

KEEPING RESIDENTS

HAPPY

With turn a fading memory, managers stay engaged all year to ensure renewals.

By Lynn Peisner

At this very moment, teams of developers, builders and architects are hard at work constructing and renovating student apartments, cottages and townhomes that become more stylish every year. How hard is it to make students happy when they're living among such upscale amenities as a lazy-river pool, valet trash service and manicures and pedicures available in the clubhouse?

Resident satisfaction, which is one of the engines driving student housing's commercial success, doesn't rest on those luxurious amenities alone. Several leading companies embrace different approaches that deliver results in keeping the Millennial generation, and their parents, satisfied enough to renew and to refer their friends.

The idea of customer service in a student community is already far more exacting than it is in most conventional multifamily environments. Cementing a solid reputation requires more than serving donuts in the office or posting recycling tips on a bulletin board.

At Campus Crest Communities, for example, developing and modeling civic responsibility and environmental stewardship are among the foundations of the company's success, and its residents' satisfaction. At Campus Apartments, an accelerated technology platform that speaks to students through media they already know and love is directly linked to why residents renew leases.

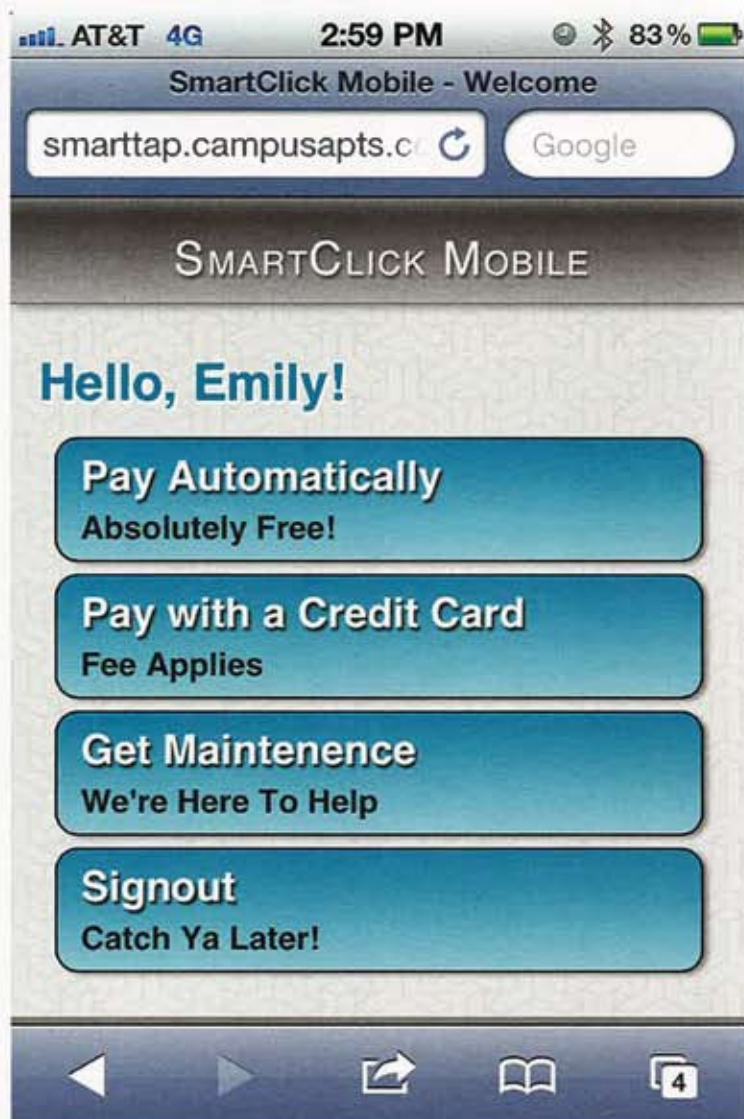
COMMUNITY MATTERS

Student housing managers, staff and CAs around the country are slammed during turn, then go immediately into move-in day and the first 30 days, which are vital to establishing a sense of community. A dynamic definition of community, most agree, is the strongest 'amenity' that drives occupancy, promotes renewal and leads to the greatest return on investment for all stakeholders.

After the pool parties and mixers at the start of the year wrap, managers are tasked with creative ways to make student residents feel welcome and included. These efforts involve remembering birthdays with balloons, obtaining free movie and restaurant passes, learning everyone's major and triaging residents into study groups.

