

## *I “Expect to be Impressed” by Your Advertising*

I will never forget the only time in my life I have ever been speechless. I got my start in this industry with my own small apartment publication in West Texas. When I began trying to branch out, I selected the Beaumont area of southeast Texas as a candidate city. My best friend and I went down to Beaumont to try and sell some ads and see if our magazine concept would work there. The very first community we walked in to should have ended our careers. The manager was sitting behind her desk, puffing what had to have been a Camel non-filtered cigarette judging by her teeth. We launched in to our spiel and she listened, seeming to take in what we were saying. She didn't jump in at any of the usual points so we just kept on going. After about twenty minutes, she finally stopped us. She took a huge long drag on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the overflowing ash tray and looked up at us and said “sweetie, we've never had no rapes nor murders here, so I don't see no need to advertise.” I was dumbfounded. I looked at the manager, looked at my friend and back to the manager. Finally, I reached in my coat pocket, fished out my business card and said “Okay then! If your needs ever change, be sure to think of us first.”

Times have changed, even in Beaumont. The importance of effective advertising to your community can't be overstated. No apartment community can survive without it. If you are to win traffic, increase occupancy and make a profit you must advertise and advertise well! Your advertisement must attract attention, stimulate interest, carry conviction, and, most importantly induce action! Effective advertising is well thought out, informative, inviting and attractive – and is essential in community marketing. But how many advertisements in the local apartment magazines accomplish all of these? If you handed a friend an apartment magazine and asked them to find the most creative advertisement – would it be for your community?

First, you have to ask yourself some key questions. Who are you wanting to speak to? What are you trying to say? What will you put in the ad? Where will you put the ad? That's right – where you are going to place the ad makes a big difference in what you want to say and what information it should include. The mistake many people make is that they decide on the medium first, and then try to craft their message around that medium. You have to design an ad campaign first – a clear message – and then apply it or trim it to fit the medium.

It is necessary to define your audience before you craft an advertisement. Now I know what your thinking, isn't that against the fair housing law? Doesn't our ad have to appeal to everyone? No! The Fair Housing law is not intended to keep you from properly marketing your community. While to be in compliance, you obviously will rent to anyone meeting your qualifications, this doesn't mean you can't pick specific groups to market to. Be specific when you look at your resident profile and decide whether you want to build upon that, attract a different profile or go in a completely new direction. You must design advertising that speaks to your market!

So decide what you want the ad to accomplish. You have to decide the overall purpose of your ad – are you trying to get your name out there, bring in traffic, etc. Most apartment advertising fits in the category of Direct Response Advertising versus name recognition or Brand Identity Advertising. Direct Response Advertising is intended to get your prospect to act – to pick up the phone or drive on in. But we often use phrases or headlines that fail to make this happen. How often do you thumb through an apartment magazine and see the phrase “call for current specials”? I can't tell you how many times I see that and it amazes me that such an ineffective phrase is in so many ads. What makes someone act on this? Where is the incentive? When is the deal expiring? You have to give them a reason to act, and act quickly. Otherwise your ad might fall into the category of Brand Identity Advertising. This is the most common form of

advertising on billboards or in national general interest magazines. Brand Identity Advertising does work for apartment communities if you have an established and easily recognizable brand. Post Properties has done an excellent job of establishing their brand in the Atlanta market, as has AMLI in Chicago. But typically, brand identity advertising misses the mark and generates little traffic.

The next essential element is a tagline. There are two types of taglines that will get the best results. One uses a positive approach, the other a negative one. You convey a positive message with words that show a reader how he can save, gain, or accomplish something through choosing your community as his/her next home. Demonstrate how it will increase his mental, financial, and social well-being or sense of comfort. A negative approach points out how a reader can avoid or eliminate risks, worries, mistakes, or any other undesirable condition if they choose your community over another. It explains how it will reduce their fear of loss, lack of comfort or missing out on a deal. A little harder to work into a property advertisement – stick with the Positive.

