

Curb Appeal's Appeal



No longer is maintenance service the No. 1 factor driving resident retention. A community's upkeep and general beauty now top the list.

BY JEN PICCOTTI AND LEA NICOLE SMITH

There's an epidemic sweeping our towns and cities. It has already infiltrated many communities. Residents may already be showing signs of it. It's called "Pride in Community."

Residents have always wanted to be proud of their own home but, now more than ever, residents want to be proud of the entire package. Whether taking out the trash, picking up mail, having friends or family over or simply walking the dog, residents want to feel good about every corner of the community they've chosen.

Not long ago, when it came to a resident's decision to renew, the quality of maintenance service was the top influencer. In less than two years, however, maintenance has gone from being a key selling point to a basic expectation. Residents assume that a professionally managed apartment community will include high-speed and high quality maintenance services.

Doug Miller, Founder and President of SatisFacts, shares:

"It's fascinating and powerful that customer service has become an 'expectation.' That means as much or more attention must always go to enhancing the resident experience and making sure it's easy to be a 'customer,' as you are only as good as the last interaction with a resident. Meet expectations, and life is good! Fail, and there, of course, are repercussions at renewal time."

When it comes to residents' perceptions of value, especially with a looming renewal notice and inevitable rent increase, there are three areas of overall appeal that have catapulted ahead of maintenance, according to an analysis by SatisFacts and Ball State University of more than 1.6 million resident and prospect surveys.

1. Appearance and condition of building exterior.

Do residents really care whether the exterior of a building is made of brick, siding or stucco? Not at all. But again, they do want to be proud of where they live. A community does not have to be brand-spanking-new to generate feelings of pride. Be obsessive about neatness and tidiness. Ensure walkways are swept, trash cans are emptied, cobwebs are brushed away and exterior lights are in good, working order. Stay on top of the big-ticket items,

such as roofing, woodwork and exterior paint. Neglecting these, even for a season, can have dire results in this current market.

2. Appearance and condition of grounds and landscaping. Apartment staff members can no longer afford to lavish attention on the market window alone. A community's residents don't all live at the front entrance. While flowers are fun, landscaping doesn't have to come with a high price tag. Walk the entire community with fresh eyes. Ensure grounds are neatly maintained, pathways are clear and there are no bare patches of dirt or fields of weeds. Is there any corner of the community that residents avoid? What can be done to remedy that area? Success is observing residents out and about, enjoying the sights and sounds of their community.

3. Appearance and cleanliness of common areas.

The onsite team should obsessively pick up any trash or debris they see, but that isn't always enough. Residents live their lives in their community and, as a result, there will be wear and tear and spills and breaks. Ensure damaged or worn features in common areas are addressed immediately. Again, neat and tidy is often just as appealing as brand new, so whether it's ordering new cushions for the chaise lounges or power-washing the pool deck a month earlier than budgeted, now is the time to reinforce your residents' pride in their community and their wise decision to renew.

Aesthetically pleasing community features, amenities that are in working order at all times and consistent porter services are things about which the resident has no personal control. Therefore, seeing the community team pay close attention to these details makes residents feel as though their money is well spent. Residents need to see where their money is going and they want to know management is spending it wisely. Appeal to your residents' sense of pride, and you'll be appealing to their pocketbook. ■



Allen & Rocks' The Encore at Wheaton Station, Silver Spring, Md. (opposite page) and The Metropolitan of Baltimore

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