They also may have to respond to a urgent problem in the middle of the night, then turn around and handle an overflowing toilet. Pulling all this off with style, discretion and consistency — and doing it uniquely in every community — is what will keep students coming back.

Reviewing processes and activities routinely is important in staying relevant to the changing needs and wants of students.



Campus Apartments was the first student housing company to roll out a mobile app that allows students or their guarantors to pay rent and schedule maintenance from their phone.

Kris Schraeder, regional director with EdR, who currently manages 3,134 beds for the REIT, surveys students and parents once after move-in and again in the spring.

"The feedback helps us create an action plan to make improvements," she says. "Evaluating and improving processes and procedures is pretty basic, but many companies don't do this on a regular basis to measure the success of their efforts."

Schraeder says excellent customer service boils down to remembering residents' names, responding to maintenance calls within 24 hours and answering questions promptly and helpfully.

Among the events that work at Schraeder's nine properties are a welcome dive-in movie at the pool, a moonlight mixer with a photo booth, club casino events, welcome back concerts, bike education and safety programs, campus tours, barbecues and improv comedy performances.

"Resident Appreciation Week each semester is a very popular way we let residents know we care with events and food each day of the week," she says. "Plus, our staff plans monthly resident appreciation days with food and fun. Some of our properties offer free movie



passes to new releases. The key is to find out what the residents are interested in and provide them with opportunities that meet their interests and needs."

Landmark Properties, a two-time SHB Innovator Award winner for its amenity-packed cottages, focuses on a few portfolio-wide community events at the properties it owns and manages, supplemented by numerous property-specific events.

"We develop an environment that utilizes the amenities to create a lifestyle the students are drawn to," says James Whitley, Landmark's vice president and chief operating officer.



Campus Crest Communities hosts blood drives at many of its properties.

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MANAGEMENT & OPERATIONS



Campus Crest CEO Ted Rollins (second from left, back row) says community outreach, such as giving away turkeys and bicycles during the holidays, leads to students having happier college years. Campus Crest co-founder Mike Hartnett is at far left in the photo.

Events include blood drives, a late-summer, welcome-back pool function and a fall event, such as a weekend tailgate for an away football game or a fall festival with pumpkin-carving contests.

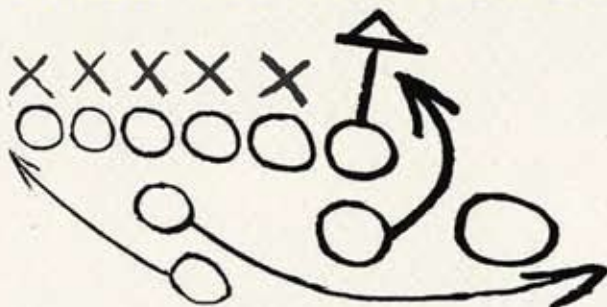
The product itself, Whitley says, also plays a large role in keeping students happy.

"We have predominantly detached units so we have far fewer noise issues at our properties," Whitley says. "Younger students tend to gravitate toward the pool, courtyards and other amenities, while grad students gravitate toward the fringe for privacy. With our cottages, we offer that kind of diversity in our portfolio, within each property and are able to appeal to a broader segment of the market."

At Campus Apartments, the Keystone program has been a large investment for the company. keystones, which are Campus Apartment's RAs, live for free on the property in exchange for their efforts to create community and ensure safety. The Keystone program has been a part of doing business for the company for approximately 20 years. National Director of Residence Life Heather Sizemore trains new keystones onsite. Weekly and monthly conference calls and training webinars keep the staff up to speed with the company's expectations.

"We like to be able to talk to our keystones regularly about trends," says Miles Orth, executive vice president and chief operating officer for Campus

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Apartments. "If something is working well in Florida, we might want to share that with our team in California. An example was the shooting at Virginia Tech. We used that as a teaching tool to talk to our student staff about what to look for, what type of behavior to monitor and how to react if there is a crisis of that magnitude."

On campus, student housing operators, such as Capstone On-Campus Management (COCM), fine tune their approaches constantly because they are required to walk in step with each college and university's expectation of customer service, and in many cases, COCM is entirely seamless, essentially operating as if it were the university itself.

