

## **Tricks of the Trade – The ABC's of Maintenance** **by Jan Leasure**

For many landlords, the words “maintenance” and “headache” often occur in the same sentence. But it doesn't have to be that way. You can put several systems into place to make your maintenance life easier.

- A. The first involves your perspective on maintenance. If you approach landlording with the idea that you do intend to maintain your properties, you will be rewarded with fewer maintenance headaches in the end. If you are willing to spend time and money on routine maintenance of your property, you can expect fewer catastrophes.
- B. Secondly, establish a relationship with the vendors you are most likely to need and always call them first. Your loyalty to them will generate their loyalty to you.
- C. Finally, give your tenant some latitude and control over the maintenance of your property. He will feel more like a homeowner and act more like a homeowner, taking better care of your property. Read on for more details about how these suggestions can be implemented and work to reduce your maintenance headaches.

So let's assume you have the recommended perspective on maintenance (you read this far, didn't you?). Some housing experts recommend setting aside one to three percent of the property's market value for maintenance. You may not need that much in a given year, but you may want to put it aside for a big-ticket item, such as a roof replacement or a new heating system, at some point. Here is a punch list of some of the things you can do to keep your long-term maintenance costs under control.

As you are inspecting your property between tenants:

- Have a pest control company inspect the property on a routine basis for termite damage and wood decay. The pest company will generally also advise you as to the condition of your vapor barrier and alert you to any dampness or standing water that might indicate water intrusion or a leak.
- Have a reputable roofing company evaluate the condition of the roof. They will advise you as to the condition of the shingles, the flashings, any skylights, the chimney cap, and advise of any water damage. Ask the inspector to check vents and louvers to see that they are allowing good circulation.
- Look at your driveways and walks for any cracks or breaks that could not only lead to further damage to your property, but could create liability for you.
- Walk around the exterior of the property, looking for loose or missing pieces of siding, any lifting or warping of the siding, or any sign of mildew (especially on shaded sides of the property). Look at the siding where it joins the foundation wall, at inside corners, and where window and door trim meets the siding. Does it need re-caulking? Is there any peeling, chipping, or blistering paint? Does the trim still fit tightly? Is it rotting anywhere?
- Be sure that the gutter and downspouts direct rainwater away from the foundation. This might require a trip to the property when it is raining to see for yourself exactly how the water drains. Be sure gutters and downspouts are kept clean and in good repair.
- Look at the windows for any loose putty around the panes, any torn screens, and any moisture between the panes of dual-pane windows. The habitability code (California Civil Code 1941) dictates that you should repair any cracked or broken glass.

- Look at the trees around the property. Trim any branches that scrape against or overhang the roof. Keep branches away from the chimney.
- On the inside of the house, take note of any cracks in ceilings and walls. Settling cracks can be filled and painted, but if you do that and the cracks reappear or get worse, you should investigate the reason.
- If you notice any odors, be alert to the possibility of mildew or mold, as well as the possibility of a dead animal in or under the house.
- Examine caulking around sinks, bathtubs, and showers. Has it become brittle with age? If so, it no longer acts as a water seal. The newer caulking materials are flexible and resist drying out, so dig out the old caulking and replace it with a silicone or latex material.
- Do any floors squeak when you walk on them? Are there any loose treads or handrails on the stairs? This can be an area of potential liability.
- Look in your electrical panel for any signs of wear or a short in the service box, such as a black spot. Look for similar signs where you have exposed wiring, such as in an attic or a crawlspace. Call an electrician for repairs if you do not feel comfortable making them yourself. Look for exposed wires and wires with cracked insulation. Replace those in poor condition.
- Have your furnace and air conditioner checked by a qualified serviceperson once a year or according to the manufacturer's warranty and service recommendations. Failure to do manufacturer-recommended servicing may void warranties. The service person will clean or replace filters. Ask how frequently the filters should be cleaned or changed. Your residents are more likely to change filters if the filters are handy. Buy some and leave them at the property, and show your incoming resident how to install them. Explaining to the resident that changing the filter will probably lower his/her utility bills may increase the likelihood of the filters being changed.
- Have the chimney professionally inspected and cleaned, if necessary, to avoid creosote build-up which can cause a fire.
- Look at faucet and hose connections under sinks and toilets. Look for leaks at shut-off valves at sinks, toilets, laundry equipment, and main water shut-off valve. If any supply lines are plastic, check to see if they are getting rigid; this can lead to cracking. Better yet, change them to metal.
- Turn on the water at all fixtures to see if the water pressure is adequate. Do all the drains run freely? Check the crawlspace near plumbing fixtures for any signs of leaks.
- Open the pressure relief valve on the water heater to see that it is working. Check for signs of leaking or rusting. Some manufacturers recommend that a small amount of water be drained periodically from the tank.
- Test smoke alarm and heat alarm systems before you place a tenant. Remind your residents to change batteries in smoke detectors when the change to and from daylight savings time occurs.
- Keep a fire extinguisher handy for use in kitchen and near any wood-burning stove or fireplace. Check the extinguisher gauge for proper pressure.

