

## **The Number One, Most Important, Never Fail Ingredient in Resident Retention**

*By Anne Sadovsky, CAM, RAM, CSP*

What is it? COMMON SENSE! Let's keep this simple. We have begun to see the resident as the enemy...after all, there are so many of them and so few of us. Plus, they act like they own the place. And on top of that, they all have problems on the same day and then take it out on us. They are rude, demanding and arrogant. Who needs them anyway? I do, and so do you. Without them, we'd be out of business, and no business means no job. Let's look at some simple common sense tips/rules/ideas that just might change our negative feelings toward our customers and make us more successful at keeping our residents.

1. **Understand who the resident is.** They are often difficult. Most of them live stressful lives, have demanding jobs, family problems and financial constraints. Sound familiar? Wow, they're just like us. The only difference is that they have us to take it out on. So next time someone is being mean to you, have a little empathy. Practice magic words like "I'd be upset if that happened to me" and mean it. If you don't take their behavior personally, and instead realize that the world has just gotten to them on that day, perhaps your behavior, your response, will be a little different. If they were always easy, always nice, your boss could probably find someone for less money to do your job. So think of yourself as a peacemaker, a junior grade psychotherapist, and the world's best professional problem solver.
2. **Treat your peers with respect and kindness.** They are your customers, too. Your service tech, your groundskeepers, the accounting office, your supervisor; they are your "in-house" customers. And you are theirs. The way you treat each other becomes a behavior habit, and reflects in the way you treat your "outside customers"; the residents.
3. **Begin to see that the residents create your paycheck.** The more happy and satisfied they are, the longer they stay, the more they pay, the more they refer their friends, then their friends stay and pay, and on and on. The reputation of your community grows more and more positive, ultimately creating long term high occupancy. The money you are paid does not come from your company, it comes through the company. It comes FROM the residents.
4. Remember how nice all of you were when they came in looking for an apartment, how everyone in the office went out of their way to say hello? We offered them refreshments, the best chair in the office and gave them our undivided attention. You know, ladies...sort of like we treated our boyfriends when we wanted them to become our husbands. So why, after they have become our residents (or our husbands) does all that love and attention stop? We even complain that those darned residents come into the office and eat all the cookies and drink up all the coffee. Why wouldn't they? After all, that's how they thought it would be after they were married! (oops, I mean after they moved in!) **Big advice coming...we have to keep selling to them every day if we want renewals, just like we sold to them before they signed on the line the first time.** Contrary to popular belief, and to the way we treat them (just like our spouses) we do not own them forever. We have to never stop selling! Budget for retention and renewal,

send little cards and flowers, spring for lunch once in a while...you'll be pleased with the results.

5. **Rewrite your "rules and regulations."** If they sound like you're the Federal Government or their parents, get rid of all those "you have to, you must, you can't, do not" beginnings to every sentence. Title them "Resident Guidelines" or "Helpful Handbook" and use lots of please and thank yous and we appreciate your cooperation beginnings instead. Feel free to reference the policies as a "legal addendum" to the lease, but please know that you'll get more cooperation, and put a better taste in their mouths, when you say it nicely. And yes, they are just as legally enforceable when said politely.

6. It's tempting to give up on social activities for your residents...I know, you plan parties and they don't show up. Take a look at the 'invitation.' Do you roll up a photo copied black and white piece of paper and rubber band it to their door knob? You know, one that says something like "if you have nothing better to do on Friday night, we're having a dumb little party from 7 to 9?" The invitation is more important than the event...make it exciting, give it a theme, use great colorful paper, tie on a balloon, shape it like a heart, attach it to a candy bar...THINK! What would make you excited to attend a party? **Get a resident social committee together and let them help plan several events...if they help make it happen, they'll help market it.** The day before the party, call every resident personally and remind them, telling them you really want them to be there. And a few door prizes will further your cause!

7. **Why wait until 60 days before their lease is complete to start with surveys and friendly treatment?** All that should begin on move in day. Plan a program where they are contacted at least 4 times during a 12 month lease. Ask how they're doing and if they need anything and remember their name when they pay their rent. 68% of customers who stop doing business with any given business do so because of some perceived disinterest toward them by someone on the front desk.

8. Take a long look at the documents you use to invite them to renew. I know, I know...your company or the State or somebody expects you to use "the forms" but certainly you can add a cover letter or invitation that is personalized and is warm and friendly. Words like "renew" instead of "expire" and "we want you to stay" have a powerful impact. In consumer focus groups we've learned that they hate fill in the blanks type form letters. So make it personal and individual.

9. **Please remember that they are not stupid.** They see the free rent banners and ads just as the prospective renters do. When they ask "What will you do to get me to stay?" you'd better come up with something better than "We'll shampoo your carpet." Even if they received some kind of incentive at the beginning of their lease, remember that they could move out and move back in, or move elsewhere, and receive that "special" all over again. Then you're out not only two to four weeks loss to vacancy, but cleaning, painting, utilities, advertising costs, locator fees PLUS the incentive to the person who finally does rent it. Move outs today cost the housing provider around \$2,000. Offer a \$400 renewal bonus! Take care of all the disclaimers right up front...non cash, non rent, non refundable, non accruable...then offer a menu of what the resident can use their "allowance" toward. For example, complete paint for \$200, a ceiling fan with light kit for \$100, a microwave for \$150, carpet replacement for the whole \$400 on a long term lease. Make up your own list and your own game plan, use your own amounts and numbers, but do something! If you snooze, you lose.

**10. Last but far from least, remember the Golden Rule...** better yet establish a platinum rule. Treat others, renew residents, exactly as you'd like to be treated and renewed. We have taken the customer service aspect of our business way to lightly. We've always focused far more on leasing than retention and look where it has gotten us. There will always be job transfers, marriages and divorces...and yes, with low interest rates there will be house purchases. But let me repeat the statistics...68% move out because of the way they are treated, and there IS something we can do about that!

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