

Secret Shopper: Is Your Vacancy Really Ready? **by Robert L. Cain**

Some prospective renters need apartments right away, and are ready to make a buying decision as soon as they find an apartment they like that will meet their needs. With so many apartments to choose from, many people looking for future availability may look at dozens of apartments before making a decision. However, those needing immediate occupancy do not have the luxury of time. See what happens when the Secret Shopper visit three communities early in the week, looking for an apartment to occupy by the weekend.

“Losing out on even one new resident isn’t just bad for business, it’s TERRIBLE for the bottom line!”

The first community I shopped by had a lush, green lawn and pretty blooming plants and flowers. The grounds throughout looked clean and well cared for. The signs were well placed and easy to read, and the directional signs clearly indicated the location of the information center. It seemed to have a peaceful, relaxing environment and I looked forward to seeing what the apartments looked like. When I entered the office area, the consultant came forward and greeted me with a handshake and a smile. I explained that I was brand new to the area, and staying temporarily with friends. I told her I was anxious to find a new place right away and get moved in by the weekend. The consultant said, “That’s no problem.” She explained that she had “several” apartments currently available. She invited me to have a seat and filled out a guest card for me. The consultant said, “I’m out of brochures right now, but I can tell you what they look like.” She described some features and benefits, which appealed to me, but did not offer to show me one of the available apartments. I requested to see an apartment and she stated, “They’re being “turned” right now, but we’ll definitely have something ready for you by this weekend.” I said, “What about a model?” She explained that they didn’t have one because they are usually full. She gave me a tour of the community amenities, and everything was clean and in good condition. However, I was not seeking to rent the recreational facilities. The consultant asked me to leave a deposit for an apartment and said that I could come back in a few days and look at it before I moved in. I told her I really didn’t feel comfortable doing that. I said that I had planned to make a decision TODAY, but couldn’t very well decide on an apartment I hadn’t seen. She said she would give me a call when an apartment was ready, just in case I hadn’t found anything else yet.

My second stop was at another attractive, well cared for community. The landscaping was carefully manicured and there were many colorful flowers and plants to enhance the entrance. I easily located the welcome center and found plenty of available parking. When I entered the building, I was greeted immediately by an enthusiastic consultant. He came forward with an extended hand and welcomed me to the community. He asked how he could help me and I explained that I was new in town and needed an apartment right away. I said I was hoping to get moved in and settled somewhere by the weekend. The consultant told me that he had two apartments available for immediate move in, but they had just recently been vacated and were in the process of being cleaned and painted. He said one would be getting new carpet on Thursday. He pulled out a floor plan, and described the lay out and many of the interior features. I told him I liked the size and the way the apartment is designed. However, I couldn’t get a good idea of what it was like, from just seeing a floor plan.

The consultant explained that it was “against company policy” to show an apartment before it was ready. He said that if I left a deposit for one of the apartments today, he would be happy to refund my money if I wasn’t satisfied once I saw the apartment. I let him know that I appreciated the refund policy, but if I didn’t like the apartment, I’d be ready to move, but have no place to live. I didn’t want to have to move twice! The consultant expressed his regret for being unable to help me. He closed with, “I’m really sorry I don’t have anything to show you today.” He offered to call me in a day or two, to see if I had found a place yet.

I made a third stop that same day. The community was cleaned and well maintained, with bright, colorful flags and beautiful flowers at the entrance. It was very eye-catching from the curb. As I approached the leasing office, I could see that the parking areas and sidewalks were all

swept clean. A friendly consultant came forward to greet me and asked how she could be of service. I explained that I was new to the area and needed an apartment right away. I said I was hoping to get into something by the week-end, but so far I wasn't having any luck finding an apartment that was ready. She said, "Well, you've come to the right place!" She offered me a seat and asked if she could take a few minutes to fill out a guest card and find out what I was looking for in an apartment. We established an easy rapport, and although there was only one apartment available, the consultant described it in such a way that it matched what I had said was important to me. She told me that the previous resident had moved out only a few days ago, so I "braced myself" as I waited for her to tell me that it wasn't ready yet. However, I was almost astounded when she stood and said, "Let's go take a look." The consultant noticed my surprised expression and started, "We don't have a model here, so we make it a priority to always have at least one vacant apartment to show; even if it means working overtime to get it ready." She said, "Losing out on even one new resident isn't just bad for business, it's TERRIBLE for the bottom line!"

Are you prepared to rent the apartment you have available RIGHT NOW? Many apartment communities have beautiful models to help prospective renters visualize furniture placement, floor space, etc., but some do not. They have to rely on brochures and floor plans, and MUST make sure that their vacant apartments are ready for viewing and moving right into. Being prepared to sell when your prospects are ready to buy will turn your prospective renters into new residents EVERY time.

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