

How to Maximize Online Advertisements

BY LISA TROSIEN

Designing a compelling online advertisement is not as easy as many think. Today's renter is far more experienced and savvy when it comes to searching for an apartment on the Internet. These prospective residents won't stay on an ad for more than a few seconds if the soliciting property has not made the effort to make its community stand out from the rest.

Gone are the days where properties online were few in number; these days there are literally hundreds of other communities competing to capture a prospective resident's attention. Following are tips on how to make an Internet ad stand out:

Publish prices. According to ApartmentGuide.com, properties with prices published in their ads receive 192 percent more traffic than those that do not. Most residents use "price" as their number one search criteria. A test search for an apartment in Florida showed all communities with "call for rents" coming in dead last in search results on several apartment search sites. In fact, 81 percent of renters surveyed said that not only were "actual prices" important, but they also want the ability to check real-time availability of apartment homes they search. (For information on real time availability, go to www.vaultware.com).

Use virtual tours. The extra money spent to provide a virtual tour (a moving, photo tour of your apartments and/or amenities) on your Web site or advertisement is worth it. Virtual tours are heavily used by visitors to individual property Web sites and apartment search sites. These tours can increase leads by as much as 50 percent. Since the first visit to your community is, in fact, virtual, it has become an essential tool for the Internet renter. Make certain that your virtual tours include a furnished apartment home.

Use Great Photos. Unfortunately many communities publish a photo of the sign to their community at the opening of their online ad. Residents do not base their decision to lease at an apartment community based on the sign. They do care about the look of the buildings and the apartments themselves.

When shooting the building's exterior, try to keep cars out of the photo.

Do not photograph buildings that have cluttered balconies or patios.

Pool shots should be taken with the furniture lined up neatly with chaise lounges in the upright position. The umbrellas should be open, not closed.

Do not use photos of empty apartments. They never turn out well and it is difficult for potential residents to make their leasing

decision based on photos of a vacant apartment home.

Create a sense of depth in the apartment by taking shots that show multiple rooms.

Take advantage of any great views that are available from the community, such as nature, an impressive skyline, etc.

If seasonal photos are used, make sure they are changed to reflect the current season.

Update information. If rents change, update them online as soon as possible. The Apartments.com Web site features a "property updater" tool that ensures its rental update is made within one hour. Also double-check for typos and accuracy of the information listed. Make sure every possible feature of the community is listed.

"Check off" on all amenities. Renters also use amenities, such as air conditioning, washer/dryer, pet welcome, etc., to make their leasing decision. The online apartment services allow properties to "check off" as many amenities as apply. Check that all amenities are checked off. Failure to have every possible amenity can result in your community ranking lower in searches or worse yet, to not come up at all. Speaking of amenities, a review of ApartmentGuide.com, Apartments.com and ForRent.com show that the number one amenity requested across the country is air conditioning. Take this one step further and add "air conditioning" to all print ads. Do not assume that the prospect knows air conditioning is included.

Take advantage of available online ad upgrades. If the apartment search site provider offers items such as bolded listings, consider doing it. The Apartments.com Web site allows a "special offer" coupon, which is an amenity that is searchable by renters. Homestore.com offers what they call "focal points" and ForRent.com offers "spotlight ads." All are great enhancements to your existing online ad program. One company said that by simply bolding their listing on Apartment Guide.com, their traffic increased "noticeably." Another indicated that ForRent.com's spotlight ads literally doubled the number of individuals who viewed their ad.

With more than 50 percent of renters conducting their apartment search online, it is critical that an ad offers the most dynamic look and feel possible. Simply posting an ad online no longer is enough. ■

Lisa Trosien has more than 20 years of industry experience, as well as expertise on targeted uses of the Internet. Reprinted with permission from the July/August 2003 issue of UNITS magazine, published by the National Apartment Association (NAA).