

Using Technology to Boost Customer Service, Marketing

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The benefits of technology are having a significant impact on two critical functions in apartment management—customer service and marketing. Through Web-enabled software, interactive applications, and smart phone systems, onsite staff can be more responsive and proactive in meeting the needs of existing and prospective residents.

The key to both customer service and marketing is information, and here, again, technology greatly enhances the gathering, storage, retrieval, organization, and management of information critical to these processes. As Carey Fried, director of education and training for CallSource, maintains, technology alone isn't the solution.

“No matter how sophisticated or high-tech the underlying technology is, it won't matter if calls go unanswered and response time lags because the on-site staff does not know how to use the system or the process,” says Fried.

According to Fried, the CallSource system impacts marketing by automatically tracking the response rate of each advertising and marketing source used by the target property and produces detailed reports giving time and length of call, the caller's phone number, and other selected demographic data that help owners and managers optimize their advertising expenditures. CallSource clients can access the marketing and operational data through the Internet as well as through detailed reports provided by CallSource.

Many of the top property management firms use CallSource systems, as well as such leading apartment firms as Archstone Communities, AvalonBay, BRE, Village Green and others.

“Most turnover can be avoided with proper attention to your residents' needs,” says Fried. “One of the main factors in resident satisfaction is responsiveness to maintenance requests. CallSource provides powerful retention tools such as toll-free maintenance number, which is an inexpensive way to improve resident satisfaction.”

The CallSource toll-free maintenance number is tied to its tracking system recording dates and times of each call as well as the phone number of the caller. Whenever the maintenance office receives a call, the CallSource system's CallReview program indexes, records, and saves the information. This, says Fried, avoids disputes over what was requested or promised, and allows ongoing training in customer relations and phone techniques. If the call is missed, CallSource voicemail records the message, then immediately pages the maintenance staff.

The trend toward Internet-based applications and deployment of high-speed broadband connectivity has resulted in the development of a new class of software programs or services that

make the gathering, input, access and distribution of data easier and more readily available across the enterprise.

Broadband service providers such as BroadbandNow, One Point Communications (recently acquired by Verizon), CAIS Internet and software providers such as RealPage and MRI with its MRIConnect service, and others are leveraging their Internet development capabilities to produce highly interactive, responsive systems for managing and marketing properties and meeting the needs of residents.

A major new product in this category is OneSite from RealPage, one of the industry's leading providers of peroperty management software and Web-based services. OneSite is the first complete business-to-business Internet application for the apartmtne industry that connects multiple property stakeholders, including onsite staff, portfolio managers and owners. It allows authorized users to collaborate on real-time solutions to optimize property performance.

"OneSite redefines most internal and external business processes performed by apartment owners and managers to take advantage of the Internet," Says Jim Melson, president of RealPage. "It is an integrated solution that enable shared management of a distributed portfolio of properties as if they were one site."

Consisting of a suite of nine customized products that each address property management business processes, OneSite's property application provides and e-Commerce enabled Web site service that allows owners and managers to control the image and branding of each apartment community. The site provides valuable marketing information to prospects and a Web-based community to serve the needs of residents. OneSite Leasing and RealPage's new tenance screening services automates these processes and expedites the leasing process.

Internally, RealPage is using technology to improve its own customer support operations as well. Becky Van Meter, new vice president for customer service at RealPage, joined the company from J.D. Edwards, and is spearheading development of new ways to quicken response times to RealPage customers through and advanced Lucent phone system that tracks and analyzes calls, expansion of an e-mail system, and new ways to deploy the Web to provide responses to customers around the clock from any location.

"Our goal is to respond to 90 percent of our calls within three minutes," says Van Meter. "Technology is an indispensable tool for tracking and analyzing customer calls and needs and implementing a responsive system for providing customer service."

A similar approach is being used by MRI with its MRIConncet hosted portal service and Yardi Voyager, a Web-based solution from Yardi Systems.

One of the leading products in the maintenance and customer service arena is CorrigoNet from Corrigo, Inc., which uses the Web, wireless devices, and telephony to connect residents, maintenance technicians, vendors, and property management professionals. CorrigoNet recently completed its first successful trial run in a number of apartment communities in the portfolio of BRE Properties and is now being implemented throughout BRE's portfolio. Use of CorrigoNet, says Lee Carlson, chief operating officer for BRE, has dramatically reduced response time to service requests and has automated and streamlined what was a fundamentally paper-based, time consuming process.