Think of some good taglines from corporations across America. What are some you remember? How about these - GE – We Bring Good Things to Life; Secret – Strong Enough for a Man, But Made for a Woman; Kodak – Share the Moments, Share Life. They are all perfect because they are short, succinct, memorable and tell what the company is all about. Especially Kodak's – isn't that exactly what pictures are for? These also stick in our memory because of endless repetition. We don't have that luxury, but that doesn't mean we cannot create a memorable tagline. Take a moment to look through any apartment magazine in the country and you will find tagline after tagline that isn't memorable and doesn't say anything about the community itself. Expect to be impressed. Raise your expectations. Experience the Luxurious Lifestyle. The best kept secret in town. One word comes to mind – BARF! Some of the taglines that stand out are: Our plans will change yours; Serenity – in the shadows of the city; Get your head in the clouds; or my friend Tracey Hopkins' fantastic tagline

for a community with a very specific target audience – Closets you won't want to come out of! How great is that? Will everyone understand it? No, but they don't have to. Tracey used this great tagline for a community in the Turtle Creek / Cedar Springs area of Dallas – an upscale neighborhood with a decidedly gay clientele. It was cute, memorable, succinct and clever – everything a good tag line should be.

Okay, so now you have a great tagline, what's next? Focus on your text description. Many times this space is wasted by just listing the amenity bullet points in paragraph form. You have to describe your community in a way that paints a picture of what you're all about. One of the best examples I have ever read was another property in Texas, a new highrise on Allen Parkway near downtown Houston. The description didn't even focus on the property, but sold the neighborhood, the street life and the amazing views. It was perfect because it was interesting, enticing and spoke to the intended audience – upwardly mobile and successful people transferred to Houston from other large cities. The idea was to sell the urban environment and this streets' chic sophistication to folks that might not think of Houston as an urban oasis. It did that and more.

It is also important to use language in your copy that is similar to everyday conversation. It should be addressed to the individual in the form of short sentences and brief paragraphs. Depending on the size of the ad, space permitting, you should try telling not only what your community is like, but what it is like to live there. Copy length can be as little as one or two sentences, or as much as several paragraphs. It depends on where the ad winds up that limits your text.

Describing your amenities with your bullet points is also important. The words you use count! Don't use the same old words that everyone else uses, try something different. Don't be afraid to crack open a Thesaurus. Strike certain words from your vocabulary – a pool can still *sparkle* when it's green and filled with leaves. *Ample* closets? Wow, that sounds nice. *Fully-equipped*, what exactly

does that mean? How about this one – *architecturally-designed*. That’s good, because so many apartment communities are designed by stenographers and waitresses these days. But I always laugh when I read amenities that just aren’t – like wall-to-wall carpeting. That’s kind of like saying your community is fully-roofed or wired for electricity. List your top amenities, the ones that are unique. Describe them each well and then list them in order of priority. It is also a good idea to have them in two groups – community amenities and then apartment features. An interesting note, most readers are more likely to remember community amenities if asked than remember individual apartment features like microwaves and soaking tubs.

To complete your advertisement, make sure you have all of your bases covered. Contact information – does your ad list *all* the ways a prospect could choose to contact you? Meaning your local phone and a toll-free call tracking number, your e-mail address and your fax number? You need to have each of these so that your prospect can choose the one that they prefer. How about your map and driving directions – are they easily understood, clear and concise? I’ll never forget when I first moved to Austin and everyone told me how close they were to MoPac or that they were just three blocks from the Arboretum. Look at almost any map of Austin and you don’t see MoPac anywhere, it is called Loop 1 (funny considering it is a straight line). The Arboretum isn’t a botanical garden in some city park but in true Texas-style, a shopping plaza. So be sure your directions make sense to the unfamiliar. Orient your maps with north at the top, refer to freeways and easily recognizable landmarks. Do you have a property website or a direct address with one of your online ad sources like RentNet.com or Apartments.com? If so, be sure to list that on your ad as well for more information. If your print ad is in one of the three national publications, Apartment Finder, Apartment Guide or For Rent Magazine, they will likely include your direct address in your ad already. Be sure to not just reference the site in general! Sure they will find your ad, eventually, after they have seen all of your competitors.

So you have all the right elements in your ad – now review it for effectiveness. Can you answer positively to these three questions - Why should anyone read it? Will the reader understand what my community is about? Why should the reader act on it? If you have good positive answers to these qualifications, you should have a winner! Good advertising doesn't have to be left to big companies or advertising agencies. It takes just takes thought and preparation! Work with your ad reps and design a campaign that sells your community and generates that interest to increase your phone volume and walk-in traffic. Or when all else fails, call a consultant!



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