

Turning Phone Traffic Into Leases

by Tami Siewruk

It's impossible to lease apartments without traffic. We all know that. Even a steady stream of qualified traffic doesn't necessarily translate into leases. Unless a property's on-site team is skilled at closing, visitors come in as potential residents, but leave as only slightly better informed potential residents. Knowing how to convert traffic into leases is critical.

Because initial traffic frequently takes the form of phone-ins, the first order of business must be to convert those calls into appointments. In order to do this, the leasing professional must know how to "drive" the phone call. That is, he or she must control the direction and flow of the conversation. This means being the one who is asking the questions.

This may seem counterintuitive at first. After all, the caller is the one with the questions, right? And you're the one with the answers. Not exactly! In fact, that old-fashioned, outmoded theory probably leads to some of the shortest conversations on record. Why? Because in most cases, the caller's list of questions is fairly short. In fact, it often consists of only two: "Do you have a vacancy?" and "What is the rental rate?" Once you answer those questions, the conversation is pretty much over, unless you take control and create a dialogue.

The goal of such a dialogue, of course, is to convince the caller that your community merits a closer look in the form of an in-person visit.

Tailoring Your Presentation

The best way to ensure that your caller will want to visit your community is to focus your phone presentation directly on his particular needs and wants. Launching into a 15-minute canned spiel that covers every feature of your community will only have the caller tapping his foot and rolling his eyes in impatience. He doesn't necessarily want all that information. What he wants is the information that is pertinent to him. Think about it. The Internet has made us all accustomed to having our information custom-tailored. We type in our zip code and get weather forecasts for our immediate area. We sign up for news updates on items that are of specific interest to us. Some websites, like Amazon, even greet us with personalized product recommendations. So leasing professionals must rise to challenge, and deliver the specific information that matters to the specific prospect.

Take control of the conversation, dig into the caller's mind, and find out what motivates him. One caution: you may want to preface your questions with an explanation, like "Jeff, if you'll give me just a few moments of your time to ask you some questions, I'll be able to tell you about an apartment that may fit your needs." This explains to the caller what you are doing and why. If he perceives that you are genuinely trying to help him, by meeting his exact needs, he will be much more likely to cooperate.

Once you've gotten permission to ask some questions, start asking! Strive for open-ended questions that invite longer, more detailed answers. (The difference between an open-ended and a closed question is much like the difference between an essay question, like the essay question, on a test. The open-ended question, like the essay question, invites the caller to elaborate. The closed question, like the true-or-false question, can be answered briefly, in one or two words.)

Try asking things like, "Are there any specific features you're looking for in a new home?" "What things are most important to you in an apartment?" and "Why are you moving from where you are living now?" (Two of our contributors use a unique tool to prompt their leasing professionals to ask certain key questions. Kimberly Sherrill and Staci Durham of CAPREIT place a mirror on each associate's desk, with a sticker listing these phone call "basics." The mirrors also serve as a reminder to smile when answering the phone!)

Another important technique involves using assumptive questions. In an assumptive question, you use phrasing that assumes the caller will become a resident of your community. For example, instead of asking, "When do you need an apartment?" you might ask, "When are you planning on moving into our community?" Although the difference may be subtle, this type of phrasing helps the caller think in terms of not just moving into an apartment, but of moving into your apartment.

As the caller starts to respond to your questions, pay attention. He is giving you precious information that you can use to tailor your presentation directly to him. Has he indicated that he has lots of furniture? Talk about the ample square footage of your living rooms. Does he do a lot of work from home? Emphasize how “wired” your units are. Love to cook? Talk about your new, state-of-the-art appliances. Spend lots of time outdoors? Point out your proximity to the park. And so on and so on. Show him how your community is ideal for his particular lifestyle needs.

As you describe your community’s features, use colorful, inviting words and phrases, like “bright,” “cozy,” “spacious,” “airy,” “comfortable,” and “warm.” If this doesn’t come naturally to you, practice it! Work on “talking” your way through each of your community’s floor plans, painting a picture of each room as you go. Instead of saying, “The bedroom is down the hall, to the right,” say, “At the end of the hallway, if you turn to your right, you’ll enter the master bedroom, which is large enough to easily accommodate a full bedroom suite, complete with a king bed. The windows in this room are oversized, so you get a terrific sense of light and spaciousness, not to mention a great view.”

Write these “talk-throughs” down, if you need to. Next, go through them a few times and look for ways to make them more descriptive. Once you’ve mastered each floor plan, work on your community’s amenities, like the pool, the fitness center, and the clubhouse. You might even want to practice describing the surrounding area. One of our contributors makes the most out of giving callers directions to her property, by describing the beautiful scenery they will see as they drive in and the nearness of great shopping and entertainment.

Getting the Appointment

The end result of the phone call, of course, should be an appointment for the caller to come and visit the property. If you’ve done a good job of tailoring your presentation and painting a picture of the community’s features and amenities, an appointment should be an easy sell. Simply say, “Jeff, I really think you’d love this apartment and this community. I’d like for you to come out and see for yourself.” Then say, “Would today be a good time, or is this weekend more convenient?” Notice that while you are giving the caller a choice of days, you are removing the more obvious choice of whether or not to visit in the first place and assuming that he will.

Once your caller has agreed to come visit your property, be sure to get his or her contact information: phone number, address, and email. Not only will this allow you to confirm (or reschedule, if necessary) the appointment, but it will also allow you to send him or her a follow-up packet of information. Send the packet immediately; it will arrive either shortly before or shortly after the actual appointment and, either way, will serve as great reinforcement.

So the appointment’s all set and you’ve gotten the information you need. Great! Now, all that remains is to thank the caller for this time, and warmly express how much you are looking forward to showing him his future home!

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