. Wellness and well-being have become major priorities, and today's consumer wants to live actively and maintain a healthy lifespan for as long as possible. That mindset is very different from previous generations, and the new consumer is not just interested in it—they expect it.

The communities that stand out are the ones embracing positive aging and integrating it into both their operations and positioning. That is what attracts people seeking that lifestyle, energy, and sense of purpose.

How can communities successfully reposition their brand when they already have an established reputation in the market, and what challenges do they need to overcome to shift public perception?

A big part of the shift comes down to messaging and imagery. Too many communities still rely on stock photos of older adults who

all look the same—gray hair, sitting around laughing, eating ice cream, or drinking wine—which can unintentionally trigger internalized ageism. What we do is help organizations remove those triggers and instead embrace aspirational, beautifully styled photography that highlights the setting, lifestyle, and energy of the community. Even communities that are not the “shiny new penny” have beautiful moments and environments worth showcasing. The impact can be dramatic. We’ve seen communities lower their average move-in age by nearly 10 years within about two years of repositioning. Residents who once moved in at 88 are now arriving at 78, 70, or even younger, creating a much longer and more engaged resident lifespan within the community. The reality is, it can be surprisingly simple: when you put out a different message—one that inspires people—you attract a different audience.

What are the Myths about Marketing?

One of the biggest misconceptions is that marketing is something anyone can do. Organizations often assume the receptionist or a young staff member who understands social media can manage it effectively. While there are many talented young people, marketing is still a professional discipline, just like architecture, law, or accounting. One of the fastest ways to damage a community’s reputation is putting an unqualified person in charge of its public-facing marketing and social media presence. Because it is so visible and shareable, poor marketing can quickly hurt perception and occupancy. Another common mistake is viewing marketing as a cost center instead of a revenue generator. Communities focused only on limiting their marketing budget often overlook the much greater cost of low occupancy. Sometimes investing more strategically in marketing is exactly what helps a community climb out of a census hole and stabilize long term.

How does physical environment impact marketing success?

It’s huge. We often say, “We’re marketers, not miracle workers.” We can’t simply wave a wand and make something appealing. First impressions matter most—especially curb appeal, the entrance, and the lobby experience. You can walk into a community and immediately see where the opportunity is: a welcoming lobby, natural elements like living plants, a pleasant scent, and thoughtful touches like real coffee instead of outdated, institutional details. Those early sensory cues set the

tone. That’s why we run a session called “Everybody Sells,” which reinforces that the entire environment contributes to the sale—the physical space, dining experience, and every team member. When organizations embrace that mindset, it changes outcomes.

Of course, when the physical environment is dated, we can’t always fix it immediately. In those cases, messaging becomes critical—setting expectations while still communicating value, warmth, and the strength of the people who live and work there. Everything is marketing. The physical space carries enormous weight, especially in renovations, where investment in first impressions has the highest return. It’s a lot like walking into a place like WeWork—each location feels intentional, modern, and distinctive. That’s the standard every community should be aiming for: a strong, consistent impression that immediately communicates “this is a place you want to be.”

What will winning senior living brands look like in the next 5–10 years?

It won’t be called “senior living” at all, and it won’t lead with age. The future is affinity-based communities built around shared interests—what people love to do. We’re starting to see the strongest concepts emerge from this idea: a music-focused community, for example, where residents are musicians, music lovers, or people learning instruments. With performance spaces, rehearsal areas, and casual jam sessions, the entire environment reinforces that identity. That level of specificity is what makes a brand compelling. This matters even more today because people are highly mobile. Prospective residents

are no longer limited to a 3-, 5-, or 10-mile radius. Higher-income, active adults move across the country for lifestyle reasons—family, familiarity, or personal passion. They follow identity, not geography. That’s why niche positioning works. Whether it’s music, art, outdoor living, gardening, volunteering, or something like golf, the clarity of focus attracts the right audience faster and more naturally. A golf-centered community, for example, immediately draws people who want to live that lifestyle and be surrounded by peers who share it.

What advice would you have for owners and operators?

My advice to owners, nonprofits, and operators is to create an innovation task force. It doesn’t need to be limited to current staff or even internal employees—it should include a mix of perspectives and sit slightly outside day-to-day operations, focused purely on strategy and innovation. In senior living, I fully recognize how demanding operations are. Leaders are often building the plane while flying it, with constant daily challenges that leave little room to step back. But that reality is exactly what holds the sector back from getting ahead of market expectations. The concern is that outside disruptors—companies like Uber or Amazon—will eventually enter the space and deliver what consumers already expect elsewhere. When that happens, they’ll set a new standard quickly. The opportunity for existing organizations is to get ahead of that curve now. An innovation function, separate from operational pressure, helps ensure they’re not just reacting to change, but actively shaping it.

Interview edited for length



12 INGREDIENTS TO ELEVATE THE DINING EXPERIENCE IN SENIOR LIVING

AS PUBLISHED BY MCKNIGHT SENIOR LIVING - GUEST COLUMN ARTICLE



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In today's senior living communities, the dining experience plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of life for residents. As baby boomers redefine retirement, their lifestyle and preferences In Today's senior living communities, the dining experience plays a vital role in enhancing the quality of life for residents. As baby boomers redefine retirement, their lifestyle and preferences significantly influence the latest trends. Accustomed to having restaurant variety and personal choice at their fingertips, they expect more diverse and engaging dining experiences than what was considered standard in the communities of their parents' generation. As empty nesters relocate to active communities, they desire to trade in the maintenance of their former home without sacrificing or compromising their lifestyle.

The following are some of the more popular dining trends catering to the taste of this generation. Explore them and select the right mix of ingredients to create a unique experience that best serves your residents and specific demographics. Critical Design Considerations



to read the full article on McKnight, scan the QR code here below

If you are thinking to renovate your dining spaces, or thinking about the dining venues in a new build, this checklist helps you, have a roadmap to select the dining venues in your community, makes it easy to gather all the information in one spot, avoiding being overwhelmed and align all stakeholders and decision makers. Then our "Dining venues checklist" provides the roadmap to select the right ingredients to the dining experience in your community.



Scan this barcode to download the checklist

If you're a senior living executive or developer, considering a renovation or new build, and want to reduce project risks early, moving from confusion and misalignment to complete clarity about your project's direction without costly design mistakes—then our "Discovery Pre-Design Review" provides the roadmap and insights you need to truly understand your project's potential.



Scan this barcode to Schedule a free consultation call, or email us with consultation request in the title.

If you're a senior living executive or developer, in an early planning Phase of a project, not ready to engage professionals, but would need help to navigate an uncharted territory with confidence, check out our tools and resources.



Scan this barcode to download the available resources.