

Virtual Tours: The Best Way to Do This

By Paul Bergeron

Apartment operators spend thousands of dollars and thousands of hours training their onsite leasing professionals. Faced with the new (temporary) normal of reliance on virtual leasing tours, there's no reason to rely on guesswork and your agent's smartphone to get this right.

Virtual tours are not the same as self-guided tours and certainly aren't the same as walking tours. Those points were made by Apartment Expert Lisa Trosien during a recent 40-minute webinar on the topic as part of her Speedy Solutions program. It was hosted by the Triad Apartment Association.

And while recent statistical data from RealPage, CoStar and Zillow each show that traffic is picking up again, this doesn't mean that virtual tours are winding down. These types of tours will remain a desired alternative in the future for out-of-town prospects, or for those who might still be hesitant to relax social distancing.

Practice, Practice, Practice

There are many commonsense points that apartment communities might be overlooking if they haven't adequately thought this through.

"It's not just walking around with your phone taking video," Trosien says. "You need to plan. Storyboard it. Practice it."

Virtual tours can be recorded or be conducted as live walk-throughs with the leasing professional communicating to the prospect every step of the way. That's the ideal situation, Trosien says. The tour can include walking the prospect through your website or a pre-recorded video, if it's feasible.

"With a live virtual tour, go out of your way to show them that during these challenging times you are doing it for them," she says. "They will appreciate it and remember you for it."

For in-person virtual tours, always ask the prospect: How much time do you have? And be sure to honor that. (Recorded tours should not go beyond two minutes. Really, about 1 minute, 45 seconds is the sweet spot, she says.)

Ask the prospect ahead of time what type of device they will be using to view the tour so you can plan accordingly.

"Remember, the tour is about them; not you," Trosien says. "They need to feel comfortable about what device they want to use. For a lot of people, taking part in a virtual tour is a real shift for them. Think about how awkward it might have been for you the first time you joined a Zoom call. You don't know what buttons to click and when. You don't how to turn on and off the video or audio."

Accessibility and accommodation are other components to address when delivering a well-executed virtual tour. By customizing a live virtual tour, persons with disabilities can be shown accommodations such as ramps, parking spaces and interior fixtures such as accessible apartment homes.

For persons with hearing disabilities, audio can be replaced by captioning.

Live tours are more authentic because they are more interactive and conversational, she says. It starts with a warm welcome where the prospect can see the leasing professional's face. "Let them see who you are," she says. "Make that personal connection at the start."

Trosien says introverts and even extroverts really need to ramp up the personality while giving the tours. Yes, extroverts, too.

"You must be 'on' the entire time," she says. "Ask questions throughout the tour after your points are being made: 'What do you think of this?' 'Are you okay with that?' 'What do you think so far?' 'Do you have any questions?' Keep it moving."

"Having this interaction is so important because you cannot see them; you are not getting your usual body-language cues and facial expressions to help you gauge their interest or displeasure."

"However, don't turn your virtual tours into a creativity contest for your staff. This is not the place for this. Be creative about how to market it, such as on social media. But if you try to be clever during the tour, it can become a distraction for the prospect."

Before the tour, Trosien says to list things that the prospect has shared that they are interested in seeing and be sure to include them.

"If they want a 'western view' then give them one," she says. "And right now, balconies are hugely popular, especially for prospects who didn't have one before. During shelter-at-home, this might be there only (or primary) window to the world."

"And even if they didn't emphasize the kitchen, you should. Spend extra time in the kitchen. During this pandemic, people are doing more cooking and baking from home. Highlight that."

Hundreds of Dollars, Thousands of Dollars

Remember, Trosien says, "whether they will be leasing for a few hundred dollars a month in rent – or a few thousand – signing a lease is a major investment. You need to treat it like that no matter what Class property you work at."

Even though your amenities are closed, show them. They will be using them at some point. If it's difficult to do, make sure you have a recorded video that highlights the amenities to show them or to send to them.

(For recorded tours, make sure to do them shoeless. There is nothing worse than the distracting echo of footsteps. And please: Put the toilet seat down), she says.

Finally, it's tough, Trosien says, but at the end of the tour, you must ask the prospective resident: Was there anything you didn't like?"

This is mandatory because, "again, you have no idea what they are thinking because you weren't able to see their reactions to things," she says. "And if they say something was not right, be ready to respond to it."

A Word About Privacy

Privacy for leasing professionals is an important aspect of this process. Onsite staff do not want their personal cell phone numbers made available to the public. One benefit to Zoom is that it doesn't capture or display cell phone numbers or other contact information.

Technical Difficulties

Most technology needed to do a strong virtual tour is surprisingly affordable.

Communities should absolutely buy tablets or smart phones for their properties specifically for this use, Trosien says. "Matterport (cameras) are great, great products, but you don't absolutely need one to do these tours well."

Virtual leasing must be accessible across all types of devices, browsers, operating systems, and technologies so as to not alienate anyone from joining those experiences because of the device that they do or do not have.

"You want to make sure your virtual tours are dynamic and personalized in order to cover everything that a person would expect from an in-person tour," says Matt Weirich, Co-Founder & CEO, Realync, one of the leading virtual tour operators nationwide.

Following is more advice from Trosien:

- Some older devices don't have webcams. But you do need one. They are about \$25.
- Get a gimbal and attach it to your camera. It will improve the production of your video, such as allowing you to zoom in. (not Zoom, lol). A gimbal is a pivoted point that allows videographers to rotate an object along a single axis and helps it to capture incredible images from various angles. They are priced from approximately \$40 to \$160 and are mostly used while making videos, but also can help to capture amazing still photos.
- Make sure the battery on your phone, tablet or laptop is charged.
- Don't fail the Wi-Fi strength test. Make sure the connection will be there at all points on the tour. You can determine this during practice runs.
- Add a My-Fi device to help improve your signal, especially in high-rise buildings where the connection could be susceptible to thick walls or while you are in an elevator or a stairwell. You don't want the connection to fail. What does that tell the resident about your Wi-Fi abilities onsite?
- Don't go out on a windy day, if you can possibly avoid it. Ideally, these tours should take place on sunny days (for recorded tours, there's no excuse), but that's not always possible. Buy extra floor lamps to use to help light the apartment home if you must conduct the tour on a cloudy day.

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