- Keep outside security lighting in good repair. Lighting exterior grounds helps discourage prowlers.

With regard to establishing a good relationship with vendors, the best way to endear yourself to the vendors is to pay them promptly! If you want your vendor to remember you and respond to you when you call, sit down and write the vendor a check the minute you receive his bill. Better yet, when you call and request the service, give the vendor a credit card to charge for the service call. Most vendors have to wait thirty days or more to be paid, thus carrying large accounts receivable. Prompt payment is the best way to insure great customer service in the future.

If you want to take the subject of vendor loyalty a step further, here's another tip. Look for additional ways to thank your vendor, in addition to paying him/her promptly. For example, I was coming from Costco when I drove by my apartment complex last week. I noticed that the gardeners were there doing their regular weekly service, and had stopped to have lunch. I had purchased a bag of ruby grapefruit at Costco, so I asked the gardeners if they would each like one to have with their lunch. They graciously accepted. Not a big deal, but that small gesture went a long way toward getting great service from the gardeners! Another example: I was in the middle of cooking Christmas dinner when the faucet on my kitchen sink broke off! I turned off the water to the house and called the plumber, who (amazingly!) came right over. While he was repairing the faucet, I put together a plate of cookies to send home with him for his family. Again, a small token of my deep appreciation went a long way toward sending the message that I valued his time and expertise.

Having vendors whom you know, trust, and can rely on facilitates my last suggestion, which is getting the resident involved in the maintenance of the property. If you give the resident a list of trusted vendors whom he can call directly in the case of a routine maintenance issue, your property will be maintained without your being involved in routine items.

We facilitate the resident being involved by giving the resident a \$75 discount on his rent each month in exchange for his taking care of the first \$75 of minor maintenance. The resident agrees to take the responsibility for calling the vendor (from the list we gave him/her) and to pay the first \$75 of the bill. The balance is paid by us. This procedure causes the resident to think and act more like a homeowner, which, in turn, has the effect of making him feel more like a homeowner. When residents feel more like homeowners, good things happen to rental properties! Of course, this program is for routine maintenance. Naturally, if and when something major happens (water line bursts when resident is not home, property is flooded), you will want to be involved. However, your headache will not be as severe during this disaster if this is the first call you've gotten all year!

Can't bear to think of giving up the control? Okay, that's your decision. Personally, I prefer to spend my time doing more productive and enjoyable things than calling and scheduling a plumber when the tree roots grow into the drain lines. Let's face it, the end result is going to be no different in most cases of routine maintenance whether your resident calls, schedules, and facilitates the maintenance, or if you do it. But your headache factor is reduced if your resident does the legwork, especially if those drain lines back up at 10 p.m. on Sunday night.

Email me if you have thoughts or questions regarding any of the above procedures. I will be happy to elaborate on any aspect of maintenance that has been discussed here.

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