

*Thank
You!*
The
Management



The Six Degrees Of Separation

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SPECIAL EDITION



Managers spend an enormous amount of time focusing on enticing residents who chose not to live in their community. Instead, Trosien writes, they should turn their efforts toward retaining their new residents. She discusses six situations in which a management staff can make residents feel welcome.

BY LISA TROSIEN

During the past several years, there has been a huge push from within the industry to increase resident retention. Books, articles and seminars have been created to help property managers “close the back door” and keep residents longer. Is it working? In analyzing the practices of numerous properties and the responses from their residents, it appears that many companies have forgotten that the most effective way to improve resident retention comes when management caters to existing residents. Management’s greatest efforts should come after the prospect signs the lease and continue throughout the course of their stay.

Following are tips on handling residents smoothly during the “Six Degrees of Separation.” Each presents a scenario in which

the resident feels separated from the management and staff, so much so, that the actions of the community will likely determine whether the resident renews.

First Degree The Thank-You

It is human nature to chase “the one that got away.” Prospects who visit most communities and view the apartment homes likely will receive a follow-up phone call, an e-mail or a handwritten note, thanking them for the opportunity. A prospect may get several of these gestures, depending on how well-trained the leasing professional is who conducted the community tour.

One classic leasing mistake is overlooking the sending of a thank-you note to a prospect who chooses to rent at the community. Leasing professionals who are focused on service know this

is more important than the follow-up with the one that got away.

Following are suggestions on how to make a soon-to-be-resident feel welcome:

1. Send a note thanking them for choosing to lease at the community.
2. Schedule a lease-signing appointment with them to ensure their move-in goes smoothly.
3. Conduct periodic follow-ups, using that time to inform the resident that their apartment is being prepared for their entry. One way is to send an e-mail that reads, "Your apartment was painted today in preparation for your move in. We look forward to your residency."
4. Remind them about switching their address for their utilities, and to reserve time to use the elevator (if necessary).
5. Notify them that a nearby carport or parking space is available to them when they unload their belongings.
6. Send a note to remind them of their move-in date and let them know when they can come by to pick up their keys.
7. And make sure, again, to thank them for choosing to lease in your community. Presenting them with a small gift is a nice touch, too.

Second Degree Convenient Service

Consider this situation encountered by a new resident during move-in. On move-in day they find a few problems in their apartment. Because it is a Saturday, they assume the leasing office is open and its staff can immediately fix the problem. But instead, they find out that the maintenance staff is not always readily available during the weekend and they have to wait until Monday to have it fixed.

Facing this predicament, the new resident begins to question their decision to lease in this community. With no staff there to help, some of the excitement that comes with moving into a new place is erased.

Following are several ways to overcome this inconvenience:

1. Give a complete and thorough walk-through of the apartment home, prior to



when the resident receives their keys. This might alleviate any maintenance issues that were overlooked. This also gives the maintenance staff a chance to make any necessary repairs before the new resident officially moves in.

2. Go on a walk-through with the new resident on move-in day. This is a terrific way to begin their leasing experience on a positive note. Having a checklist available that the resident can use during this process will show them that the community is committed to customer service. This also is a good time to explain the community's service policies and procedures, and to reassure the resident that their needs will be met as soon as a service person is available.

3. Consider having maintenance staff working during the weekend. This new trend is gaining popularity and has proven to be a huge help in smoothing the way for weekend move-ins. Most maintenance personnel happily accept the flexibility that a weekend schedule can allow.

Third Degree Positive Communication

It is important for the property manager to reach out with positive communication between themselves and the new resident. It is not healthy for residents to only hear from their onsite staff during times of difficulty, change or when a policy is violated.

Consider the feeling of a resident who has been in the apartment for about three months, during which time they received only these letters from management:

- Please do not park in the parking lot for the next three days. We will be seal coating and striping. Cars that are not moved will be towed at the owner's expense and risk.

- Your water will be shut off for the day beginning at 7 a.m. due to necessary plumbing repairs.

Sadly, many residents only hear from management when inconveniences occur, or worse, when there has been crime at the community.

Following are



examples of how to extend positive communication with residents.

1. One week after a new resident moves in, conduct a "warm call" and thank them for choosing to lease there. Ask if there are any maintenance needs that can be addressed by the service team. This makes them feel important and appreciated.

2. Six weeks after they move in, send a short note expressing how much their residency is appreciated. Personally invite them to an upcoming resident event, or remind them of the community's after-hours phone number or e-mail address in case an emergency arises.

