

The Marketing Message: All Things Touched and Seen

BY LISA TROSIEN

When reading the words “The Marketing Message” most readers probably assumed this article would discuss advertising copy. Wrong. Advertising copy comprises only a small amount of the marketing message that apartment communities send every single day.

To really know what type of message is being sent to both residents and prospects, it is necessary to review everything that touches or is seen by the customer. In a survey of rental prospects in Chicago, respondents were asked how they determine whether or not a property is well maintained.

Their answer: They pay close attention to the laundry rooms and mailbox areas while touring the community. This makes a lot of sense. Residents probably use common laundry rooms and mailbox areas more than any other common area. If the management cannot keep those areas clean and well maintained, how in the world can they keep the fitness center, swimming pool and other areas in good, clean operating order?

Signage and Curb Appeal

Exterior signage also sends a strong message to residents and prospects. Following are scenarios of adjacent properties viewed in a suburban Midwest market two months ago:

Property A: Signage was clean, freshly painted and well maintained. Landscaping was crisp and colorful with seasonal flowers planted underneath, but not obscuring the sign. A nighttime drive-by showed the lighting to be well placed, bright but not overwhelming and all bulbs were operational. A series of bootleg signs indicating a current rental incentive led the way down the street to the monument signs. The bootlegs were strongly anchored and in excellent condition.

Property B: Signage was faded with peeling paint. Landscaping was minimal with a series of scrawny, water starved Petunias withering in the August heat. A banner proclaiming “One Month Free” was stapled to the sign, but had drooped on one side, partially obscuring the property’s name on the monument sign. The typeface indicating the property name was dated, sending a strong message that the property was built in the late 1970s or early 1980s.



The prospect driving by must then choose between Property A and Property B. Clearly, Property A is the winner because everything about their community makes a statement.

Drive-by appeal is not limited to signage and landscaping. A regular, ongoing review of resident windows for neutral colored blinds or drapes is essential. Balconies and patios should not overflow with too many furnishings, bicycles, motorcycles and the like.

While community policies and procedures should emphasize the need to keep these areas clean and neat, enforcement is the key to increasing the marketability of any apartment community.

Almost every apartment community these days has a computer onsite or at least a typewriter. Therefore, there is no excuse for sloppy, handwritten temporary signage in common areas. Just as bad are signs with misspelled words. A dictionary should be an essential tool for every onsite office.

Career Apparel

Career apparel is again making a comeback. Reduced in the most recent years for budgeting reasons, it has now become apparent to owners and management companies that what the team wears sends a strong message to anyone considering living at or renewing their lease in any community.

Is it necessary that leasing professionals and the management team wear suits and formal attire? No. That’s not for every community. Land’s End (www.landsend.com) has an excellent line of clothing in their “Business Outfitters” section of its Web site. Today’s career apparel is attractive, fun and flattering to all body types. For those three reasons, employees actually enjoy wearing it. Best of all, it conveys to prospects and residents that the property is professionally managed and cares about its appearance. (Translation: If the property cares enough to make sure its employees are well dressed, they will care enough to make sure the property looks good and is well maintained.)

Maintenance techs should always have a spare uniform available in the maintenance shop for a quick change, should their uniform become covered in grease early in the day. Properties in cold climates should always supply their maintenance team

THE LEASING CENTER STANDARDS CHECKLIST

Every day, each Leasing Professional should take a moment to view the Leasing Center as a prospect would upon entering the office for the first time. Please complete the following checklist on your office and perform it mentally whenever you walk in to your office.

How does the office appear to the prospective resident?	Yes	No
1. Are all desks orderly and free of clutter with minimal personal items?	_____	_____
2. Is the bathroom clean and neat, stocked with tissue items?	_____	_____
3. Are the trash baskets clean and not overflowing?	_____	_____
4. Are the floors free of clutter?	_____	_____
5. Are all empty drink containers disposed of and not present throughout the office?	_____	_____
6. Is the carpet vacuumed?	_____	_____
7. Is the kitchen area clean and tidy?	_____	_____
8. Is all the dusting completed throughout the office?	_____	_____
9. Are all windows and glass doors throughout the office clean?	_____	_____
10. Do all team members have a "professional" appearance?	_____	_____
11. Are all entrances to the office clean and orderly?	_____	_____
12. Is the office supply and storage area neat and orderly?	_____	_____
13. Is there quiet, easy-listening music in the background?	_____	_____
14. Are all plants healthy looking and devoid of dead leaves?	_____	_____

members with logo jackets and cold weather logo gear such as Carharts to wear during snow removal duty.

The Leasing Office

A quick trip through many leasing centers during the lunch hour generally finds staff members eating at their desks and the aroma of takeout food strong in the air. Both of these send negative signals to anyone entering the leasing center on business. Staff members need the break of getting away from their desks during the day to help keep them fresh and invigorated to handle residents and prospects. And no one wants to lease in an environment that smells of fast-food.

The leasing center must be continually evaluated to ensure that it is a pleasing place for everyone. The National Apartment Associ-

FYI

Lisa Trosien will publish responses to her October 2003 Onsite Solutions column that dealt with discrimination in the January 2004 edition of UNITS. To respond to the column, please e-mail lisa@apartmentexperts.com.

ation's NALP program provides a checklist just for this very purpose.

Models

How does the model look? If it is furnished in Southwestern style décor—something that went out of vogue several years ago—it is time to change. Dated models tell prospects that the property is not keeping up with the today's tastes and economy. Worse yet, is the model decorated beyond the means of its prospects? Models should reflect the community demographic; they shouldn't be limited to a decorator's idea of what works. Make sure to have input when determining the design and décor or the furnishings.

Has the model been renovated to show better? Or have items such as decorative paint and wall-paper been added when both of those are not allowed in the apartments? If the leasing team has to continually say, "That's not allowed in the apartments." Or "The apartments don't really look like this," this is a problem. The model is one of a property's strongest marketing and leasing tools and it needs to be decorated in both a fashionable and functional way. If the model demonstrates that there is one set of standards for management and quite another for residents, the marketing message is telling prospects that

the property is not trustworthy.

To ensure that properties send the marketing message to their prospects and residents, it is necessary to continually review and inspect everything that touches the customer and make the necessary adjustments as needed. All dollars spent on print ads, marketing campaigns and more is simply money wasted if the marketing message at the community says, "We don't care." ■



Lisa Trosien has more than 20 years of industry experience, as well as expertise on targeted uses of the Internet. Reprinted with permission from the November/December 2003 issue of UNITS magazine, published by the National Apartment Association (NAA). For more information about NAA, please visit www.naa.org or call 703/518-6141.