



"Zero ring" call centers dial up big advantages for prospects, residents and managers

December 14, 2010 - Design / Build

Historically, residents and prospects often regarded communication with multifamily property managers as a black hole. They phoned in their request or problem, and if they were lucky enough to reach a person rather than an answering machine, the person was only a relay point with little or no subject matter knowledge. The message would be forwarded to the leasing manager, who addressed it when time allowed, assuming the note was not lost among the stacks of paper competing for attention.

Today, even with web-based technology offering new channels for communicating, not everybody is comfortable using the Internet for service requests, rent payments, tour appointments, and other aspects of multifamily living. Some people simply prefer the "old fashioned" live person-to-person contact and dialogue. However, a leasing manager might be out showing apartments or otherwise unavailable when a call comes in. Delayed responses or calls that disappear altogether can mean lost prospects, frustrated residents, and harried property managers facing a pile of paper phone messages and sinking occupancy rates.

An emerging solution that can help managers make a good first impression on prospects and improve service to residents is call center service, which utilizes live respondents while leveraging many of the software advances that have streamlined multifamily property marketing, leasing and resident services in recent years. Blending new technology such as portals and electronic payment processing systems with old-fashioned person-to-person customer service, they offer guaranteed "zero ring" service that connects callers with a highly trained, knowledgeable human being, virtually any time of day. No more generic answering services or leasing office answering machines; instead, callers speak with respondents who are equipped with real-time information and trained in such multifamily processing and services as leasing, utility billing, maintenance, and concierge services. Call centers also offer a live online chat capability. Call center staff members also perform a valuable reporting function, gathering metrics on how effectively phone traffic is turning into walk-in traffic and on resident satisfaction.

Call centers can be a key part of a manager's effort to ensure resident satisfaction and retention. For example, if a resident calls asking to see a ledger, pay rent or utility charges, make a service request, or reserve community amenities, the appropriate call center employee, pulling resident information from the property management database, fulfills the request and process. This translates to improved resident service and satisfaction. No call goes unanswered, every caller gets a response, and the action is recorded directly into the property management database.

Furthermore, call centers have proven to help increase and maintain high occupancy levels. When a prospect phones, a call center leasing specialist uses the manager's property management system to display real-time unit availability, create a guest card, set up appointments, and even start the

application process. The ability to answer when a prospect calls is very important, because it's an opportunity to hold leads that might otherwise move on and look elsewhere if they don't receive information promptly.

Cynthiann King is chief marketing officer for Philadelphia-based PRG Real Estate Management Inc., which will use Yardi Call Center for lead capture, leasing support and resident services for more than 13,000 residential units around the clock. "The call center staff answers our phone calls as if they're working at our property. The Yardi call center team also customized their answers to emphasize our key points. It's wonderful to have a live person answering leasing and marketing calls from 7 a.m. to midnight," King said. All leads are captured and acted upon, increasing leasing opportunities and promoting maximum occupancy. PRG property residents can receive live assistance for rent payments, maintenance requests, concierge services and other functions.

King added, "Another key point is Call Center's integration with Voyager, which enables the staff to provide real-time prices and availability and to set up appointments. PRG is excited to have this coverage and it has been a positive experience."

The ongoing challenges presented by the still-uncertain economy have intensified the tough competition among multifamily property managers for occupancy. Resident retention and the ability to secure new residents will be important to competing in the marketplace. Call centers leverage existing tools and technology to ensure intelligent response, which makes a favorable first impression on prospects and provides satisfying service to residents. In an era of uncertainty, the promise of call centers rings true for multifamily managers who wish to ensure that they are poised to lead the marketplace when the economy makes its upturn.

Joel Nelson is senior writer, marketing for Yardi Systems Inc., Santa Barbara, Calif.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540