



Search

[About NAA](#) | [Government Affairs](#) | [Education](#) | [Publications](#) | [Industry Resources](#) | [Meetings & Events](#) | [Blog](#)

You are here: [NAA Home](#) > [Publications](#) > [units Magazine](#) > [units 2011](#) > [March 2011](#)

#### Menu

[April 2011](#)

[March 2011](#)

[February 2011](#)

[January 2011](#)

## Texting Residents Gets a Thumbs Up

by *Paul R. Bergeron III*

**Volume 35**

**Issue 3**

**When it comes to delivering the message to residents, these management firms have their fingers, er, thumbs on the situation.**

Consider this head-scratcher for one community manager who struggled to persuade a resident to consistently pay rent on time. As days went by, he tried asking in person, e-mailing, calling and leaving notes on the door, but his efforts hardly provoked even a response. Finally, he tried texting.

Sure enough, the rent check arrived within a day. Was the college-age student not getting the message? Maybe. For the manager, even more valuable than getting the rent check was the lesson learned that Generation Y tends to pay more attention to requests made by text.

"It's weird," he says. "But this is the way that members of this generation have trained their parents on how to get them to do what they want them to do."

The college students of today are the residents of tomorrow. Texting has grown right along with the number of consumers who spend much of their days with their cell phones in hand. Results from national apartment-resident survey firm SatisFacts show that cell phone (53.9 percent) is neck and neck with e-mail (55.7 percent) as residents' No. 1 preferred method of communication, according to data released February 2011. More than 11 percent of respondents specifically stated texting as the preferred method, a number that is climbing as SatisFacts only started polling this option in September.

More than 6.1 trillion texts were sent in 2010 and there are an estimated 2.4 billion active users of SMS (short messaging service, the most widely used form of texting), or 74 percent of all mobile phone subscribers worldwide, according to a February release by research firm mobiThinking.

In an effort to give their residents what they want, forward-thinking communities are using or considering texting programs for their residents—of any age.

### The Text Generation

Texting can create issues of concern and strategy for apartment owners. How often should they text? What should they text about? Are there privacy concerns? Should company policy be set about who sends the texts and if and when to reply?

Many apartment management companies have enlisted the help of mobile and text-message service providers or have partnered with their Internet listing service (ILS) partners to develop customized programs that enable automated group and targeted resident texting.

These blast-texting programs are the next wave in the apartment industry's use of texting communications. They follow the text-message marketing strategies that communities use for prospective residents via signage and short codes, which were rolled out a few years ago. Results from those programs are mixed.

Some have even abandoned marketing strategies focused on text messaging. "You need a strong print campaign to drive an efficient text-marketing program," says Lynette Hegeman, Vice President of Marketing, Gables Residential. "Our focus has shifted from print to mobile, as we have seen far greater results with mobile web search. However, we have not completely given up on texting and find it valuable as a resident engagement and communication tool, just not as a prospect-generating

vehicle.”

### **Text Me**

Spend a short amount of time with almost any person under age 30 and you'll see they don't spend much time actually talking on the phone, but will often whip out their cell phone to check for text messages and then zip out a reply almost immediately.

College-age students' desire to text was quickly confirmed for Kim Cory, Sales and Marketing Manager, University Village, when her company worked with an ILS' technology department to build and then implement a text-based communications pilot program called the Mobile Club, at one of its biggest communities at Ohio State.

“When we announced [in the fall] that we have a mobile club, 88 residents out of 2,000 signed up on their own free will,” Cory says. “We didn't even market it.” Today, more than 500 are participating.

Whereas such blast-texting programs are growing, traditional one-on-one, back-and-forth texting is much less common at most communities—including student housing. “They'd think it was weird” to receive a text personally from their manager (or owner), says one community manager.

There are occasions where one-on-one texting works: residents living in one- or two-unit buildings managed by independent rental owners (IROs). See “When Traditional Texting Does Work for Residents,” p. 53.

Programs such as the one Cory uses primarily communicate notifications for emergencies, weather alerts, reminders for rent payment, social event invites and status updates on things such as deliveries or maintenance work orders.

Lisa Trapp, Director of Marketing, Sequoia Equities, Walnut Creek, Calif., expects text-message communications to be embraced across all demographic segments. “We think demographics are less of a factor, considering most from Generation X and the Baby Boomers have children, nieces or nephews, and employees who already text them,” she says, so those residents are familiar and comfortable with texting.

### **Good Reception**

A primary concern for apartment owners should be sending texts that speak to residents' interests, Cory says. “Our purpose for our Mobile Club is to communicate immediately about information, deals, promotions or events we know they want to hear about,” she explains. “When you connect with them this way, they become ‘raving’ fans of yours.”

