What Do Residents Want?

Top 10 Technology Trends Survey Results

By Joseph Batdorf

Key in and capitalize on prospect and resident technology preferences in apartment search and amenities.

As part of a panel presentation at the 2012 National Apartment Association Education Conference and Exposition titled *What Do Residents Want? Trends in Resident Technology & Communication Preferences*, J Turner Research conducted the multifamily industry's largest and most comprehensive, national survey on apartment resident technology preferences to date.

What Do Residents Want? explores online apartment search patterns, behaviors, and preferences at 1,231 apartment properties across the country. Responses from 41,303 residents provide insight into their apartment search, ILSs, referrals, the absorption of smartphones, tablets, and other devices for researching and communicating with apartment operators and property managers, as well as investigates emerging resident and prospect patterns in the use of social media and online ratings and reviews sites. Survey results were further collated by age demographics into Millennial, Gen X, Baby Boomer, and Silent generations.

Understanding resident preferences is critical to successfully delivering the amenities and customer service that drive satisfaction at apartment communities. Knowing how to communicate with residents through the channels they prefer can translate to increased conversion, retention, referrals and higher customer satisfaction levels. Whether you're an on-site leasing pro, an asset manager or a head honcho at the corporate office, there's plenty of data to engage, inspire, and even surprise you.

What follows are the top 10 tech trends as revealed by the survey.

ILS Yes!

Hey, we're not saying those balloons out in front of the leasing office aren't pulling in prospects, but when you're talking serious lead traffic, Internet Listing Sites far and away remain the top source used by apartment hunters looking for new digs. According to *What Do Residents Want?* 64 percent of apartment residents say they used an ILS as a search source, besting good old-fashioned drive-by (39 percent) and referrals from families and friends (24 percent). Beyond ILSs, the use of Craigslist was also popular among respondents, and came in at number four, mentioned by 20 percent of respondents. The takeaway: Cast the widest ILS net and keep your listings up to date. Take note of Craigslist as a surprise up-and-comer, particularly with affluent, urban young people.

Social Awareness

While social media did not score high as a source apartment hunters used during their search (95 percent of respondents said they didn't rely on either Facebook or Twitter during their apartment search), the use of social media was notably higher among younger age demographics. In fact, the average age of respondents who used social media as a source to find their apartment was 36, compared to an average age of 45 who indicated using Apartment Classified Magazines. The takeaway: Know your audience and activate them accordingly with outreach, be it via social media or other traditional channels.

The Price Is Right

While social media wasn't a big draw to apartment hunters, reliance on apartment community websites during the apartment search remains a key source of information for prospects. And what are those prospects most interested in finding on your website? Cha-ching: unit pricing ranked most important by survey takers, besting other top responses like floor plans, amenity lists, and unit availability. Surprisingly, the least important website features to apartment prospects were videos, virtual tours, and online leasing capability. Lesson learned: Post the rent and keep it up-to-date, especially if you're using a revenue management system.

Computer Crazy

And even while property managers and apartment owners anticipate a surge in mobile-based lease leads, 87 percent of respondents to *What Do Residents Want?* still show a strong disposition for using desktop and laptop computers as their preferred device to search for apartments. In fact, laptop computer ownership was high across all age demographics with 89 percent of Millenials, 84 percent of Gen Xers, and 75 percent of Baby Boomers owning a laptop. While smartphone ownership was high among younger generations (88 percent of Millenials and 82 percent of Gen Xers had them), only 32 percent of the Silent generation reported having a smart phone (62 percent still had landlines). Best Practice: Keep your mobile websites clean but stay focused on the laptop and desktop experience. Prospects may use smartphones on the road or while visiting communities, but typically return home to complete research on a home computer.

Mobile Minded

As apartment residents, survey respondents were much more likely to use mobile phones for communicating with property management and maintenance staff. In fact, more than a third (34 percent) like to call the leasing office to submit maintenance requests, and the number of residents using their smart phone to pay rent was three times greater than those who are still mailing in a check. The takeaway: Don't screen that call—be responsive as residents are increasingly reaching for their mobile device when trying to communicate and do business with property management. Engage a mobile payment portal to deliver greater satisfaction to your residents.

Text Me Not

Just don't fire off texts to your residents. While smart phone and cell phone ownership is high across all age demographics, and prospects and residents like to communicate using their phone, the use of text messaging was not popular among respondents, only two percent of who opted for text to submit service requests. One third of survey respondents said they preferred not to receive texts at all, and among those who were OK with texting, 62 percent wanted text messages primarily for emergency announcements. Best Practice: Know your residents and their communication preferences. If there's no sense of alarm, you're better to smile and dial, send out an email, or visit residents in person.

The Rating Game

Of course, customer service is becoming all the more relevant as ratings and reviews continue to impact multifamily lease-ups and property management. In contrast to hardly-there social media, 74 percent of survey respondents said they utilized online ratings and reviews during their apartment search. On a scale from zero to ten, respondents pegged the importance of ratings and reviews at 6.66. Among the 19 percent of residents who said they had posted to an online ratings and reviews site, 52 percent report writing a mixed bag of both positive and negative comments, with 39 percent saying their ratings and reviews were mostly positive and (ahem) only nine percent saying the nature of their review was mostly negative, a response that is likely skewed by respondents who are reluctant to admit griping online. Key takeaway: Ensure you have an online reputation management strategy in place and ready to engage prospects and also address unhappy residents and their negative reviews.

Yelp It Out

Despite only 17 percent of respondents using Yelp.com for ratings and reviews, Yelp topped the charts when it comes to the trustworthiness of online ratings and review sites, gaining a 7.35 trustworthiness score on a scale between zero and ten. Ratings and reviews were least trusted when generated from a generic Internet search, but still scored above the mid-line with a 6.82 trust factor. In fact, residents reported positive trust factors for all ratings and reviews sites including popular ILS sites like Move.com and Rent.com. The takeaway: Be proactive when it comes to ratings and reviews as consumers place at least above average trust in the info on ratings and reviews sites, and consider both high trust and high volume channels in your practical approach.

The Main Events

Just because prospects aren't relying on apartment social media sites during their search doesn't mean they're not checking the "wall" as soon as they move in. In fact, 42 percent of *What Do Residents Want?* respondents are hitting their Facebook page between one and three times per day. One in four of them are searching for information on neighborhood events including restaurants, theaters schedules, and outdoor activities, offering property managers content galore for social media posting. According to ongoing studies by J Turner Research, the number of residents who frequent their community Facebook page has increased three times from seven percent in 2010 to 21 percent in 2012. Top Tip: Update your community Facebook page with local events, neighborhood restaurant specials and the latest and greatest news from the management company. Hey maybe even try to partner with local restaurants for special Facebook promotions for your residents.

Hot Or Not?

Whatever method apartment residents select to communicate with management, Internet access and cellphone reception nonetheless remain powerful necessities at the unit-level. When asked to rate the importance of speed, reception, and reliability within the apartment unit on a scale of zero to ten (with zero being least important and 10 being most important), respondents to *What Do Residents Want?* weighted speed of Internet connection (7.54), stability of Internet connection (7.44), and cell phone signal reception (7.33) all as highly rated tech amenities. While additional data suggests most residents are satisfied with their bandwidth, connectivity nevertheless remains an amenity that requires constant diligence. At the student housing level, J Turner Research finds that over two thirds (64 percent) of students won't renew at communities with poor connection speeds. Best Practice: Keep booted up, stay wired, and check your wireless signals across all cellular providers to ensure strong signals throughout the community. Give residents options for broadband connections to meet their needs.