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Top 10 Strategies for Deploying a Multifamily Mobile Platform

By: [Chris Wood](#)

Everybody's got one.

Whether it's an Android, an iPhone, a Blackberry, or any of the other app-launching, text-and-talk, GPS-tracking, business-boosting smart phones, the devices are out there, virtually tethered to nearly all of your prospective renters. While mobile penetration in apartment search and marketing is still small, the growth is exponential, and the use of smart phones among existing residents to pay rent, make service requests, and get community updates is likewise surging.

So what does it take to develop and deliver a solid mobile platform? Multifamily Executive wanted to know, so we talked to apartment technology executives and culled information from the 2010 NMHC Operations and Technology Conference and Exposition as well as the recent "Mobile Traffic and Trends" webinar held by Provo, Utah-based website portal provider Property Solutions. The result is this list of 10 strategies for rolling out an effective multifamily mobile platform.

1) Set Your Sights on a Site.

Apps might seem like the hot thing, but the development of apps, particularly for a variety of platforms and ever-changing operating systems, can incur costs. By developing a mobile-optimized websites, on the other hand, you can be one and done with a basic approach to mobile. Smart phone users can access the site and take advantage of any web-based applications there rather than having to download a specific app.

"We haven't found any evidence that a prospect will download an app vs. simply visiting a mobile site," says Property Solutions marketing manager Chris Brashear. "We also think it is easier to develop a mobile site that will support all platforms vs. standalone apps."

2) Don't Search Too Hard.

Sure, mobile offers a great way to market apartments, but a majority of operators have been content to let the ILS sector handle the full-on apartment search applications. Some multifamily companies known for their bleeding-edge IT teams, such as Highlands Ranch, Colo.-based UDR, continue to probe location-based search possibilities. But for the most part, the ILSs have already developed search apps that would make similar efforts by individual companies duplicative.

"I do think it makes more sense for the ILSs to develop apartment search apps vs. individual companies," says Peggy Abkemeier-Alford, president of Santa Monica, Calif.-based ILS [Rent.com](#). "Unlike [repetitively] accessing individual company websites, with one app from an ILS, users can gain access to the same inventory."

3) Check Your Geography.

While smart phones may seem ubiquitous, their adoption and use tends to be heavier in urban

metros. Even when it comes to a city-by-city comparison, the use of mobile among apartment searchers and community residents can vary widely. Atlanta, New York, Chicago and Dallas have an almost 10 percent mobile penetration when it comes to apartment portal access, while tony Los Angeles is surprisingly still languishing at 4 percent, according to Property Solutions. “You can selectively deploy your mobile strategy in different markets and look for [higher penetration] before rolling it out across your entire portfolio,” Brashear says.

4) Get Multidimensional.

Remember the UPC barcodes you used to stare at on the cereal box as a kid? Well, they’ve come a long way. Mobile 2D and QR barcodes are a simple image that smart phone users can scan or take a picture of that directs them to a particular mobile site for specific information, specials, or downloads. “I think instant coupons through 2D codes will be a next big wave,” says Lynette Hygman, vice president of marketing for Atlanta-based Gables Residential. “You can change that coupon at anytime. You can load the codes with any information that you want. They are easy to build, and they are very inexpensive.”

5) Go Easy on the Eyes...

Smart phone users have become accustomed to clean, simple interface architecture that enables quick access to information. When designing mobile-optimized websites and mobile apps, use larger navigation buttons and clear calls to action (such as radio buttons to initiate a phone call or request more information by e-mail). “Users on the go want a slice of information instantly,” says Property Solutions project manager Ian Morris. “They expect things to be clean, to the point, and clutter-free.”

6) ... and on the Memory.

Likewise, apartment firms looking to go mobile should optimize site and app design for carefree loading. Remember: Your prospective user isn’t always going to have full reception. Many firms have moved away from Captcha and other password and user input memory eaters. Make sure floor-plans, photos, and videos aren’t huge files, either. “You want to optimize for loading all of your data on limited bandwidth,” Morris says. “The last thing you want is to slow down the user.”

7) Stay True to Yourself.

Even if mobile sites and applications seem to offer an endless array of slick features and functionality, users nonetheless need to be indoctrinated with easy branding, and apartment firms should keep the look and feel of a mobile interface as close as possible to previously established web branding and marketing. Don’t go crazy, and don’t develop disparately designed destinations.

“You don’t need to go too outside the box from what the corporate website looks like on a computer,” says Brenda Lidner, senior vice president of operations of Atlanta-based RAM Partners. “Critical things to consider are consistency and branding.”

8) Embrace Your Residents.

Sure, mobile marketing seems to be a cost-effective way of quickly reaching prospects, and offering mobile-initiated leases looks to be a great lead frontier, but the multifamily mobile arena is seeing much larger usage—and transactional usage at that—among existing residents. “Smart phone-enabled rent payment and service request web portals has really taken off, even for applications that were originally thought to be better suited for a prospecting tool,” Brashear says.

9) Gauge Success by any Measure.

Mobile-optimized apartment firms and multifamily tech consultants agree: When it comes to mobile, successful evolution of your platform comes down to consistent analysis and measurement of metrics, including downloads, page views, percentage of mobile users accessing portals, bounce rates, and lead initiation and conversion.

In other words, don't just build it and think they will come. "We are programming our analytic platform in conjunction with launching our mobile site in order to track statistics," Hygman says. "Hit the benchmark you are at right now, and set the base line to determine growth analytics once you deploy."

10) Don't Disconnect.

It's a classic beginner's blunder, so don't feel bad if it happens to you: Requiring mobile users to access a desktop computer for any part of their user experience is smart phone suicide. Make all functionality native to the platform. "You want your users to be able to enroll in and access your mobile applications and portals directly from their mobile devices," Morris says. "Don't ever defer and refer to the desktop."