

The Leasing Presentation: Setting the “*Customer Service*” Tone for the Future Resident

Beyond a persuasive and people-oriented sales “pitch”, the apartment community benefits from the salesperson/customer interaction throughout the leasing presentation. Of course the Leasing Professional’s objective is to gain a new, qualified resident, right? Yet, can we design and apply our leasing efforts to generate even more value...something beyond simply a new resident? Our Ellis shopping clients tell us “Absolutely!” In addition to adding to the resident count, the leasing experience also defines the sort of long-term relationship you will have with this future resident. The leasing experience is the initial stage of that never-ending wooing of our residents that we generally refer to as ***Resident Retention***.

As we review Shopping Reports and observe participating companies’ practices, we realize an aspect of customer service that is being included in many sales presentations is the anticipation of repeat buying or renewing of the lease. Many companies adhere to the concept that the “renewal process starts at move-in.” **Denise Bailey**, Senior Vice President of Marketing and Training at Legacy Partners says their leasing professionals take this concept a step farther. “We are thinking *renewal* in our very first contact with the rental prospect! And the key is communication, combined with an immediate accommodation of the rental prospect’s needs and expectations. Whether it is responding to an Internet inquiry, answering a phone call, or greeting a visitor at the door, we demonstrate a responsive and sincere attitude that sets the stage for a long-term residency.” By establishing a two-way dialogue of open communication, the Legacy Partners on-site leasing professionals model the sort of positive relationship they plan to extend after this prospect moves in.

There is not a distinct line drawn between the end of the Sales Presentation and the beginning of Customer Service. Rather, it is a blur as one blends into the other. The Sales Presentation marks the initial beginning of what we hope will be a longtime relationship, while Customer Service is our effort to maintain and deepen that relationship. The Sales Presentation equates to the courting phase; the initial overture to this prospect that we hope will grow into a mature relationship -- that is, the prospect becoming a resident. Customer Service is the marriage, the ongoing nurturing of that relationship. You cannot be successful with the latter if you do not first present a genuine and memorable proposal! The leasing presentation defines and sets the tone for the remainder of the new resident’s stay.

At Tarragon Management, the goal of the future renewal is reflected in the company leasing model. “The objective in leasing is not simply to gain a new resident. We want to recruit a *raving fan* who not only refers others to our communities but also has the mindset of staying longer and even renewing due to the positive leasing experience”, says Tarragon Vice President of Education, **Wendy Muse**. An award winning leasing presentation is service oriented first and sales focused second. “Of course we want to offer an aggressive and persuasive sales presentation that maximizes our closing ratios. Yet, we must think long-term even in this first contact with the *future resident*.” Says Muse, “We want to create the sort of experience that will not only get them into an apartment now but will also make the prospect think they are making a really good long-term decision.”

“A good salesperson is one who takes care of his customer, not simply sells them something,” adds Muse. She reminds us, “As with any form of customer service, the key is to sell to each rental prospect in a way that is considered *good service* to that individual.” She explains that the best customer service is *made to order*. One size never fits all because each prospect’s perspective and rental needs is different. “We know our customer service has been appropriate when residents refer their friends and decide to stay and renew rather than move to another community. The same is true in the sales process. When someone likes the way they are treated and feels a connection with our leasing professional that is good customer service.” Muse notes that the result is more new residents who move in and feel positive about their decision from the beginning. The goal is then to continue meeting those service expectations that are established in the sales presentation.

This additional emphasis on Customer Service does not diminish the strength and persuasiveness of a solid Sales Presentation. Rather, it enhances the leasing effort as the “Customer Service” component creates a friendly and genuine sales atmosphere. Our customers confirm the hypothesis that the apartment community benefits from the salesperson/customer interaction in more ways than simply a “closed prospect”. Hopefully the result will be a long-term relationship resulting in numerous lease renewals AND corresponding rent increases.

The “leasing event” is much more than a sales job. It is the opportunity to demonstrate what living in a particular community that is managed by a specific identified management company will mean to the prospect’s quality of life now and well into the future. We have matured to a fuller understanding of how the initial sales presentation can create a tone of customer service that enhances the potential profit of the asset. In other words, a service based sales approach will potentially generate more rent from each resident as they start the residency satisfied and positive and thus will be more likely to renew.