

Subject: Look who's talking: managing your online reputation: residents are discussing apartment communities online right now. Here's how to listen, learn and...

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Look who's talking: managing your online reputation: residents are discussing apartment communities online right now. Here's how to listen, learn and decide how to join in.

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When renter Candice Chung was deciding between two apartments in Arlington, Va., she turned to past residents at both communities to help her make her choice. On the Web site Apartment Ratings.com, she found a network of renters from both communities sharing compliments and complaints about their experiences. One community had 100 percent positive ratings, with commenters mentioning specific things they liked about the community, such as its friendly management. The other, a commenter alleged, had rats.

"After that, I was really adamant about getting the apartment with high ratings," Chung says. "I liked that the management left responses to the comments, like 'Thank you for your comment.'" "The responses reassured her that management was responsive, she says. As to the rats: "How would I ever have known that otherwise?" she asks.

Washington, D.C., resident Rin-rin Yu also researched her Logan Circle apartment on ApartmentRatings.com before leasing. "I am a huge fan of doing background checks online," she says. But even though one comment on the community page called it "an old dirty building" with too much street noise, Yu decided to rent an apartment there and has been satisfied. "To me, it sounded like this person had never lived in a real city before," Yu says. Plus, she adds, "I took the comment with a grain of salt because it was written a while ago, so management might have changed since then."

The lesson for apartment managers and owners is that positive and negative conversations about apartment brands are happening between social media users right now, in real time. Many apartment pros are taking the opportunity to listen, and even respond, to what their customers are saying online, because the conversation is happening whether they choose to participate or not.

Community Chatter

Conversations between customers about apartment communities have always happened. One long-time leasing professional recalls leaving work at a community one day and finding her residents talking in the parking lot about their rent increase letters.

Today, those conversations are taking place online, she says. If someone goes to a bad restaurant, they post a comment on Yelp. If they're traveling, they go to TripAdvisor to read about hotels. And many apartment hunters turn to Web sites

such as ApartmentRatings.com and others to see what their peers are saying about their experiences. The difference between conversations on those sites and those taking place in parking lots is that apartment companies can actually monitor the online conversation.

For that reason, Consultant and Author Andy Beal, CEO of social media monitoring tool provider Trackur, recommends that companies should at least listen to what's being said about their reputation online. "It provides a tremendous opportunity for you to hear what your customers, business partners and employees are swing about your business," he says. "It's free market research."

For AvalonBay Communities, an apartment management and development firm with more than 50,000 apartments nationwide, monitoring the conversation reiterates that companies don't necessarily own their brand, says Kevin Thompson, Vice President of Marketing. "The consumer owns the brand," he says. Monitoring online comments "helps us understand the consumer perception of our brand and, if necessary, make changes to our communications efforts."

The focus on social media has spread across industries. A MarketingSherpa Social Media Marketing and PR Benchmark Guide study published in February found that social media was the marketing budget line item that most companies said they would increase in 2009, topping even online display ads and paid search.

If SEO and SEM (search engine optimization and search engine marketing) were the apartment industry buzzwords of 2009, the buzzword of 2010 will be SIM: social influence marketing, Thompson says. "That's the next area of opportunity that we envision: better managing social influence," he says. "Everything we learn is helping us redefine our 2010 marketing strategy to focus more directly on what we call online reputation management."

Tracking the Buzz

AvalonBay is listening to the conversation in a variety of online locales: blogs and comment boards, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and opinion sites such as Apartment Ratings.com and Yelp. The company's PR agency uses tracking software to monitor every mention of Avalon, AvalonBay, Avalon Communities and each of the company's community names across blogs and social networking sites. Thompson's marketing staff identified the company's portfolio on the opinion sites and set up profiles so that any response is sent to a centralized customer service e-mail box for review and follow-up.

Such tracking is not limited to large companies. Mark Juleen, Vice President and Director of Marketing for Carmel, Ind.-based apartment provider J.C. Hart, which has 2,500 apartments, says he tracks mentions of his company himself by using free online tools such as Google Alerts and TweetDeck for Twitter.