Keep a regular schedule for sending positive communication to all residents throughout the course of their residency. Make certain that the number of positive messages sent far outweighs anything that could be perceived as negative.

Fourth Degree A Responsive Voice

A friendly, responsive voice is always more appreciated than a beeping answering machine or a general information voice-mail message, particularly when the resident is requesting service. Onsite staff cannot always be on the other line, but a prompt response always is appreciated.

Consider a resident who awakens to a garbage disposal that is broken and whose kitchen light fixture has a burned out bulb. The resident, wanting to expedite the process, e-mails the service request that morning, thinking it is the more convenient method of communication. However, when finding out the leasing office does not have Internet access, they call the office directly to request a work order.

When the call is made, an answering machine picks up and broadcasts a non-specific recorded message. The resident leaves a message, requesting service. At approximately 3 p.m., the leasing professional returns the call and accepts the request for service. But, the manager says that because it



is now the middle of the afternoon, they will not be able to complete the job until tomorrow.

The resident does not see this as a fair settlement, but chooses to go along with the rules so that the items get fixed. Even more, this response makes the resident feel like the community's management views them simply as a rent check.

Following are ways to help keep residents from feeling like more than a rent check.

1. Is voice-mail really necessary in a leasing office? If so, how often is it checked for messages? Create an in-office policy so that no phone call is ignored.

2. Re-examine service request policies. Perhaps rewrite it so that if the request is received, either via e-mail, drop slot, fax or voice mail before noon, it is completed that day.

3. Survey current residents to see which mode of communication is preferred. If e-mail is the overwhelming choice, allow the onsite staff access to e-mail.

4. Consider adding "residents only" hours in the leasing office to accommodate residents who work during the typical course of a business day. Select one night each week when the office is open an extra hour or two to allow working residents to be able to speak in-person with the office staff.

Fifth Degree Billing for Repairs

Billing for service repairs is another opportunity for management to show the resident that their goal is to treat their residents with courtesy and fairness. Taking into consideration the situation with the resident in the "Fourth Degree," management should avoid this type of scenario:

Upon returning home from work the next day, the resident finds a notice hanging from the apartment door handle that reads,

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add the cost of the repairs to next month's rent check. Failure to pay for repairs could result in eviction proceedings. Thank you, The Management."

Smart companies know that one of the greatest keys to resident retention lies in the training of the maintenance teams. Smart and successful community management teams not only train their maintenance team members on how to calm an upset resident; provide outstanding customer service; and comply with Fair Housing; but also about the art of being a part-time marketer. After all, that is indeed what maintenance team members are.

These companies realize that maintenance requests are opportunities to dazzle residents by providing excellent service. They know that charging a resident for a light bulb does far more damage than accepting the charge themselves. They realize that a \$15 charge could ultimately cost them the renewal.

Smart and successful community management teams make sure their maintenance team members know how to clearly compose a completed service request form in a courteous manner, even to the point of making sure their handwriting is completely legible

"Someone was in your apartment home today!"

There is clear evidence that a person from the maintenance staff made the repair. Large dirty footprints are visible on the beige carpeting that leads straight to the kitchen, and both the light fixture and garbage disposal now work. However, the resident, pleased that the repairs were made, quickly has an attitude adjustment when reading this note, which was left on their kitchen counter:

"Fixed disposal. Replaced kitchen bulb; charge to resident \$15 for bulb and labor. Please



and their spelling is perfect.

These management teams also provide job aides (such as pocket cards) that provide step-by-step instructions on how to enter and leave an apartment home when making a service call. They put courtesy toward residents ahead of cost savings.

Sixth Degree The Renewal

Successful apartment community management companies make sure to extend new resident bonus offers to renewing residents, too. Consider this unfair treatment that one community showed to a resident whose lease is up in two months.

It sent a photocopied form letter to the resident, asking for the renewal. It is addressed to "Dear _____", with the person's name written into the blank line.

Meanwhile, banners are displayed in front of the community that read: Three Months Free Rent!

The apartment community's advertisements feature concessions such as: Ask us about our move-in specials.

Nowhere in the lease renewal letter sent to the existing resident are concessions mentioned. And when the resident calls the leasing office to ask why, the leasing professional informs the resident that the specials only

apply to new residents, and that the current resident received their leasing concession when they moved in.

It is not likely that, in this current down market, this kind of response will convince the resident to renew. Instead, they might cross the street and become a "new resident" next door.

Do not let the degrees of separation between management and residents make the residents decide that their move-in should be a move-out. ■

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