



As a Landlord, You Cannot Afford to Ignore the Internet **By Clifford A. Hockley**

The World Has Changed

There was a time when a landlord rented a vacancy by placing an advertisement in the local newspaper and waited for the phone to ring or tenants to visit. The classified sections of the local newspapers were packed with ads. You had to be very creative to leap out of the pack of ads.

Apartment properties with more vacancies to fill (due to their size) used additional advertising sources like “For Rent” and “Apartment Finder” magazines. These methods of advertising were successful for many years. These companies extended their products by offering online listings and were joined by other online competitors; each one promising super results with different pricing schemes and marketing approaches.

Of course all properties use some sort of “for rent signage at the property, ranging from small signs and flyers in windows to large a-frames located close to the main entrance of the property.

Then Along Came Craigslist

This free on-line service was easy for potential tenants to use and free to Landlords. And as they say, free is a very good price. It has been the category killer.

In major cities, classified sections of the newspapers are mere skeletons of their former self. Newspapers have suffered and are downsizing as a result. Small towns, however, are not as impacted by craigslist and newspaper’s classified sections are still used as a major marketing source, especially in rural areas.

Landlords have benefited. Advertising costs have dropped significantly. Tenants, especially younger tenants under 35, are used to looking for rentals on craigslist. The use of computer search engines has become integrated in our social fabric. On the other hand...

Online Comments

Computer search engines also bring a new product to the table such as online comments.

These comments often appear when you type a property’s name in your city. Say you type in “Lakewood Landing Apartments” – you might get the following comments, (examples only):

- “Don’t move here! There is a creepy security guard at night that follows you as you are walking to your vehicle.”
- “Going downhill – his apartment complex is awful. The air conditioning never works and there are always burned out light bulbs in the hallway. The onsite manager tries but is held back by ownership and the property management company. Dumpsters are always full.”
- “Nice place if you suck up. You pay for heat, which includes the hallways, so you never how high your bills are going to be.”
- “Nice, but noisy.”
- “I would discourage any women from renting at this place. The maintenance man is a total pervert and a stalker.”

As you can see, these would have an influence on any potential tenant and, online comments can extend to property management companies, for example, which can be good or bad. All is not rosy on the internet after all.

Other Internet Issues

1. As more and more people have access to the internet (the price of net books have dropped to \$200), professionally prepared websites have become more important. Computers are accessible to almost everyone.
 - Professional prepared websites might include:
 - Virtual property tours
 - Pictures of the property
 - Floor plans
 - Floor plans that allow you place furniture in place
 - Leasing information
 - Screening criteria and applications
 - Contact information
2. Large apartment properties must have websites which serve not only as a way for a tenant to rent, but also for a way to communicate with the onsite property manager regarding property events, maintenance and rent due.
3. Onsite staff must have employees designated to receiving messages on the internet and responding to them within 24 hours. Tenants might use email to report property emergencies and property managers need to be prepared to deal with an immediate response.
4. Property managers need to be aware that not all emails arrive. Spam eliminators might clean your important message off of a tenant’s computer. If you don’t hear back, send a letter. Or better yet, have the tenant put you on their white list so that you can communicate with them via email.
5. Much of your communication with your clients and tenants happens via email. How do you know they have received the message? Letters should be used for official notifications.

Summary

The internet has progressed from an afterthought for our property marketing to a full scale marketing and communication system. As property owners, we need to adjust to this change. We need to understand that the internet and web sites are used by tenants to evaluate our properties and make choices about where they want to live. The internet is now the front line of where housing decisions are made.

A good way to be aware of what is going on is to track what people are saying about you or your company is to use Google Alerts (google.com/alerts). Other services that might help you track activity are: Backtype.com, Blogpulse.com, Boardreader.com or Search.twitter.com to name a few.

Effective property owners will invest in understanding the internet, craigslist and how search engines operate so they can optimize their access to current and future tenants. This will continue until another innovation makes it easier and less expensive to rent units.

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