Minneapolis-based **Dominium Management Services**, which owns or manages about 17,000 apartments nationally, took the step to hire an Internet Marketing Specialist. Nick McLawhorn, who brings online experience from the legal marketing industry, says that finding someone with online expertise is important because customers have moved ahead of apartment companies in online sophistication. "So many companies did really well with print marketing, and they haven't fully grasped what they're doing in the online world," McLawhorn says. "Search engine optimization, conversion and conversion tracking, blogging, social networks and rating sites are pretty new concepts for property managers."

Assigning someone, perhaps in the public relations or marketing department, to be responsible for monitoring online feedback for 30 minutes a day can pay dividends for most companies, Beal says. While larger companies may have more to

look for, they also have more resources. "You have to figure out, 'Whose responsibility is it on a local level to monitor and respond?'" Beal says. "You really need to put in a plan ahead of time."

Setting aside that time is increasingly important as consumers become accustomed to instant gratification, says Mike Whaling, founder of 30 Lines, an online marketing and branding firm. "It's no longer acceptable to let a rant from Friday night go without a response until Monday morning," he says. "Many companies will have to find ways to make sure monitoring tools are being checked and addressed as necessary at least once or twice a day."

Even setting aside 30 minutes a day can be a challenge for time-strapped property managers, however. In a post on her blog, apartment consultant Lori Snider writes: "In the world I see, property management professionals have difficulty just conducting follow-up and keeping their gosh-darned craigslist ads up to date. Insisting that they now constantly manage everything people are swing about them online is likely to push them over the edge."

Indeed, Mindy McCorkle, Operations Manager for Charlotte-based apartment company Crosland, says manpower is the biggest challenge in keeping up with social media and opinion sites. Nevertheless, "We've got some policies in place that require our site managers to check ratings sites for their properties on a regular basis," McCorkle says. Corporate office staff members monitor social networking sites and media.

Companies, such as Camden, are testing and evaluating results before engaging large-scale at the community level. Camden has set up a handful of communities on Twitter and Facebook and is about to launch another 20, says John Selindh, Vice President of Marketing for the REIT with more than 60,000 apartments. "We're looking to see what kind of feedback we get and what it does for our prospects and residents," he says. "It's easy to create but more difficult to keep up. We're making sure it's sustainable and also that there's value there for our customers."

Selindh adds that when the company brought in a consultant to discuss online reputation, the consultant told it that the level of online conversation about apartments has not yet reached the level found in industries such as technology or retail.

Finding Value Through Feedback

Even if Camden isn't receiving the same amount of online attention as Dell or Starbucks, apartment companies can gain residents by improving their online reputation.

In some cases, tracking comments can lead to actionable feedback. Crosland's McCorkle monitors portfolio and submarket trends to see if the same issues popped up, and her team noticed a trend on ApartmentRatings.com in a Charlotte submarket with three communities. "The message from different staff members on the site teams was that customers were receiving conflicting information about policies such as early termination and renewals," she says. McCorkle designed a training module for that market emphasizing that the way you communicate can be as important as the words you use.

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J.C. Hart has received traffic from ApartmentRatings.com for its communities receiving positive ratings, Juleen says, but even disgruntled residents provide valuable feedback. "It is an opportunity to find out what we did wrong," he

says.

For example, a renter posted a comment on ApartmentRatings.com about a J.C. Hart community's pool, reading, in part, "After business hours, anyone and everyone are using the pool regardless if they live there. It creates an unsafe environment for those who like to take their younger kids." Juleen responded using his own name, thanked her for her concerns, and added: "As for the pool situation, we will address this immediately. Please accept our apologies for the inconvenience."

Sometimes apartment companies can reduce online complaints simply by providing an easy way for residents to contact them with comments and by following up on their concerns, Beal says. "A lot of people complain because of a lack of response they see through official channels. Be approachable and reachable, and that can reduce a lot of complaints," he says.

Camden's Selindh says his company's twice yearly survey, the Camden Living Excellence Index, helps accomplish that goal by asking for a rating and providing an opportunity for residents to ask a manager to follow up. "That direct feedback at least minimizes the frustration that makes them feel like they need to online and vent," he says.

While most apartment companies involved in monitoring social media value the feedback and insight they have gained, not all are sure it's best to engage in the same forums. Crosland's McCorkle asks onsite staff not to respond to online reviews. "We don't allow them to respond to negative comments because there's no way to respond and not look defensive," she says.

Camden is evolving its social media strategy and evaluating whether the company is better served with community personnel using their time in other ways, Selindh says. "We all need to be careful not getting so caught up in interactions online that we forget our residents live right down the hall from us."

