

**There is More to Maintenance than Nuts & Bolts**  
**By: Jackie Ramstedt, CAPS, CAM, CAS**

I was interviewing a maintenance technician applicant for an opening we had at one of our communities one day. His resume was very strong in technical skills and abilities and he had several licenses and certificates of completion from various trade schools.

I began to discuss what his responsibilities would be. During the discussion I was explaining about our procedures on handling service requests; he stopped me and said, "You mean work orders, don't you?" "No, I mean SERVICE requests. Do you know the difference?" I asked. "I guess they're the same, aren't they?" he replied.

This is not an uncommon perception for some of our own site maintenance personnel. While many of our maintenance technicians are extremely good at what they do, they still believe that their job responsibilities are mainly just to "fix things", but NOT have to actually *interact or talk* to the residents. That's the job of the office people!

**Remember ... the acronym for ASSET is:**

**A = Apartment**  
**S = Service**  
**S = Satisfaction**  
**E = Eliminates**  
**T = Turnover**

With the ever-increasing amount of competition in the multi-housing industry, *service* is a very strong competitive commodity. There are so many different styles of multi-housing accommodations including a wide array of amenity packages for a prospective customer to choose from, that it becomes confusing at best, to tell the difference from property to property. In fact, many times the recreational amenities are not as important to the prospective resident, as "what services do you provide?"

We all have our "horror stories" of bad services; illusive waiters in restaurants, bank tellers putting the "Closed – Next Teller" sign in our faces, and locked doors to business "when we desperately needed to get something"! There are so many "sins" of dealing with customers out there today. It seems like no one really cares about anything these days! Here are some, just to mention a few:

**The #1 reason people rent or lease their home, instead of purchasing, is for the services provided.** Being able to pick up a telephone and call in a Service Request for a broken dishwasher or garbage disposal, and knowing that request will be done within a day, is why they are "voting with their dollars" and paying rent.

If you would poll any number of residents on out communities, they would tell you that a "good maintenance staff" is far more valuable than the people in the office. Therefore, the success rate of the property is mainly determined upon the quality of customer service a staff gives, and the ability to actually "fix" their problems in a timely manner.

Now don't get me wrong about the office staff. OF COURSE, they are very important too, but it is because they generally ARE customer service minded anyway, that customers naturally EXPECT THEM to be nice, friendly, and to explain things. It's the maintenance personnel that don't like speaking with the residents especially the ones who can be very difficult to deal with. They just want to "fix the problem and get out!"

Let's start with a look from the consumer's point of view and their perceptions of what constitutes good customer service. We need to ask these questions of our service team. True or False?

1. **The first step toward improving your current level of service quality is to find out where the problems are.** TRUE. How can you improve on something you really don't know the "true answer"? It's like the old adage; "You can't fix it if you don't know it's broken".
2. **When it comes to your maintenance staff, technical skills are more important than customers service skills.** FALSE. Although actually fixing the problem IS

important, their ability to communicate information and gain the customer's trust is what the customer remembers.

3. **Most residents don't care about your maintenance staff's appearance; they just want their problems solved.** FALSE. Perception is reality with most people. Dressing professionally enhances the respect level and, again, trust level, a resident has with a maintenance individual, AS A professional.
4. **One test of quality service is: "Quality must be high because resident complaints are low.** FALSE. Contrary to the "regular complainers" on your property who come in daily to express their dislike for "something", statistics show that more times than not, people who have complaints don't necessarily tell them to the management or maintenance staff. They just "quietly" give notice at the end of their lease terms and MOVE OUT!

To insure better quality of service from our maintenance teams, keep in mind the following:

- Hire right from the start! Incorporate questions within the interviews of "how would you handle this situation?" and impress upon them that dealing with the customers is as, if not *more* important than their technical skills and abilities. We are in the PEOPLE BUSINESS!
- Service requests are NOT the same as "work orders". We are here to fix people's *problems*, as well as their appliances, plumbing, air conditioners, etc.
- **The "Move In Condition Sheet" is our report card.** Be sensitive to those requests, as they are our FIRST opportunity to show that new residents how effective and professional we are. Remember, residents decide to renew their lease based upon their experiences on MOVE IN DAY!

Good communication skills, professional appearances, sincerity, patience, and understanding, coupled with extensive technical knowledge and abilities to correct mechanical problems, are the keys to having your maintenance team be REAL customer service assets!

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