

Did Discrimination Occur Here? You Decide

BY LISA TROSIEN

During a recent search for a new place to live, a middle-aged woman and her two children visited a brand-new community. They arrived just before closing time to find the parking lot filled with cars. While they expected the sales office to be busy with customers, they were surprised to find that no other customers were present in the sales office—just employees.

After being greeted by a receptionist, they were asked if they had ever visited the community before. The woman said “no” and then handed them a guest registration card.

While the woman was completing the card, the receptionist asked her if she had visited the community before. Again, the woman told them “no” and handed the completed card back to the receptionist.

A second employee, another woman, joined the receptionist behind the counter. She again asked the woman if she had visited the community before. The woman, whose young children by this time were getting restless, stated for the third time that she had not visited previously. She also asked if she could see the models. The second employee handed her a description sheet and pointed the family to the doorway. “Just go through that doorway and walk onto the models. They are highlighted on the page in order.”

The employee did not offer to accompany them through the models, which surprised the customer, but since it was so unbearably hot that day (a heat index of more than 100 degrees) she decided that the salesperson must have just decided to stay inside where it was cooler.

The woman and her children proceeded through the models, examining each one for its suitability to their family composition and living style. After viewing all four models, they returned to the sales center and waited for someone to assist them. The mother looked at the plat map, the feature displays and the various sales materials displayed on the walls. Although she could see and hear sales associates in their adjoining offices, no one offered to assist her.

Finally, the mother tired of waiting and approached the recep-



tionist desk once again. “May I help you?” the receptionist asked. (The second employee who had appeared when the woman first arrived was also still present; she did not offer assistance of any kind.) “Yes, I’d like a brochure, please,” said the mother. “Of what?” the receptionist asked. “The floor plans,” replied the mother. “Which ones?” the receptionist asked.

The mother gave her the names of two of the floor plans she had viewed. Without a word, the receptionist handed her the floor plans, without placing them in any type of

brochure jacket or presentation folder. And no business card was attached so that the woman could follow-up should she have any questions.

“Thank you,” said the mother and her two children, as they left the sales office.

Did discrimination take place here? In Fair Housing training, students often hear the term, “Intent vs. Effect,” meaning that while the intent of the salesperson was not to discriminate, the actions created the “effect” of discriminatory behavior. Was it the “intent” of these particular employees to discriminate?

Two More Facts

- The woman was not accompanied by her husband and was not wearing a wedding ring. Without reviewing the guest card (which was not reviewed in the presence of the prospect) she appeared to be a single parent.
- The woman is white; the children are Asian.

Did discrimination take place in this case? E-mail Lisa@apartmentexpert.com and give your opinion. Responses will be shared in next month’s column. ■

Lisa Trosien has more than 20 years of industry experience, as well as expertise on targeted uses of the Internet.

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