"We do a lot of surveying of our students, sometimes twice a year, and there really are patterns that come up in those surveys," says Doug Brown, president of COCM, which provides management services for 23,228 beds on 22 different campuses.

"One is convenience. So we spend a lot of time trying to make living on campus convenient, which means not having to worry about furniture or hooking up the utilities but it also means our staff understands financial aid enough to help students and parents with strategies that help make that process easier."

Brown says community and value are the two other topics revealed as a priority among students and parents.

"If they connect with their community, they have up to a 20 percent greater chance of returning to campus than if they didn't," Brown says. "The last piece, value, is that it's got to feel like it's priced right. The one thing about the value component is that we know that if we're really good at the convenience and community side, then the value aspect tends to take a bit of a backseat. That doesn't mean we don't want to be affordable, which is extremely important right now due to the cost of attending college, but if we can figure out strategies for students to matriculate, using housing, it can not only help the student but it can also help the campus use its housing up to that level. That means we've done our job."

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

If technology is an integral part of how Gen Y tenants live and learn, it follows that the more integrated technology can be to a student's rental housing, the better. Ideal customer service initiatives

require technology, and the successful application will translate to happy renters.

At Campus Apartments, the SmartClick mobile app was the first of its kind in the student market. It allows renters, as well as

their guarantors, to pay rent with a credit card or directly out of a checking account. Users can also schedule a maintenance request, receive updates on the status of the requests and a notice when the service has been complete, all

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— MILES ORTH, CAMPUS APARTMENTS

via a laptop, desktop or mobile device.

“It’s transformed what we’re doing,” Orth says. “At conferences, I talk a lot about how real estate and technology have become totally intertwined for us.”

Campus Apartments has been heavily involved in technology specific to student housing since the late 1990s. The company is focused on identifying new ways to apply technology innovations to student housing.

“The relationship with our customer starts on move-in day. Then, we try to use our team to stay ahead of the curve, which requires us to use technology. I can’t talk about the success we’ve had on the real estate platform without talking about the success we’ve had on the technology platform,” says Orth.

To that end, Orth says beginning in fall 2013, every lease at all Campus Apartments communities will be online, including the guest card, the application, the qualifying information and the lease agreement itself. Paper documents may be provided to those who request it, but paperless will be the way forward for the company.

ANGELS AND ROCK STARS

Campus Crest Communities, which owns 20,884 beds, owes much of its success in keeping residents happy to a proprietary residence life program. The REIT’s branding of its properties as The Grove ensures that residents know exactly what they’re getting when they sign leases. Each property, for example, is architecturally designed to create physical



Campus Crest’s GO Team Program provides students the opportunity to participate in outreach programs in local communities.

space that is conducive to fostering community. Most properties contain nine buildings, with a community assistant — or Rock Star, as CAs are known at The Grove — in each building.

The prototypical models ensure consistency. But without the behavioral and social application of Campus Crest’s residence life program, the amenities and physical spaces can only do so much.

SCORES, the company’s proprietary program, incorporates social, cultural, outreach, recreational, educational and sustainability elements into managing residence life and leading students. This mission involves rallying students to participate with community partners such as Habitat for

Humanity or to get involved with Campus Crest’s Holiday Angel program that gives away bicycles and turkeys.

“We try to address a live-learn experience for the student and create a social infrastructure for them that complements their academic life,” says CEO Ted Rollins. “That’s the Number-1 order of business for us. It keeps them engaged and makes them feel like they live in a community. As a result, they end up leading a better life in their college years.”

The Campus Crest Cares program has a dedicated website, and the “People and Planet” tab on the Campus Crest Communities website further spotlights the company’s values, particularly the goal to incorporate sustainable practices and procedures in construction and development, corporate culture, operations and maintenance and residence life.

“At the top of our hierarchy is the resident experience, and that’s everything from socializing to outreach,” Rollins says. “The amenities are nothing without the activities.”

“We have nice projects, and we have great furniture,” Rollins continues. “We really sweat the details, and that’s critical. But that stuff is just to get in the game. If you’re going to be in the game, you need to be focused on these kids. You need to be building their life experiences, building their social and environmental awareness, and you need to be getting them off their iPhones and Blackberries and getting them engaged. That’s really what we are about.” **SHB**

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