San Diego-based Fairfield Residential, which owns and manages market-rate, affordable and student housing nationwide, has a texting program called Customer Care that is typical of the approach of many owners and managers who have carefully delved into text messaging in the past year.

The company's onsite management team oversees the texting program with the residents. A communication calendar and strategy is set each month and then executed via a host of communication channels, including texting.

Fairfield rolled out its program at its 398-unit community Presidio Apartment Homes in Denver in February 2010, and according to its Vice President of Marketing Sue Garcia, more than 80 percent of the residents participate and only a handful have opted out. Garcia says Presidio's resident demographic matches nicely with the mobile phone-user set and the property is located in the Denver Tech Center, another great tie-in given its tech-savvy residents. Fairfield also is committed to offering its “Living Green” lifestyle options, and the incorporation of texting can reduce the use of paper products.

### **Here's My Number**

Fairfield's onsite team had to gain approval from residents prior to adding them to the text communication efforts. At the time of move-in, Fairfield asks residents for this approval while inviting residents to participate and engage with the onsite team via e-mail, social media sites, texting and traditional communication. Residents can opt out at anytime, Garcia says. The program costs Fairfield approximately \$300 per month per community. Cory adds that some texting programs are available for

about \$100 per month, based on community size and participation.

Fairfield sends texts to residents about community events, resident-referral reminders and promotions. It uses texting to gain resident feedback on survey questions, allowing residents to select responses on their phone and reply.

Fairfield also implemented Mobile RSVP programs for its resident functions and activities such as pool parties, movie night, sunrise yoga and Monday Night Football, Garcia says. These offerings have gained rave reviews from residents, she says.

At Presidio, for example, Fairfield provides a "Pressed for Time" dry cleaning service. This mobile platform, arranged through a software vendor, serves as the perfect solution to inform residents about the arrival of their freshly pressed clothing.

"There are some situations where communicating through texting makes the most sense," Garcia says. "For example, when a package is accepted in the office on behalf of a resident, a text message to the resident informing them of the delivery is appreciated as it allows the resident to stop by the office when coming home at the end of the day before they head up to their apartment home. This communication is welcomed because it is non-invasive."

These text-message notifications have saved "precious time previously spent playing phone tag with residents," Garcia says. "This solution notifies our residents at the same pace that they move during their day—on the go."

Trapp, who launched Sequoia Equities' program in February, says blast-texting could help her cut her budget on items such as printing notices, door hangers and fliers. She said currently Sequoia spends about \$1,500 per 10,000 professionally made door hangers.

Sequoia operates more than 10,000 units over 40 communities, with four exclusively serving student housing and three others including 25 percent student housing residents.

Whereas text messages are often received immediately by residents on their cell phones, written notes, voice mails or e-mails left by apartment managers might not be read until hours or days later. One misperception that Cory says some apartment management companies have made about young professionals or college-age residents is that they are plugged in through Internet access on their phones. Some owners, aiming to reach their "wired" and social-media savvy residents, have focused on sites such as Facebook or portals to communicate.

Cory says she found out that many students at her community cannot afford Internet phone service. "We had been e-mailing them and putting things on Facebook, but many students didn't spend as much time online as we thought," she says. "Important, immediate information such as having a utility turned off wasn't received in time. When we asked residents about events, we kept hearing, 'I wish you had texted me.'"

#### **No 'Paper' Trail**

Not every company sees text messaging as an ideal vehicle for resident communications. Bryan Grackin, Regional Manager for Gates, Hudson & Associates, Fairfax, Va., says that although many residents certainly text just as much or more than e-mail, from a management perspective, he wants to have formal, documented communication with residents.

"In this litigious society we live in, you have to worry sometimes about how a text message or even an e-mail would stand up in court if the communication has to do with a legal issue or conduct codes," Grackin says.

"We encourage all residents to follow their community on Facebook, where information is posted about events and fun things, in addition to fliers on community bulletin boards and high traffic areas," says Grackin, whose firm manages approximately 5,000 units in the mid-Atlantic region, "but the cost of a mass-texting service just doesn't seem worth it at this time with so many other free mediums to use."

#### **Ready to Respond**

While few companies encourage managers to text directly with residents, some texting services include an option for the onsite staff to receive responses to blast texts and

then reply back to the residents. With software developer IRIO's product, the text is sent with the sender listed as a short code, followed by the message, ending with a signature line such as the property name.

IRIO's Managing Director John Bower says onsite staff members are alerted that replies have been sent, by whom, and how many. They may choose to ignore them, read them, respond to them, or continue a back-and-forth texting dialogue, as necessary.

