

The Marketeers



THIS MONTH: Richard Williams, director, Cognatum Projects

in central and southern England, with 928 retirement homes in total. Set within vibrant market towns or villages, within walking distance of shops and restaurants, all schemes benefit from thoughtful architecture, landscaped grounds, plus a dedicated estate manager.

Williams joined the board last year, having held a variety of senior board level roles across the retirement, healthcare and housing sectors for both not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. He says the internet – and role of digital advertising – has changed the way that the retirement provider specialises its developments.

“An interesting point for Cognatum is that while the owners are the ones making the move and buying the property they are frequently assisted by, or at least engaged with, their children, who tend to be more techsavvy than their parents.”

“That having been said, the older generation are rapidly catching up, and 90% of our purchasers are actively online and increasingly engaged with social media, which offers many new opportunities for reaching both audiences. Digital marketing has become a vital part of our strategy over the course of the last few years and will continue to grow in terms of importance. Coronavirus has undoubtedly accelerated this approach.”

As the first Cognatum development was over 40 years ago, Williams has “watched things come full circle” with “traditional” marketing changing definition several times. *“For us there will always be a place for the personal touch, and there will always be those who like the feel of a newspaper in their hand and a pen ready to do the*

crossword. However, it would be folly to insist that the future is not in the digital world. A balanced approach is required.”

Marketing suites are another aspect that require a different approach: *“Where once we would have had a suite complete with scale model of the estate, we are now able to offer fly-throughs and VR tours to potential buyers prior to them visiting in person. Our sales team will meet with potential purchasers in their home too, to really get a feel for where they are coming from and what they want from their new property.”*

Cognatum’s marketing team is inhouse; specialist consultants are also brought in regularly, but there is a caveat: *“They must understand not only how to sell a new development but the additional focus for a retirement estate. With Cognatum Estates, who are a not for profit organisation, as the landlord and managing company it is vital that the relationships built in the early days of an estate are a positive experience for everyone, as they will last long beyond the point of sale.”*

Williams explains how Cognatum ensures consistency in its branding and how has this changed over the years: *“It’s evolved of course. Both Beechcroft and English Courtyard were well thought of and it’s been key for us to bring that across. However, each of our developments has its own architectural character – it is very important to us that people are purchasing a home and a lifestyle that suits them, and don’t feel that they are on an overtly corporate site.”*

Ultimately, today’s version of retirement living looks very different to that of 40 years ago as buyers are a very different breed: *“Many new purchasers will never fully retire – remote*

Cognatum was formed from a merger of two of the best-known names in retirement housing: Beechcroft Trust and English Courtyard Association. With over 40 years of experience, director Williams explains his mission: *“We make bespoke properties for downsizers, who want to make the most of their retirement and are confident that we are offering not just bricks and mortar but an enviable lifestyle.”*

Traditionally, marketing the retirement housing sector has proved challenging but today’s retirees demand a different approach, says Williams: *“Retirement necessarily conjures up images of old people, but in truth today’s retirees have never been younger, mentally at least; those looking at retirement housing now are the baby boomers, the rock and roll generation. Let us not forget Paul McCartney is 78, long past the Beatles’ perceived old age of 64. Many people have realised significant investment through property, at a rate not seen before, and their requirements and aspirations are high.”*

The not-for-profit company currently has 60 retirement developments across 21 counties





working, consultancy, voluntary work are all options that were unheard of in times past."

These changes in buyers' demands are epitomised at Cognatum's latest development in Wingham, Kent: *"The properties are sensitively designed, with unobtrusive features designed to make later life easier – level access, downstairs cloakrooms, even the space to have a passenger lift fitted should it become desirable – but they complement the properties, which are all about modern lifestyle living now."*

Petersfinger Farm in Salisbury is another example of a development cleverly designed to appeal to a generation of retirees intent on living a modern lifestyle. The development of four immaculately renovated 18th and 19th century barns is arranged around a landscaped courtyard, set within water and wildflower meadows and orchards leading down to the River Avon. The traditional construction of the barns has been reimagined and restored by craftsmen to bring them up to current building standards while retaining and enhancing the patina and beauty of the original buildings.

Exposed trusses, high ceilings and the extensive use of traditional building materials have given the barns character yet close inspection reveals that the properties have been cleverly future-proofed.

"The philosophy is to provide the young retired with a lasting uncompromised home that offers the ability to adapt to changing needs."

Williams is determined to get some key themes and messages across in his marketing approach: *"Retirement is a time to be enjoyed, to do all the things you haven't been able to do in the past. Whether that is time spent travelling or pursuing hobbies, reducing the maintenance burden to leave time for the good life is the way ahead. All of our estates are situated in the most desirable market towns, with the buzz of cafes, galleries and shops on the doorstep."*

Another marketing challenge has been how to sell homes during the pandemic, which Williams admits has hit the sector hard: *"Nowhere is this more relevant than the retirement sector. The importance of family has been so keenly felt by us all over the*

past six months, and while moving closer to family was always a significant driving factor, it is even more so now," explains Williams. *"We want our purchasers to feel safe, and the discreet presence of the estate manager makes this a very reassuring option both for owners and their families. Viewings in person are of course more difficult than previously, so as well as the online opportunities we are offering personally escorted tours of the new estate by appointment."*

Campaigns and marketing effectiveness are measured, Williams explains, by how quickly they can get their communities up and running and fully occupied. *"A good campaign means that we draw in people who are genuinely interested in the lifestyle choice that we offer and therefore the conversion rates of those that express an initial interest to those that actually move in are high."*

Williams is excited by the challenges of the future: *"This is a very interesting time for us. Over the past decade we have been concentrating on the estate management side of the business, and our developments that are currently coming to the market are for a new generation, so we are looking to deliver what the new generation require and expect."*



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Published in Showhouse Magazine
October 2020