



Training: How can we afford that now?

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Recently one of our clients questioned the size of the training budget for their property. A fairly large client with assets throughout the country, the executive was comparing what we were planning to spend against what managers of other properties were proposing. Our training budget was less than one tenth of 1% (.01%) of the operating budget, and less than the allocation for maintenance of the physical asset. Apparently our colleagues were cutting training. Given the challenging economic times, and the need to control spending, the executive wanted to know why we had not cut the training budget. My answer, can you afford to cut training in challenging times? Everyone's budgets are tight this year. The pressure is on to cut expenses wherever possible. The training budget is an easy target. It's certainly not like paying the water or utility bill. But I would argue it is one of the most important items in the budget.

Yes, we are facing some of the toughest economic times on record. Yet, while upper management tries to figure out "what to do," the front line staff still goes into battle each day. Rental staff is told to "rent more apartments" and "find a way to generate more traffic." Maintenance staff is told to "cut expenses" and "only buy it if you absolutely need it." We tell our vendors, "I need a lower price" and "do it for less." And during all this, our property managers continue to deal with the residents who "want more, want it now and want it for less." So, why does training matter? A better question is, does poor customer service matter? Do material waste, workplace injuries and low morale matter? Does high turnover matter?

The front line staff is the critical interface with our customer, our profitability depends on them. They are just like everybody else. They have fears and needs and are just as tuned in to the economy as everyone else. Only with our full support and proper tools will the site staff be able to stop that bad news at the door, and get the job done. With training we can reinforce skills, develop best practices, and motivate a professional staff.

Training provides process and procedures. Regular training reinforces the behaviors. A well trained staff member knows how to handle an upset resident. They don't spend their time fixing errors; they prevent them and spend time on creating relationships. They make sound decisions. They know how to spend the owner's money wisely. Knowing what to do, they feel more confident.

Workshops and classes are also a time to share ideas, problems, and solutions. Participants not only learn about the specific topic, but learn what their colleagues are going through. Pitfalls can often be avoided if you know about them. A shared solution at one property often works at another.

Another by product of the training experience is people get excited. I have yet to go to a training program or conference and not gotten excited about something. New ideas get developed, problems get solved, your spirit is uplifted and you get ready to go out and fight another day. Too often in our industry the top management goes to conferences, and the front line gets left home. Train staff to motivate and succeed.

At the end of the day, an apartment is an apartment. It has four walls, a floor, a ceiling, kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms. What make our assets a special community is our people. It is the front line staff that is in charge of selling, fixing and controlling our properties. A well trained staff resolves problems before they happen. They make an apartment a home. They make our customers feel special. They reduce turnover and increase revenue. They protect us from lawsuits. They make a hard job look easy. Training is that ounce of prevention that saves a pound of cure. It is the investment we can least afford to cut in tough economic times.

Jesse Holland is president of Sunrise Management & Consulting, Latham, N.Y.

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