Joining the Conversation

While opinion and social networking sites can be an excellent source of feedback or insight, they also offer an opportunity for companies to engage in the conversation and spread awareness of their brand. In the MarketingSherpa study, more than 90 percent of respondents said social media marketing and PR was somewhat or very effective in influencing brand reputation and increasing brand awareness.

Apartment companies continue to try to measure the effectiveness of social media in their own industry. As part of Camden's efforts to learn more their customer's online participation, the company is conducting focus groups with resident and apartment shoppers. Participants said they do go online for information about apartment communities, but most aren't spending time looking for feedback from their friends on Facebook, Selindh says. Asked how much credence they give to online ratings sites, participants said they look at the ratings, but with a certain amount of skepticism, because they realize many residents are more likely to post negative comments in the heat of the moment.

The preponderance of negative comments on opinion Web sites such as ApartmentRatings.com is a frequent topic of conversation and source of concern among apartment pros (for ideas on how to respond to negative--or positive--reviews online, see "Responding to Rants," pg. 34). Thompson says ApartmentRatings.com can be particularly frustrating because, unlike sites like Yelp that require users to create a profile to post reviews, ApartmentRatings.com

allows users to post anonymous comments, leaving no way for users to judge that reviewer's motivations or honesty. But, experts say, apartment companies can turn the dialogue in their favor by actively engaging in online conversation.

It's important for all businesses to take a strong, proactive and open-minded approach on how to engage, says Michael Egan, General Manager of the Home division at Internet Brands, the parent company of ApartmentRatings.com. He suggests apartment companies follow the leads of other businesses, such as restaurants, that do a good job of engaging with online feedback. The site allows property managers to register through a "manager center," where they can set up a profile and identify themselves as manager of the communities in their profile. The manager center allows them to respond to questions and statements and update information on their community, Egan says. Participating in such ways helps to establish the company as a member of the community, he explains.

"When management takes a proactive view, or a set of actions that helps to establish their reputation outside of a confrontational stance, they tend to build a reputation that is respected," Egan says. "So when people complain, the companies' responses become much more meaningful rather than reactionary."

Social Sharing If companies are listening to the conversation, they can identify their weaknesses and find opportunities to shift the sentiment, Beal says. "If we know the property needs a renovation, we'll be on the lookout for a conversation about the condition of the property," he says. Managers might let prospective residents know about new appliances they installed or other renovations they've conducted, for example.

AvalonBay's Thompson describes his company's engagement strategy as a three-step process: listen, engage and measure. "Engage" refers to the company's efforts to engage in the conversation by offering information such as corporate news, coupons, or relevant local events.

"That allows the opportunity for us to proactively discuss what's being said out there," Thompson says. "Measure" is the final step to determine the impact of the company's efforts on factors such as generating leads and improving customer satisfaction.

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RESPONDING to Rants

It's as true for cars, computers, restaurants and other big-ticket items as it is for apartments: reviews and comments on opinion sites are skewed toward negative reactions.

"Those who have a good experience tend to keep on going. They don't look back and post a comment," says Michael Egan, General Manager of the Home division at Internet Brands, which owns ApartmentRatings.com and more than 200 other community-oriented and opinions sites in many industries. "Those who have a negative experience tend to be more bitter about it," and are more likely to post an emotional comment, he says.

For property managers or company staff members who have invested their time and efforts in perfecting service at a community, it can be tempting to respond to such emotion with a retaliatory response. But to turn negative online comments into positive customer service experiences, apartment pros are advised to remain

professional and take complaints as an opportunity to address a problem.

When someone has a concern on an online review site, the reason they're posting is because they feel they can't find the answers they want, says Mark Juleen, Vice President and Director of Marketing for J.C. Hart. While each response depends on the scenario and context, Juleen recommends a three-point approach: Tell them you're sorry, thank them for voicing their concerns and tell them you'll attempt to improve the situation.

"By apologizing, you're accepting that you appreciate their concern," Juleen says. "You've highlighted the goal of continuous improvement. You're going to be known as a company that listens and participates in the conversation." There's no need to get defensive or tell the company's side of the story, Juleen notes. He also leaves his e-mail address in responses and says that the company appreciates additional suggestions.

