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Let's Be Friends: Multifamily Embraces Social Media

Industry increases use of online platforms for marketing, referrals, and leads.

By: [Chris Wood](#)

It's official: Social networking is the new multifamily must-have.

Last month, Greenbelt, Md.-based Bozzuto Group announced that it had hired a new senior vice president of corporate marketing—Jamie Gorski, formerly senior vice president and chief marketing officer for McLean, Va.-based Kettler—to provide strategic marketing direction for each of Bozzuto's six integrated companies. Translation: The Bozzuto Group has sensed that it's high time to power up its online presence when it comes to social networking media.

“Despite the economic downturn, our third-party management and construction business lines have experienced strong growth,” Bozzuto Group CEO Tom Bozzuto said of Gorski's hiring. “For that reason, we want to make sure we're marketing our company and our services as effectively as possible.”

Though Gorski boasts a second-to-none resume in multifamily marketing as a whole, it's been in the social media arena where she's made a definitive mark, particularly at Kettler, one of the first multifamily firms to leverage the power of viral marketing and brand presence across online social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

“Relationship marketing has been around forever, and social and digital media is just a new medium to do it in,” Gorski says. “It's very exciting in terms of opportunity, almost like when the Internet first came out. We really do believe that social media is going to improve our business. We think it is going to help us reduce costs, gain exposure, develop better business partnerships, and generate leads.”

The Bozzuto Group isn't alone in ramping up its social media efforts. Columbia, Md.-based Enterprise Community Partners officially launched its social media presence last month, unveiling an initiative that spans across platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

“We began researching and crafting a plan for social marketing back in January 2008,” says Isaac Salazar, advocacy and new media coordinator for Enterprise Communities. “Our main goal is to raise awareness about the work we do at Enterprise among varied audiences including residents, policy makers, partners, stakeholders, and just casual observers online. We want to reach these folks, so it makes sense to target where they are already gathering online.”

Though high on buzz factor, social media has long been criticized within multifamily for an apparent lack of monetization opportunities. Those tides are also turning as firms such as Bozzuto, Enterprise, and Kettler begin to recoup marketing and advertising dollars from their online efforts.

Firms specializing in multifamily social networking—including San Francisco-based RentMineOnline and Atlanta-based RentWiki—are also beginning to leverage social platforms for resident referrals and qualified lease-up leads for their clients. “We’re really not trying anything new; we are allowing residents to leverage the social networks that they already like and use,” says Ed Spiegel, president of RentMineOnline, an e-mail blast resident referral system that integrates with Facebook, Plaxo, Gmail, Yahoo, and AOL. Residents who leverage their existing friend networks online to generate leads for their apartment community earn rewards cards redeemable at popular retail outlets such as Starbucks.

How powerful can social referrals be versus the traditional door hanger approach? Walnut Creek, Calif.-based Sequoia Equities director of marketing Lisa Trapp says the results speak for themselves. “Within 24 hours of our first RentMineOnline campaign launch, our residents sent 3,277 positive referral messages to their friends endorsing Sequoia communities on Facebook.”

Former ApartmentGuide.com executives, including Jamie Gallo and Robert Turnbull, are likewise finding success marrying the traditional multifamily Internet listing service (ILS) model to social networking. Specifically, with RentWiki.com, they are following the user-contributed, peer-review model made popular by Wikipedia. In addition, RentWiki.com provides micro-sub-market neighborhood information across some 40 major rental markets with users providing localized information such as the level of traffic noise, the location of great restaurants around the property, anecdotal information on crime levels, and where to walk your dog. Apartment companies can then advertise their properties in specific markets and pay per lead generated by the site.

“The multifamily adoption of social media has been surprising,” says RentWiki chief marketing officer Eric Wu. “A year ago, companies would never embrace anything that actually had a pros and cons section or didn’t allow them to just publish a romance paragraph about their property and neighborhood.” Wu says RentWiki is also seeing data transfers upstream and points to Gables Residential as a firm that is republishing RentWiki micro-data on its own community-specific Web sites. To that end, RentWiki is looking to develop an API so any property management company can essentially pull localized information off the wiki and onto independent, local ILSs.

Whatever the approach, pros such as Gorski and Salazar emphasize that, for all of its simplicity, social media is anything but a plug-and-play approach to digital marketing. The Enterprise team spent a year developing their online social strategy and has Web-Ex-enabled social media meetings once a week across a broad range of business divisions and market geographies. Gorski is taking a page from the Kettler playbook and hiring full-time personnel dedicated exclusively to social media.

“Average advertising costs should go down with a good social media marketing plan,” Gorski says. “That’s not saying that you do not have to put a lot of work into it. The first step? Put someone in charge. If you can focus on doing the right things from a brand perspective—and from a customer perspective—the possibilities are endless. That’s what makes it so exciting.”

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