GOING SOLO

Other companies, such as Realeum (comprised of founding firms AvalonBay, Post Properties), and United Dominion Realty Trust, have developed their own applications such as the Jvelon to produce Web-based property management solutions that integrate their property management functions and make them more responsive.

Another company that has gone the route of self-development is Legacy Partners Residential, Inc., a developer and manager of apartment communities throughout the Western United States. More than half of the communities in Legacy's residential management portfolio are fee-managed communities owned by a combination of large institutional clients and single-community owners.

In managing these communities, Legacy utilizes nearly all of the major accounting and property management applications such as rent Roll, AMSI, Yardi, Timerblin, Skyline, MRI, and JD Edwards. While being able to work with a diverse range of applications is beneficial to Legacy's ability to serve varied clients, the incompatibilities of these different programs often present problems on a portfolio-wide basis. In addition, most of the current systems available utilize a distributed computing model where information is entered in the field, but the actual decision-making is done at regional or corporate offices located far from the information itself. To facilitate management of these disparate systems, Legacy, led by its vice president of technology Warren Adair, developed its OWN Internet-based information clearing house called eManager last March.

Asked why Legacy developed its own solution rather than tap one of the existing products, Adair says, "Existing products weren't available at the time. We are one of the charter members helping to develop RealPage Onsite. With eManager virtually all of the information needed by people within our residential operating company is available through a secure Web connection."

From one location, eManager gives staff access to consolidated roll-up reports based on the entire company, region, area or district. This information includes the leasing agent who generated the most revenue that month; reasons people are accepting or rejecting lease offers; top traffic sources, and which ads are working or not. The system also completely automates the posting of key management reports from Legacy's communities, district, regional, and corporate office systems for viewing online in near real-time access.

Departmental information including policies and procedures, important forms and documents and other critical internal items are all available in electronic format ready for download or online use. The system also provides a Web-based calendar of upcoming training events, meeting, and significant dates. Key company meetings are posted in Web-based audio and video formats to allow people in the field to keep up with what is going on at corporate headquarters. There is also an online address book and Web-based e-mail system accessible from anywhere.

According to Adair, eManager was designed for Legacy Partners' use, but it has been sold to other clients they are currently managing properties for. Adair says that the value of eManager is its ability to provide critical information in real time so decisions can be made instantaneously.

"With eManager, the information flows freely between more than 150 locations as if key decision makers were in the same office," says Adair.

SERVICE IS KEY

Technology is enabling customers of GMAC Commercial Mortgage Company (GMACCM) to receive speedier and more accurate information about their loans and investments due to a new, million dollar, high tech customer service system the company implemented last year.

“Quick, accurate information is vital to our borrowers and investors and that is what our new systems deliver,” said GMACCM president Charles E. Dunleavy, Jr. “We’ve always placed the highest priority on our customer service, but with this new system, we are bringing a new level of speed and detailed information to our customers.”

Dunleavy believes GMACCM has created one of the best customer service systems in the commercial mortgage industry in terms of speed, response to customers needs, and the scope of information delivered.

“As GMACCM grows, we are not losing touch with our customers,” said Joseph Frank, senior vice president and director of servicing. “We are strengthening our total customer commitment and focusing on individual client needs as we build the ultimate in industry client response.”

The system, which provides data to investors and borrowers about mortgage loans and mortgage-backed securities, was launched early in 1999. The system uses a multi-functional phone system that integrates GMACCM’s Horsham and Chicago offices, the company’s major loan servicing sites, and provides for backup in case of a shutdown at either office. The technology underlying the system has a number of features that track the number and type of phone call, waiting times, the volume of calls in queue, and the number of staff members speaking to customers. This greatly augments the speed in which calls are responded to.

When on a call, GMACCM customer service representatives can view a screen pop-up view of a borrower’s account information that comes on as soon as the client relations manager answers the call. There is also a voice-response unit and a Web site that allows borrowers and investors to access loan information around the clock, seven days a week.

The common threads running through all of the technology aimed at improving customer service and marketing are the leveraging of tools for communication with tools for sharing and distribution of information. these tools encompass intelligent phone systems that track, capture, organize, and distribute information and Web-based, interactive software that is easy to use. proper training and education of staff to take advantage of the power of these tools and implement them consistently is key to the success of any apartment marketing or customer service operation.