Amber Naslund, Director of Community for social media monitoring platform provider Radian 6, suggests companies run through the worst-case scenario, and imagine encountering the same response in a phone call. "We call it answering the social phone," she says. "If someone online says they would never recommend you to anyone, what would you do? What would you do if someone called you and said that?"

Not every online comment requires a response, notes Lauren McDonald, Manager of Corporate Communications for The Bozzuto Group. "Sometimes people just want to vent," she says. Other times, however, responses provide an opportunity to correct inaccurate information or simply thank the commenter for the opportunity to improve. "It's one more touch point to build loyalty and increase retention," she says.

Interacting with residents also can help solicit positive feedback online. Bozzuto has launched a program called "Share Your Experience" to encourage residents to post accurate reviews of their community on ApartmentRatings.com. As part of the program, which the company is testing at several communities, managers post a sign and offer business cards that encourage happy residents to post their honest assessments of the community.--J.L.

PROTECT Your Content

Most apartment companies have spent thousands or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to develop Web site content, add beautiful images and update pricing and availability. Some unscrupulous Web site owners are trying to repurpose that content for their own gain, which could potentially result in a negative customer experience, according to Steve Taraborelli, Vice President of Sales and Marketing at UDR, a REIT with more than 150 apartment communities nationally.

Third-party Web sites that host an apartment company's content are usually legitimate--Internet Listing Sites (ILSs) and their licensed partners use community images, rent rates, and descriptions to generate leads for those communities. But some unauthorized Web sites may be downloading that information without permission to generate pay-per-click ads and earn revenue. Taraborelli says he's found his company's apartment content on other sites using wrong prices, wrong photos, wrong directions, or other faulty or old information.

"A prospect is going to these sites and reading that our 2BR/2BA downtown D.C. unit is \$1,100, not realizing that price can be over a year old," Taraborelli says. "UDR then gets a customer satisfaction issue with the prospect, which in turn dilutes our online brand reputation."

The issue is affecting companies large and small. "It's endemic, it's pervasive and it's a huge problem," Taraborelli says. To combat the practice, UDR tracks where its content is used with a program that scours the Web and looks for identical content. If the company finds any unauthorized usage, it asks the site to remove the content. In most cases, Taraborelli says, the owner of the site will take it down and stop using it. In rare cases, the company can send a cease and desist notice. Companies also could notify search engines to remove the site from their listings, or contact the site's Internet service provider and ask them to remove the site.

Darcy Forbes, Director of Marketing and Communications for Essex Property Trust, a West Coast-based REIT, says complaints about this problem from the site level are few and far between, but that it does happen. When she worked on site, she would simply educate customers about the issue if it came up by saying, "The site you obtained this information from is not a major advertising ILS and unfortunately they are operating without our consent. Here are the sites we have relationships with and have the most up to date, current information."

Many of the ILSs work with legitimate affiliate partner Web sites to drive traffic and leads to their own Web site or to apartment companies' sites. The major ILSs say they have teams that manage such programs, checking partner sites for accuracy and ensuring that promotions and pricing are updated daily.

The ILSs and marketing experts offered recommendations for managers to make sure their information is accurately represented.

- * Work with an ILS that has a reputation in the affiliate marketing industry, and make sure it is selective in the publishers it allows into its affiliate program.

- * Ask the sales representative about the ILS's approach to affiliate marketing. Look at the different sites that will advertise your community to check the copy.

- * Google your community listing to discover which sites are using it.

- * Include links within descriptive text to a page on your Web site that you can track so you know which sites are using your copy.--J.L.

GETTING TO KNOW ApartmentRatings.com

Apartment companies tend to have a love-hate relationship with Apartment Ratings.com. The site can be a great source of traffic and leads for high-rated communities, but it also can be a magnet for emotional rants that were fired off in a huff. With about 855,000 apartment ratings and reviews, ApartmentRatings.com is the largest and most comprehensive apartment ratings Web site, so it pays to learn more about the site's policies and practices.

ApartmentRatings.com is owned and run by Internet Brands, a publicly traded media company with more than 200 community and e-commerce sites in markets like cars, careers, shopping, and travel and leisure. In addition to ApartmentRatings, the company's Home division includes four other home-oriented sites, such as Doityourself.com and RealestateABC.com. The company says its sites receive 50 million unique visitors per month.

