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These new maintenance and service delivery technologies can reduce staff administrative burdens, make the work-order process more efficient and free up more time to focus on customer service.

Although apartment professionals have placed great attention on adopting Internet-based technology strategies to support marketing efforts, they are now shifting their technology efforts toward improving customer service and retention. Given that 60 percent of turnover is controllable and that each move-out costs a community approximately \$3,000, maximizing performance requires reducing less-than-favorable resident experiences.

Research by SatisFacts indicates dissatisfaction with the work-order process impacts renewal decisions more than any other factor. As part of the strategy to improve performance in this critical aspect of the business, apartment professionals are adopting new back-office functionality, including resident-interactive technologies and online services—such as work orders and communications. These technologies are adding value to the way in which apartment managers interact with their residents.

Such investments are sound based on how resident behaviors have evolved, and will continue to evolve as younger generations enter the renter pool.

“The driver behind these innovations is not the technology itself, but the customer’s current and future behavior patterns and expectations,” said Dennis Smillie, President of Multifamily Solutions, Ambler, Pa.. “Technology enables the operator to meet or exceed current and future renter expectations.”

SatisFacts’ research illustrates the need for adopting new maintenance-related and resident-interactive technologies, online functionality and “virtual offices.” (See Tables 1 and 2.) Residents increasingly desire to communicate with the leasing office when the office is not open and prefer to communicate electronically. Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and limited weekend hours no longer meet the expectations of tech-savvy, time-crunched residents.

The results of the National Multi Housing Council’s recent Apartment Renter Technology Survey, conducted by SatisFacts, reinforce these findings. For

CHART 1

SatisFacts Index

Time residents prefer to communicate with the leasing office

	Percent
5PM - 7PM	52.7%
9AM - 12PM	32.3%
2PM - 5PM	29.3%
7PM - 9PM	23.8%
12PM - 2PM	22.9%
7AM - 9AM	21.7%
24/7	12.6%

CHART 2

SatisFacts Index

Preferred methods of communicating with the leasing office

	Percent
Phone	79.8%
Mail	70.1%
E-mail	56.4%
In Person	31.5%
Web Site/Property Portal	20.3%

Source: SatisFacts Research (www.satisfacts.net)

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example, 78 percent of residents use a laptop or a desktop computer at home, and of those, 85 percent subscribe to an Internet service at home. The numbers are generally consistent across all income and age brackets.

“Technology is changing the way we do business,” said David Seiler, Vice President of Operations with StarPoint Properties, Glendale, Calif. “As access to technology is available to more and more people, we need to offer online work orders, plus direct communication and follow-up via e-mail. Our residents not only want these services, but also expect them. They can do all of this at any time from anywhere, whether 2 p.m. at work or 2 a.m. from home in their pajamas.”

These new maintenance and service delivery technologies also reduce staff administrative burdens, make the work-order process more efficient and free up more time to focus on service.

Property Management and Work-Order Systems

New, robust Web-based property management software and online work-order systems allow apartment professionals to more effectively and efficiently manage the work-order process via automation. These automation opportunities include the centralized management of work orders, make-ready tasks, preventive maintenance and supplier partner orders. Online work orders address resident demand for 24/7 virtual offices and the need to improve service delivery. Stand-alone systems are also available.

Benefits. Centralizing and automating the work-order process saves staff time, allows greater control of ordering, cost and inventory and enables efficient scheduling, tracking and real-time reporting. For residents, online work orders are convenient, enable more thorough descriptions and can reduce staff response time.

Reminder. Office and maintenance staff education on new systems is critical. All staff members should use the full functionality—no more work orders on Post-It notes—and consistently use and update the resident contact management component.

Web Sites and Portals Aid Work Orders and Communication

There is a clear value for apartment communities to offer either a resident services page on the company’s Web site or to set up resident portals. Sites should include online work orders and e-mail capabilities, which creates a 24/7 “virtual office.” Consider including helpful hints for residents, such as what to do for minor problems before calling maintenance, for potential timesaving.

Benefits. A virtual office through a Web site or portal saves staff time and can allow for more thorough work orders. Residents benefit from convenience and reduced staff response times. Companies often can integrate portals or Web sites with an existing property management system for increased efficiency.

