



## SUCCESS STORY

# Empowering Excellence With Darby Development

How Training and Mystery Shopping  
Transformed Darby Development's  
Operations and Service Quality

## OVERVIEW

Darby Development Company, Inc. was established by R. Gordon Darby in 1968. The company's origins are in single-family home building and sales, but following Darby's success in the single-family arena, he branched out into the multifamily industry.

The portfolio now consists of office space; light industrial, industrial, warehouse space; and multifamily apartment communities, including conventional and subsidized apartments. The firm also offers third-party management, which includes apartment communities and HOA management.

But while the business has grown, Darby's leaders remain aligned with their founder's core values. They call this the "Darby Difference," an operational anchor built on four pillars of quality, value, relationships, and trust. For residents and tenants, it translates to this: "You can **Trust** us to offer you a **Quality** home at a good **Value** managed by people with whom you can build a lasting **Relationship**."

Darby operates in Charleston, South Carolina, and the surrounding areas, and Lydia Ackerman, Vice President of Property Management, is integral to their operations.



## COMPANY PROFILE

- Darby Development Company, Inc.
- **Industry:** Multifamily and commercial real estate
- **Unit Count:** 1,219  
**Headquarters:** Mount Pleasant, SC  
**Years in Business:** 56 Years  
**Number of Team Members:** 52

## CHALLENGE

Darby Development's focus is threefold: people, product, and pricing. And to make informed decisions on all three, they realized long ago the value of having objective insight into property performance — seeing operations through the eyes of customers. “We needed an organic way to see employees in action to help us recognize and celebrate their performance but also to ensure we are delivering the best service 100% of the time,” said Lydia.

Even before Darby implemented comprehensive solutions for training and mystery shopping, both were areas of focus. They used individuals to shop their properties and relied on apartment associations and advertisers for education. However, finding candidates they could teach mystery shopping techniques to was both challenging and expensive. Lydia shares, “Training and continued education are very important to us, but we are a small local company that does not have a travel budget for onsite personnel to attend training and seminars.”

While the evaluation and training processes they had pulled together worked for a time, it eventually became clear that more robust and cost-effective solutions were needed. Darby leaders not only desired a better understanding of the gaps at underperforming properties, but they also wanted relevant, impactful training that matched the needs of their employees.

Darby Development saw the need, and Grace Hill's Training and Mystery Shopping solutions became the proven platform to help them address three critical questions:

- **What are we doing?**
- **What results do we want?**
- **What can we do differently?**

## SOLUTION

It's a combination that has helped drive Darby's success.

Upon implementing Grace Hill's Training and Mystery Shopping, they saw an immediate benefit from having accurate and reliable data — two things that initially drew their team to the Grace Hill suite of solutions.

Their Human Resources department currently uses Grace Hill Training for new hire education, continuing education for skill development and compliance, and “add-on” education for focused training in areas where employees need additional support to close skill gaps.

“Our goal is to educate and have experienced excellent customer service-orientated employees,” said Lydia. “We love Grace Hill Training because it is relevant, current, and easy to participate in and take.”

Darby Development has found success with this schedule:

- **Class assignments by role: Manager, Leasing, Maintenance**
- **First 30 days: Fair Housing and Preventing Sexual Harassment training — mandatory**
- **Training cadence: 3 hours per month**





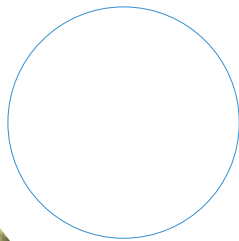
One important note about the Fair Housing training: New employees receive login credentials on their first day, allowing them time to complete Fair Housing training before they ever set foot on a property.

Employee feedback has been positive, and Darby has had no issues with their company-wide implementation processes. However, Lydia notes that setting specific mandatory requirements has been a key to their success. “We mandate 3 hours per month of Grace Hill Training and monitor it to ensure compliance,” said Lydia. “Once we did that, employees stayed over 85% in compliance to ensure payment of their commissions.”

And while compliance is a critical piece of the organizational training puzzle, the Grace Hill solutions go well beyond that in providing value. For example, when leaders noticed their leasing agents were struggling with closing sales, Grace Hill had targeted training that helped educate their leasing teams on the sales process, knowing how and when to follow up and use proven closing techniques.

In fact, Mystery Shopping serves as the perfect complement to their training process. “The video shops are much more detailed and fairly conducted than when we used individuals,” said Lydia. “But most importantly, our employees use the feedback from the video shoppers’ reports to make productive changes that result in more sales and happier clients.”

Grace Hill Training and Mystery Shopping have become integral in helping Darby Development deliver impactful education to their onsite teams.



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- LYDIA ACKERMAN

## RESULTS

Darby Development has found remarkable success in leveraging Grace Hill's Training and Mystery Shopping solutions. The longevity of their partnership with Grace Hill has allowed for continuous customization, ensuring the solutions evolve alongside their business needs. This adaptability has not only improved the education and preparedness of their staff but has also instilled a culture of continuous improvement.

Additionally, the comprehensive online educational classes and valuable video shops have become vital tools in equipping employees with the knowledge and skills needed to excel.

Since adopting Grace Hill's solutions, Darby Development has expanded its focus from simply tracking property occupancy and closing ratios to also monitoring critical customer experience metrics such as response time, staff availability, and visitor satisfaction. This shift has yielded significant results, including enhanced productivity. Staff now deliver more thorough and thoughtful property tours, fully aware of the potential for mystery shoppers. This approach has directly contributed to positive visitor interactions, often encouraging repeat visits and fostering a reputation for professionalism and politeness.

The measurable impact of these solutions is undeniable. Shopper reports provide actionable insights into staff performance, while consistent education keeps the team sharp and ready to meet challenges. For Darby Development, these tools ensure high-quality service, support employee growth, and position the company for sustained success. As Lydia shares, "Grace Hill's solutions are valuable tools — a worthwhile investment for our company and employees."

From delivering impactful education to enhancing customer experiences and driving measurable results, Grace Hill's solutions have evolved to meet Darby Development's unique needs and help their teams thrive.



Once we partnered with Grace Hill, we never had a need or desire to leave. We receive such great service and pricing; why would we?"



**Lydia Ackerman**

Vice President of Property Management,  
Darby Development Company, Inc.

It's time to take action! Empower your employees and build a culture of excellence your teams deserve.

**Contact Grace Hill today** to discover how our Training and Mystery Shopping solutions work together to improve employee performance, helping you achieve your goals and create lasting success.