



Response Time

Don't forget that dealing with maintenance requests is a three-part process: submission, handling and follow-up

By Keat Foong, Executive Editor

Are you monitoring your maintenance technicians' response time to maintenance requests? How quickly your technician responds may ultimately determine how satisfied your residents are with living in your community—and how likely they are to renew their leases.

The truth of the matter is, maintenance processing does not end when the property technician successfully fixes the problem in the apartment. John Gallagher, CPM, senior vice president of Polinger, Shannon & Luchs Co., which oversees about 6,000 apartments in the Mid-Atlantic, is a co-author of "Managing Your Maintenance Programs: A Guide to Implementing Cost-Effective Plans for Properties," published by the Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM). Gallagher notes that there are three stages to taking charge of repair orders from residents: (1) receiving the requests; (2) handling the requests; and (3) following up after the request has been attended to. Companies need to fully adhere to all three steps in order to have a complete maintenance request processing system.

Service with a smile

Service orders can be received today via the management office, phone, e-mail or Internet. Whichever way the orders are received, "the whole idea is service," says Gallagher, who is also a past president of IREM. To receive requests placed through the telephone or in person at the management office or front desk, Polinger, Shannon & Luchs keeps extended hours until 11 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays at some of its properties. Regular hours are maintained on Mondays, and only emergency orders are taken on Sundays. If the call goes to the on-site office, the company makes sure a leasing consultant or administrative staff takes the call. And the caller is never passed around on a "voice mail tour," as is often the case with calls handled by corporations.

Indeed, "Managing Your Maintenance Programs" notes that callers may already be in a bad mood when they decide to pick up the phone. "We have all had to contact a company about a problem ... In each case, were you able to reach a human voice right away to address the problem? Or did you have to maneuver through a large array of computer-voice prompts before finally being put on hold 'for the next available representative?'" the book pointedly asks. "This is the same type of scenario that each of your residents has to go through when making a maintenance request. How you enable that process can go a long way toward

their feelings about you and your property management team.”

It is vital that associates who answer maintenance calls are trained in basic customer service skills. They should be taught to be aware that callers may already be upset about other issues and avoid the temptation to “defend, argue or explain.” The book also advises that in cases where a voice message is left, the staff member should return every call to confirm the message has been received, even if sufficient information was already provided to make the repair.

More and more apartment companies, especially the larger ones, are gravitating toward the use of electronic submission of maintenance orders, particularly on community Web sites. The Internet, or e-mail, seems to be the communications portal of choice among the younger generations of renters as it allows orders to be placed 24 hours a day at the renter’s convenience. Indeed, about 80 percent of all maintenance service requests at UDR properties are now being submitted electronically rather than by phone or in person, says Jerry Davis, UDR senior vice president of operations.

UDR, which owns and manages a portfolio of 59,614 units (as of Dec. 31, 2010), provides residents with a portal system in which they can maintain an account for paying rent, renewing leases or submitting service requests.

One key benefit of the proprietary electronic maintenance request processing system that UDR employs is that it automatically guides users to identify very precisely what needs to be repaired, according to Davis. The maintenance submission form on the Internet has drop-down menus categorized according to type of repair, such as door or plumbing, and the location in the room, down to the specific fixture. There is also a box for additional comments.

UDR has found that the specificity of this repair identification function saves time by eliminating the need to call the resident back to check on details of the repair needed. The necessity for the technician to walk back and forth from the apartment to the supplies room to obtain spare parts is also minimized when the technician knows exactly what needs to be fixed from the time of the order submission.

Servicing the orders

UDR is still testing the use of hand-held devices to receive maintenance orders. The standard practice is for electronic service orders to be received by the service manager, who assigns it to a technician. On its larger properties, UDR is testing a system of sharing technicians among a handful of apartment properties located within the same area. Instead of jack-of-all-trades technicians making repairs, cleaning the premises and turning apartments, each maintenance technician on the team will specialize in, and perform, only one job function across all properties.

In this way, the time wasted switching between different jobs can be minimized. In addition, “if someone making \$40,000 spends one-and-a-half hours picking up trash, you are overpaying, as that is a \$12-an-hour job,” says Davis.

In the handling of service requests, another best practice is for the technician to check the apartment for any other maintenance needs. At Dominionium, which owns and manages more than 19,000 apartment units, the engineers have a seven-point checklist “regardless of what the work order is,” says Jim Mitchell, di-

rector of maintenance for Dominionium. This customized checklist includes smoke detector, plumbing leaks, moisture intrusion, safety hazards, carpet condition, ground breakers, appliances and pest infestation. Since the maintenance technician has the tools with him, he may be able to attend to additional maintenance items that he finds.

And, according to Gallagher, when the technicians depart, they should leave a note in the apartment informing the resident that they have entered the apartment to perform repairs.

Ensuring 24-hour policies

The third part of maintenance servicing, the follow up, is intended to track—and ensure—resident satisfaction, says Polinger, Shannon & Luchs’ Gallagher. The company closes out the vast majority of requests within the same day. Likewise, Dominionium has a strict policy of responding to all resident requests within 24 hours. “That is a key component of our customer service,” says Mitchell. Work orders generated by residents is a top priority for technicians at Dominionium.

Another benefit of automating the maintenance processing system is that it allows Dominionium to automatically track the order-closeout rate. The maintenance response speed is so important that it’s measured and looked at every month by Dominionium headquarters as a part of the property’s performance index. “[The maintenance software] can be a very strong tool for back-end analysis, for which you need robust data collection,” adds Mitchell. Other functions the software performs are, for example, monitoring preventative maintenance and recurring work orders. “At headquarters, we can monitor the compliance of the

property with the [maintenance] policy. With a few key strokes, I can also tell you in real time the number of orders that are open, closed, in progress or scheduled,” says Mitchell.

Conducting a follow-up survey is also a standard best practice. Polinger, Shannon & Luchs sends out a survey after every maintenance request is closed to ask residents about their experience. This enables the company to track resident satisfaction—as well as provide good customer service and make the resident feel valued. Most residents do not respond to the surveys, especially if the maintenance was performed as

expected and to their satisfaction, says Gallagher. On the other hand, if the resident was highly displeased with the work order, the property manager can be quite sure they will respond to the survey. Remember, then, that the maintenance technician is as much a determinant of resident lease renewal rates as is the leasing agent. MHN

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