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# The Unexpected Connection Between Reputation and Key Control

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6-7 minutes



We all know that reputation management is important for your multifamily community. As much as 98 percent of prospective residents look at reviews before leasing an apartment. If you were looking for a new place to call home, would you think twice about a specific community if you read the following 1-star reviews?

- *OUR IDENTITY WAS STOLEN. Great job for not safeguarding tenant credit information.*
- *My apartment was entered at least 3 different times when I was not home and my front door left unlocked.*
- *Key fob access inoperable during power outage on stairwell and possibly all building fob access doors (except individual units)*

*(Service request took 6 months).*

You have to admit that these reviews don't make each property sound inviting. There's an underlying lesson here: *Reputation management starts offline* — and a critical part of that has to do with having an effective key and access control policy. If you don't take the right steps to control access to residents' homes, you're leaving them vulnerable to potential thefts and violent crimes and your property vulnerable to legal and reputation risks.

Here are three steps you can take to protect your residents and your reputation.

Whenever someone accesses a resident's home, you need to have an accurate, verifiable record of it. This rule applies regardless of if your community uses traditional metal keys or smart locks — no exceptions.

If your key and access records are inaccurate or incomplete, it'll be difficult, if not impossible, to look into incidents where a resident feels their safety or privacy has been compromised. That's exactly the kind of situation that drives a resident to blast your community in online reviews (or even file a lawsuit).

As far as a reliable method for creating an accurate log, handwritten log books or spreadsheets — or any other manual method — are not it. All it takes is a leasing agent grabbing a key for a tour and forgetting to update the log or one employee fudging the dates and times on an entry, and then your records are inaccurate. An electronic system that automatically authenticates users and logs when each key is removed gives you a more accurate, easy-to-manage audit trail.

People naturally want to maintain a sense of personal space and feel secure in their homes, whether they rent or own. If they don't have privacy and security, they're not going to want to renew their lease and they're definitely not going to want to recommend your community to their friends and family.

For example, one former resident of a Washington property experienced someone entering his apartment without permission or written notice at least three different times while he was away from home, leaving his front door unlocked. I — and thousands of others — now know about this incident because the person wrote a review about it on a popular review site.

Holding people accountable for when and why they access residents' homes cuts down on unauthorized access, protecting each resident's sense of safety and security. This is a big factor in creating the kind of positive living experience that leads to a good online reputation for your community.

A big part of protecting residents is maintaining accurate access records like I mentioned above. If you manage your keys with an electronic key control system, you may also be able to automatically notify residents when the key to their apartment has been removed. This increases transparency and avoids unwelcome surprises.

A note about smart locks: It's important to treat security tokens such as fobs and cards with the same level of security you would traditional metal keys. To keep accurate records and hold employees accountable, avoid programming a "master" token that can access all the units on the property.

From ordering groceries to filing your tax return to buying a car, there's hardly anything you can't do online now. Whenever you handle someone's sensitive data online, it's important to implement cybersecurity measures to protect their Social Security number, background information, pay stubs, etc. However, don't forget to also provide physical protection for your residents' data by securing keys to areas containing sensitive records as well as keys to residents' mailboxes, which can contain sensitive documents.

If a resident's identity is stolen as a result of your failure to protect their information, you better believe they'll talk about it online. That's exactly what one Michigan couple did in a review of a community where they'd applied for an apartment. A few weeks after submitting a rental application, the couple discovered that their identities had been stolen. The culprit was a leasing agent who'd been applying for credit in residents' names. If anyone received any correspondence related to the theft in their mailbox, the woman used her keys to steal the letters from people's mailboxes before they retrieved them.

It's true that monitoring and addressing negative reviews is important. But what if reviewers never had a major issue to complain about in the first place? Protecting your residents by securing keys will go further than you might expect in preventing people from rushing to review sites and social media to complain about your community.

Would your key control practices earn you a 1-star or 5-star review?