"It depends on how specific the language in the reply is and whether the community wants its staff to spend the time to engage," Bower says. "Some replies simply are, 'OK,' and others ask more elaborate questions and might deserve a response or two."

Cory envisions that texting will someday displace e-mail altogether. Her communities have not had trouble gaining the e-mail addresses from her resident base, she says (at one community, she has 1,981 out of 2,300—"That's pretty darn good," she says), but tracking shows that e-mails sent by her office staff are read by only 13 percent to 18 percent of the students.

Cory's Ohio State community now has a formal marketing effort for its text service with signage throughout the property, announcements on its website home page and reminders to sign up on Facebook.

In six months, University Village went from 1 percent of its residents using the mobile club to more than 25 percent.

If the popularity of text messaging continues to grow, such successful text message communications programs could appear at more communities nationwide—as long as residents get good cell phone reception.

Paul R. Bergeron III is NAA's Director of Communications. He can be reached at 703/797-0606 or [paul@naahq.org](mailto:paul@naahq.org).

-----

#### **When Traditional Texting Does Work for Residents**

There are occasions when one-on-one texting does work: residents living in one- or two-unit buildings managed by independent rental owners (IROs), in which the renter has a comfortable, established, professional relationship with the owner.

Jenna Lee, an experienced renter who lives in Washington, D.C., shares her thoughts on resident/owner communications: "E-mailing is my preferred method of communication. I prefer e-mail because I like to have the record of the conversation, it's a little easier to have a more in-depth conversation, and I can copy my roommates on the e-mails to keep us all up-to-date.

"I like having the option to text because it is an easy way to answer or ask questions in cases where e-mail might slow down the process of getting something fixed in my apartment. It's also nice to have another way to get in touch with my landlord. On average, we have a brief text conversation (back and forth, maybe four or five texts) about twice per month.

"I like texting with my landlord because I feel comfortable with him. I don't think I would feel as comfortable texting past landlords. I trust him and don't feel the need to keep records of all of our conversations as I have with others.

"My owner texts if he is going to stop by the house to check on something or drop off something for us such as a new furnace filter. He also texts to check when we sent in our rent checks or if there is something else that he may need to stop by for, such as if any USPS mail was delivered to the [rental property]. In cases that involve larger repairs—such as projects that require a contractor to visit the property—we e-mail."  
—P.B.

#### **'Can I Have Your Number?'**

A text-message program can only be as good as the number of resident cell-phone numbers a community can collect.

Gables Residential, with 60,000 units spread over 140 communities, made a push starting in October to gain e-mail and phone number information. Lynette Hegeman, Vice President of Marketing, Gables Residential, says the company got 70 percent of its residents' cell-phone numbers. This can include more than one contact number per unit, as often a husband and wife have different cell phone numbers.

"For so many renters these days, their cell phone is their home phone," Hegeman says. —P.B.

### Leave a Message

Knowing what topics are appropriate for text messages is an ongoing challenge for some apartment managers. Sequoia Equities, with more than 10,000 apartment units, uses a modified "best practices" text subject matter policy provided by a software firm. For example, the company does not text information about recovering money owed for delinquent accounts. Its policy is, admittedly, initially vague, Director of Marketing Lisa Trapp says, as resident texting is new to Sequoia's management.

"We're learning the appropriate social ethos" of this method, she says. Following are examples of what Sequoia Equities' office and service team members might send to residents:

From Office Team

"A package has arrived for you in our office. Would you like us to deliver it to your home?"

"Remember, valet trash is picked up on Tuesdays and Thursdays this week. Take advantage!"

"We have a new team member in the office, Angela—if you see her around our community, be sure to say, 'Hello.'"

"Our ACS Relay for Life Bake Sale is tomorrow—come down and donate a dollar for one of Sherry's famous brownies!"

Maintenance/Service

"Don't forget our parking lot is undergoing a slurry seal Wed at 8 a.m."

"Tomorrow we will be testing fire alarm drills, so do not be alarmed."

"Put us to work! If you need pictures hung or accent walls painted just call the office—we'd like to help."

"Our gates are temporarily not working, so we will leave them open until they are fully repaired. More to follow."

"Our gates are functioning!"

| [More](#)

---

### Was this article helpful to you?

Current Rating

---

[Home](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Contact Us](#)

National Apartment Association - 4300 Wilson Blvd, Suite 400, Arlington, VA 22203  
703/ 518-6141 FAX: 703/ 248-9440 | [webmaster@naahq.org](mailto:webmaster@naahq.org)

© Copyright 2001-2011 All rights reserved