

**Filling Your Vacancies - The Internet Prospect
(5 Steps to Better Connect with the World Wide Web)
by Rick Ellis, CPM**

Are you still trying to figure out this Internet market stuff? Maybe you are advertising on one or another of the big Apartment Internet sites, but you can't seem to turn those leads into new residents. Perhaps the on-site team has concluded that Internet prospects are just tire kickers and not good, solid leads. Before you give up on creating newfound traffic through the World Wide Web (www), consider some of the factors that may contribute to your less than successful internet leasing.

Believe it or not, many on-site professionals are simply unaware of their community's internet advertising. **They don't realize these strange fax or e-mail messages are real people seeking a new rental home.** Another obstacle to successful internet leasing is lack of connectivity to the www. There are still apartment communities in this country that do not have internet access. Unbelievable!

Don't give up on Internet advertising for your community. Instead, check out the following steps and discover a wonderful new source of good, closeable prospect traffic.

5 Steps for Your Community to Fully Connect with the WWW

1. **Take inventory of your internet advertising:** Find out exactly what web sites list each of your communities in any form or fashion. You may not be paying to be on one or another of the big Internet advertising web sites but you could have some sort of free listing. Check these sites to see if your property information is correct and up to date. Determine how this site advertises connectivity to your community. (There are three basic ways your Internet prospects can contact you for your Internet ads: e-mail, telephone or snail mail. Why not offer all three options, knowing full well less than only 1 in 100 will use the latter?) Make sure the e-mail address and phone number on your ads are yours – or at least are funneled to your property quickly. If the site offers your prospects inquiry response forms that can be completed online and submitted to the property, find out how this information gets to your on-site team. Is it via e-mail? What if your property does not have e-mail? Where are your leads going? Request that these leads go to your e-mail account **and** to your community fax machine.

2. **Make certain your on-site team members have internet access:** Would you advertise in the newspaper or phone book and not provide your on-site teams with good telephones? Of course, not! Then why would you even think of advertising on the Internet and not give the folks on site the tools they need to respond? Your Internet prospects like and want you to respond by e-mail. While our marketing and consulting firm strongly recommends both an immediate e-mail **and** telephone call to every Internet lead, you can't leave out the e-mail response. Full Internet access (preferably static connection through DSL or cable) will allow your leasing team to e-mail your e-brochure, e-floor plans and even a community Resident E—Newsletter.

Special Note about On-site Internet Abuse: Because of the allure of the Internet, there is a legitimate concern that some on-site folks might abuse this tool. In other words, waste time messing around on the Net. Let me assure you of something – this WILL happen. The on-site team will occasionally go surfin' when they ought to be collecting rent or walking the property. Yet, just like those crazy 900 numbers that first came out in the late 80's, after a few careless but harmless "accidents" or abuses, there won't be many problems. The few on-site folks who continue to abuse the Internet at work are the same folks who are goofing around at your properties regardless. You'll weed them out soon enough!

3. **Provide complete Internet leasing and communication tools:** In addition to a web site, give your on-site team appropriate e-mail tools, Internet navigational software, auto responders, template letters, e-brochures, and e-floor plans so they can work with prospects located anywhere in the world. Remember, prospects who contact you by e-mail usually prefer the same kind of response.
4. **Train your on site team:** I have personally visited communities throughout the nation where even the manager wasn't clear about how to access their e-mail. And recently, a regional supervisor told me that he checked one of his communities' e-mail accounts and

found more than 130 unread e-mail messages. Whoa! While these are the exception, how can we expect to use the Internet as a leasing tool unless everyone, especially our leasing professionals, have Internet training and access?

5. **Encourage e-Commerce by using it yourself:** Until about 24 months ago, I was a complete Internet illiterate. It was a combination of several excellent management companies' Internet savvy and seeing my wife's shopping company's complete turnaround using the Internet that woke me up. Many of you are experts in using the www as an effective management tool. Those of us who do not get up to speed quickly will become dinosaurs. We will become extinct.

Use the Double Punch with Internet Properties!

Once more, let's remember to both e-mail and telephone all Internet leads. While it's true that many Internet prospects prefer you to contact them by e-mail, we can't forgo the more personal and persuasive telephone contact. If you e-mail an appropriate response (a note answer the prospect's specific questions or needs and attach a nice community e-brochure) while simultaneously calling the prospect by phone, then you have created a great opening for your telephone follow-up contact.

And if you get the prospect's voice mail, leave a similar message. Most prospects (I would guess nine out of ten), will be delighted you called and responded so quickly to their request. The personal nature of the telephone conversation will help to create a positive relationship with your prospect and enhance your chance of getting the prospect to your community. After all, your objective for handling the Internet inquiry is clear – to get the prospect to your property and do it RIGHT NOW! Let's face it. The Internet is here to stay. According to David Lake, of www.thestandard.com, the U.S. online population will reach 137 million in the year 2000. And more than 11 million U.S. households will make their first online purchase. Take advantage of this incredible source of good, stable rental prospects by taking these five steps to connecting "better" with your apartment leasing Internet prospects!

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