

Advertising Vacancies – “Who You Talkin’ To?” by Christopher Higgins, “The Apartment Guy”

Have you ever watched Fox News? Ever notice how many commercials during this programming are for stock brokerage firms, luxury automobiles and blood pressure medications? Why do you think that is? What about if you flip the channel over to the Jerry Springer Show - do you find the same advertisers courting this market? Hardly. You are much more likely to see ads touting debt counseling services or workers comp attorneys. What’s the difference? Simple demographics. The economy of television advertising is so defined that advertisers choose shows, days, times, even segments when they will be most successful offering their wares. Why doesn’t the apartment industry operate this way?

Create Ads That Attract Your Intended Demographic

Apartment advertising is much simpler, granted. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t use some of these same principles and ideas that huge corporations and successful advertising agencies have lived by for decades. Understanding the demographics of the target audience is absolutely essential to placing an advertisement. A hip, urban loft infill development simply cannot be marketed the same way as an affordable or tax-credit community in a good suburban school district. The architects understood this when designing the communities. We need to be just as aware of our customer when designing the advertising for them.

Advertising is supposed to generate interest. Most ads in the local apartment publications aren’t interesting and don’t generate much of anything. Many companies have misinterpreted the federal fair housing law by making their ads so bland and non-specific that they are targeting everyone. This is not only a mistake; it is a complete waste of money and time. Placing advertising that speaks to a certain demographic group is not in violation or even against the spirit of the fair housing law. You don’t want to waste your advertising dollars by trying to be all things to all people. You simply won’t succeed.

My friend Lori Snyder and her company, Creativity for Rent, understand the need for a fresh image to attract a new clientele. She contracted with a management company in Raleigh, North Carolina to change the direction of a community with a hip new look and revitalized image. She used styling cues from the funky 60’s interiors and incorporated that into a color scheme and logo design that speaks directly to a young and hip audience. The cool, Mondrian-inspired grid logo was influenced by the buildings unique design and sets the tone for all of the collateral material. Lori also used this new theme in the design of updated property signage and the community website. This entire project could not have been undertaken without a clear idea of who the property was intending to lure – understanding the demographics.

There are many segments of the population and so many different types of people, but generational differences are the simplest way to group consumers and they tend to share a certain number of defining characteristics that make them easier to market to “as a group”. This is sometimes referred to as cohort identity. Every age group has a shared set of cultural and historical references, touchstones in history. For my generation, nearly everyone you ask can remember where they were when they saw or heard about the space shuttle Challenger exploding in 1986. Many students watched it live on TV and like the 9/11 attacks, it left an indelible mark. For my parents’ generation, the JFK assassination has this same resonance. Cohort differences change the way we perceive and react to the world – including advertising. Think of advertisements you may have seen for a new video game on the PlayStation2 or Xbox systems. Play these commercials for members of older generations, or even anyone over the age of 30, and you will see blank stares or even a bit of concern. The anime and Japanese-inspired images, odd music and fast pace speak to an ADD generation weaned on Ritalin. But they speak perfectly to the intended demographic – young people who spend their disposable income on video games, not seniors going to bridge games.

Once you identify your intended future residents by demographic group it can give you a great amount of insight! There are four basic categories:

Generation Y

Simply put - those under the age of 28 or so. This is not a generation that many apartment owners and managers understand, primarily because the bulk of this group is just entering the rental marketplace. This generation as a whole cannot remember a time before computers were pervasive in daily life. They are a tolerant and accepting group of people. They are leery of large corporations and tend to be quick to change brand loyalties. They also expect much more customization and personalized experiences – driven by the Internet and made-to-order consumables. A cookie cutter community with three floor plans would be hard to market to Generation Y. It just wouldn’t have enough appeal. Communities with varied floor plans and multiple types of buildings would be much easier to market to this demographic and any opportunities to customize the interior would be rewarded by this consumer.

Generation X

How I used to bristle at that moniker. This is my generation and I don’t necessarily share all of the traits, but I do understand the type. Once thought to be slackers and unmotivated, this generation has come of age when the American workforce is increasingly productive and educated. This generation also doesn’t have the fear of cities that older generations sometimes possess and tends to seek out the urban lifestyle that many loft and city apartments offer.

We are also an independent generation that seeks convenience and asks questions when things seem off. Research has found that Generation X tends to go with brands and businesses that talk straight and get to the point. Fluffy advertising doesn’t attract this crowd, simple clean lines and descriptive copy does. Interestingly, because of this generation’s childhood being spent in the 80’s and 90’s, money is the overall measure of

success much like the baby-boom market and people in their 30's and 40's seek out symbols of their hard work, such as an upscale apartment or a new car.

Baby Boomers

For nearly two decades, this generation has been the be-all and end-all for anyone with an advertising message. That has changed over the past five to ten years, as most baby boomers are retiring or even considering assisted living in their future. But there are many communities across the nation that successfully target this market. Keep in mind that a baby-boomer in an apartment is usually a renter by choice. This is someone who may travel extensively for their management job, needing the convenience of apartment living. Often, they are renting after many years of home or condo ownership.

Understanding what is driving this consumer's decision making is key to creating advertising that attracts them.

The Mature Market – Ages 55 and Over

This is an ever-growing and expanding segment of the population and has become increasingly central in many companies marketing efforts. Years ago, once people reached a certain age they tended to be ignored by companies. This has drastically changed as older people live longer, healthier and much more productive lives. The statistics are startling – while the mature market represents just over a quarter of the population, they control 65% of the net worth in America. They also tend to spend a much higher percentage of their income on day-to-day living – which includes housing. However this market is much more leery of advertising than younger generations and wants the facts. They also want to be catered to but can spot a phony salesperson – they don't appreciate canned approaches or rehearsed messages.

This demographic group seeks out excellent customer service and is willing to pay more for good service and quality. Upscale assisted living facilities have exploded across the nation because of this consumer difference, and many conventional properties are seeing the niche and taking advantage.

Most apartment advertising, whether in a print publication or online, tries to talk to all of these groups simultaneously. It can't be done, at least not effectively. While fair housing law and social demands have taught us that we lease to anyone who is qualified, that doesn't mean your marketing has to be generic and dull. Spice it up a bit! Talk to your intended audience and get that advertising to work!

*Christopher Higgins is **The Apartment Guy**, a professional speaker, industry educator and marketing consultant based in Montana. Christopher owns small multifamily property in Florida, Missouri, Montana and Saskatchewan. With 17 years of experience in the industry, Christopher started his career in West Texas with his own print apartment publications and at age 23, became the national marketing and training director for a Top-50 NAHB multi-family developer. He has leased, renovated, marketed and managed rental housing. Performing more than 150 seminars each year across North America and the UK, his topics include closing and phone skills, resident retention, Fair Housing, Internet and outreach marketing, advertising, collateral*

*materials workshops and investment seminars. For more, visit www.theapartmentguy.net.
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