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The Key to Protecting Your Reputation

Before your future residents sign on the dotted line, they want to get a sense of other people's experience living in your community. That's where reviews come in. According to several industry studies, as many as 98 percent of people look at reviews before they lease an apartment. Now, a good reputation is more important than ever — J Turner Research reports that 78 percent of industry leaders expect COVID-19 to impact leasing significantly.

Reviews are a big part of reputation management, but remember that protecting your reputation begins offline. After all, if residents are happy where they live, they're more likely to leave a positive review (or at least avoid sharing negative feedback).

So, what can you do to protect your reputation? Start with the following steps:

Respect Residents' Privacy

While residents don't own their homes, they need to have personal space and feel safe. To respect their privacy, hold your staff accountable when they access apartments. If employees fail to follow proper protocol when entering someone's home, it won't bode well for your reputation. For example, a former resident of a Washington property left a poor review complaining about someone entering his apartment without permission or written notice at least three different times while he was away. Each time, his front door was left unlocked.

On a separate note, if you updated your guidelines for entering units at any point during the COVID-19 situation (e.g., if you require residents to sanitize an area of their home before a maintenance technician can complete a work order), be proactive about communicating those updates in advance.

Respect Residents' Data

The Federal Trade Commission recently warned that scams are on the rise as criminals prey on people's fear about the COVID-19 situation and the widespread lack of digital hygiene as people abruptly transition to working from home. Do your part to protect the sensitive data in your care: Social Security numbers, credit history, pay stubs, etc.

In addition to cybersecurity best practices, be sure to implement physical security measures to secure mailbox keys and other areas containing residents' personal information. Ideally, you should store keys in an electronic key control system with tamper-proof metal drawers or a wall-mounted panel that physically locks down keys. Securing keys is especially crucial if on-site staff members are working from home, leaving the office unattended.

Neglecting to take the appropriate steps to protect a resident's information could be detrimental to your reputation, especially during a time that's already fraught with fear and tension.

Control Your Keys

Whenever someone uses an apartment key or security token such as a fob or access card, you must have an accurate, verifiable record of it. If you don't, it'll be challenging to investigate situations where a resident feels their safety or privacy has been invaded — a recipe for a bad review or even a lawsuit.

Make sure you have a detailed key control policy, so employees know the proper protocol for using keys. Avoid handwritten log books or spreadsheets. All it takes is an employee forgetting to update the log once for your records to be inaccurate. An electronic system that automatically authenticates users and records when each key is removed helps you maintain an accurate audit trail.

There's no doubt that there are a lot of moving pieces to managing your reputation. Monitoring reviews is a big piece of the puzzle, but working behind the scenes to avoid negative feedback is just as important. Even something as seemingly simple as protecting keys shows residents you value their privacy and safety. In return, they'll think twice about complaining about your property online.