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Internet Brands earns \$100 million of revenue per year, much of which comes from advertising sold on its Web sites (the company also licenses Internet

technologies for e-commerce, community and other applications).

While the company is a proponent of freedom of speech, it does monitor posts on its Web sites and removes posts that violate its policies, says Michael Egan, General Manager of the company's Home division. "When a reviewer posts something that can be construed as personally identifying information, or when someone is posting something outside the realm of a review, we do take that out," he says. The company has employees that actively monitor posts, but with nearly 860,000 reviews on ApartmentRatings.com alone, the company says it is bound to miss some inappropriate postings, Egan admits. So the site relies on managers who see feedback for their community to report posts that cross the line.

Some apartment professionals say ApartmentRatings.com can be confounding because the ratings are so unpredictable. Egan suggests companies find perspective in several ways. The site considers how recently a rating was posted, so that more recent ratings bear more heavily on a community's score. Companies should look for trends in reviews rather than examining all of the reviews in their entirety, he suggests.

Second, companies should have a sense of scale for each community. If a community is only getting one review every five or six months, readers won't give it as much credence compared to one that has hundreds of reviews. "More and more, users are very savvy about what ratings mean," Egan says. "If there's one bad review for a restaurant, they'll probably still give it a try. If it's one of 40 bad reviews, they'll believe the crowd."

Finally, while managers should not rely on reviews alone, knowing that they tend to be somewhat skewed to negative comments, they should pay attention to the core issue the review raised. "If people are complaining about construction contractors' noise at 7 a.m., that's a real issue," he says. --J.L.

HOW TO GET Started

Ready to begin monitoring the conversation online, but not sure where to begin? Andy Beal, Author of *Radically Transparent: Monitoring and Managing Reputation Online*, recommends casting a wide net, then finding the centers of influence.

Casting a wide net means trying to listen to as much chatter on the Web as possible, Beal says. A free tool such as Google Alerts can notify apartment companies when a company or community name shows up in its search results, and inexpensive tracking software can patrol sites such as blogs, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube for relevant mentions.

"For most people that's the simplest approach," Beal says. "From there you can fine-tune to your centers of influence. It could be CitySearch, it could be Yelp, it could be a local forum or message board. That's where you start drilling down and saying, 'For our property, here's where our customers are going to learn about our reputation.'"

Identifying those sites can help apartment companies decide where to focus their social media marketing efforts, says Mike Whaling, founder of 30 Lines, an online marketing and branding firm. "Monitoring conversations about your brand, employees, neighborhood and company will tell you where the conversation is happening and where you can focus your message." In addition to alerts, he says, "it's also important to run searches for your key terms from time to time, to see exactly what perspective renters see when they look up your brand."

An apartment company's size and resources may dictate the depth of its monitoring efforts and the tools it uses. Mark Juleen, Vice President and

Director of Marketing for J.C. Hart, which has about 2,500 apartments, uses free online tools such as Google Alerts and Tweet-Deck for Twitter. "I feel like we can handle it with the tools we have because we're regionally based," he says.

AvalonBay, which has more than 50,000 apartments, uses a PR agency that has tracking software to monitor mentions of the company name and its communities. Costs for tracking range from less than \$20 per month for a software program up to \$20,000 per month for a managed solution, Beal says. Beal's Trackur, as well as Radian 6, PressArmy and Collecta, are some of the companies that offer monitoring tools or services.

While the most influential social media sites vary from market to market, be sure to check these national sites for chatter about your company or community.

- * Social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace. Socialmention is a great search engine for social networks, according to Radian 6's Amber Naslund.

- * Twitter. TweetDeck provides an easy search function, while Twitter Alerts such as Tweetbeep.com or Twilerts can notify you when selected words are mentioned. Also track the URL of your communities' ILS listings, the ILS's say. Some customers use a community's ILS property detail page to ask for thoughts on Twitter or other social media sites.

- * Video sites such as YouTube, Meta Cafe, and Yahoo Video, including comments on videos about your communities

- * Opinion sites such as ApartmentRatings.com, Yelp, RentWiki, ApartmentReviews.net and ApartmentTag.com

- * Blog comments and bulletin boards. Backtype.com aggregates blog comments, while boardtracker.com tracks board posts and forum replies, Naslund says. --J.L.

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