Reminder. When developing a resident services page or portal, invest in resident-interactive functionality, such as work orders, rent payments and communications.

Maintenance Call Centers

Call centers that are open 24/7 can handle overflow service request calls, after-hours calls and full-time support, and are a cost-effective and service-enhancing alternative to answering services. Call centers help communities to improve call handling in the areas of call volume, response speed, information gathering, work-order detail and after-hours service quality.

Benefits. Call centers save staff time by entering work orders and offer superior call handling because they lack the distractions of a typical leasing office. Call centers are convenient for residents, allow more thorough work orders and reduce response times. Many can integrate work orders with the existing property management system.

Reminder. Answering services typically only take messages. They do not have trained “service writers,” cannot submit work orders effectively and the cost is comparable to call center overflow and after-hours contracts.

Handheld Wireless Devices

Some work-order systems allow maintenance professionals to communicate and manage service requests via handheld devices.

Benefits. Such devices eliminate the need to print, pick up and close out work orders and reduce staff response times.

The Maintenance Shop

Efficient maintenance operations require supplies, suppliers, service providers, organization and a system to support and control the purchasing and inventory process. There are several electronic spend management systems available to the apartment industry.

Benefits. Electronic spend management systems reduce budgeting, ordering and administrative time and minimize delays and return visits by the maintenance staff. They allow greater control and reduce ordering and billing errors.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The value of integrating new technologies is clear—as is the critical role the office staff plays—in the the powerful correlation between outstanding maintenance issues and satisfaction and the NOI impact of minimizing dissatisfaction.

SatisFacts has studied the relationship between how residents rate key operational areas and the likelihood they will renew. Satisfaction with the leasing and office staff’s performance in responding to requests, initiating service delivery and following up have the strongest relationship with renewal likelihood. This research supports the value of investing in “tools” that can improve maintenance operations and the work-order process.

CHART 3

Strength of Relationship with Renewal Likelihood

Rank: Strongest-to-Weakest Relationships with Renewal Likelihood

Rank	Category
1	Office Staff: Promptly returns/responds to calls, emails
2	Service Requests: Office staff follow-up on completed service requests
3	Office Staff: Responsive, dependable
4	Office Staff: Courteous, professional
5	Apartment: Appearance, condition
6	Community: Safety, security
7	Service Requests: Quality of work done
8	Service Requests: Speed requests handled
9	Community: Grounds and landscaping
10	Community: Common areas
11	Community: Building exterior
12	Maintenance Staff: Courteous, professional
13	Community: Recreational facilities

Gray indicates a moderate-to-relatively strong relationship; no shading indicates a moderate relationship

Data: A sampling of random telephone surveys completed in 2006; analysis includes results for more than 13,000 residents

Source: SatisFacts Research (www.satisfacts.net)



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The E-mail Advantage

Offering and promoting an office e-mail address is an important step in improving communications, as communication is the backbone of customer service. If it is not feasible for an apartment community to invest in other technologies or services, at a minimum, it is advisable to offer e-mail.

Benefits. E-mail provides clear convenience benefits for residents.

Reminder. Remember to collect and enter residents' e-mail addresses into the property management system. A community must have a high coverage of current resident e-mail addresses—and phone numbers—in the property management system to facilitate quality communication.

Technology Integrations: Lessons Learned

Apartment communities should expect some bumps during integration because of the significant scope and nature of roll-outs and should also expect short- to mid-term negative impacts on operations during rollouts because of learning curves.

Reminder. Management often will need technical support during rollouts, and rollouts typically require updated policy and procedure manuals because of new processes. To maximize the value of the new systems, plan thoroughly and internally train and reinforce the value added by the system and continually communicate to create resident awareness. Require leasing and office staffs to complete more thorough work orders and immediately enter them into the system. Staff must follow up on completed work orders to ensure resident expectations are met.

Positive Performance

Property management companies that have integrated technology into their work-order processes are experiencing positive changes in performance.

“Retention is critical, and maintaining high resident satisfaction levels is one way to increase retention,” Smillie said. “Satisfaction is greatly impacted by the quality and efficiency of servicing residents' work-order requests.”

And residents see the benefits of investments in new technologies. “Our satisfaction survey ratings increased,” said Lynn Kiley, Vice President of Gates Hudson & Associates, Fairfax, Va. ■

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