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Handheld devices gain traction as a prospecting and retention tool

By Christopher Hosford, Contributing Editor

You see them everywhere—smart phones of every variety. Their users, with thumbs flying, in most cases are young, Gen-Y apartment-renter prospects. Welcome to the world of mobile marketing, which promises to transform the way renters look for apartments and how communities reach prospects.

“The advantage to mobile devices is that they provide instantaneous feedback to the customer,” says Mike Mueller, CEO of Realty Data Trust, whose company provides an online reservation system. “Say I’m in the middle of Salt Lake City. I can hit the global positioning system (GPS) function on my smart phone and it will show me the apartments closest to me,” adds Mueller.

Most of the major Internet listing services, and many apartment management companies, are optimizing their Websites to display appropriately on the small smart phone screens so that on-the-go prospects don’t have to juggle printed guides or newspaper listings as they roam the neighborhoods. They can scope out rental opportunities directly on their smart phones. And, increasingly, they are.

“What we’ve found is that about 85 percent of people looking for a rental property think first of looking online,” says Peggy Abkemeier, president of Rent.com, which is in the process of optimizing its site for mobile devices.

“Renters have lots of choices, and the better their experiences in finding the right apartment, and how quickly the leasing agent gets back to them, really does make a difference,” she says.

A new study from market research company Gartner underscores why multifamily marketers

need to be aware of the rapidly emerging mobile channel. Gartner projects that mobile phones will be the dominant Web-accessing device worldwide by 2013, outstripping computers in total units in use—1.82 billion phones compared with 1.78 billion computers.

The firm warns that companies neglecting to optimize their Websites for mobile devices are putting themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

Text to rent

Apartments.com launched an iPhone app last summer and has enjoyed more than 100,000 downloads since then. And the mobile version of its Website saw 100 percent traffic growth last year, to about 1 million total visits in 2009.

In addition to optimizing displays for mobile phones, Apartments.com has developed a text-messaging product, Text4info. For example, a prospect on the go might drive past a property, and could use his smart phone to text the name of the property to the Apartments.com short code, 29999.

According to Tim Grace, senior manager for consumer products at Apartments.com, the prospective renter will instantly receive a text reply with basic property information, including rent ranges and availability, as well as a link to the

property’s mobile-optimized Website.

“I truly believe the use of mobile marketing is a real trend, for us and for our customers,” says Apartments.com’s Grace. “And there’s so much oppor-

tunity for resident communications and retention tactics—things like maintenance requests or notices that packages are available, or [notifications] if there is an emergency.”

Multifamily developer and management company Village Green says it is the first privately held apartment company to launch complete mobile search and leasing capabilities via individual property Websites. Its partnership with Realty Data Trust’s VaultWare product allows mobile users to search for Village Green apartments by price, location, service and amenities, as well as to reserve a unit directly on their mobile devices.

“Renters these days want to do everything electronically, and that includes making service requests and finding out about social activities or benefits,” notes Jonathan Holtzman, Village Green chairman and CEO. Add in the ability to pay rent online, already available through many community portals, and mobile phones have the potential to be the renter’s primary interface with management.

Not everyone sees mobile marketing in such a bright light, though.

“There’s a lot of upside for the consumer in using a handheld device to compare rents and communities in a certain geographic area,” says David Cardwell, vice president of technology at the National Multi Housing Council. “The question I ask is, does it also create a situation where someone is in front of a leasing agent negotiating rent, and from their handheld device can cite that it’s \$50 less down the block? Information is always a two-edged sword in the sales business.”

But the numbers are hard to argue with. People are using their mobile devices, and properties want to be where the prospects are.

“Since we launched our first iPhone app in the fall of 2008, we’ve had 420,000 downloads,” says David Quinlan, general manager of emerging technologies, Apartment Guide. “And for our Android phone app, we’ve had 112,000 downloads since June 2009. We’re seeing a lot of traction.” **MHN**

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