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Synopsis: Before you take a step forward, take two steps back! Before you increase your special (or marketing), increase your ability to compete. Find out how you can distinguish your property from all the others in your market by closely examining it through the eyes of your customers.

Marketing: Basics first, specials last

One month free! Two months free! Free DVD! Are all these concessions really necessary? Have you ever wanted to just walk out on the front lawn of your community and yell, “Stop the madness!”?

It’s frustrating when you are in a soft or competitive market and the best everyone can do is offer the largest concession. While it’s true that our customers have gotten in the habit of asking, “What’s your special?” you need to realize that we have trained them to ask this.

Pick up the phone and call three of your competitors. You will find they “whip out” that special before they even mention amenities or apartment features. When the customer calls the next community to find out price and availability, they now need to compare who has the biggest special. The sad part is that once we all offer concessions, we all lose our competitive advantage. Sure the first guy had some advantage to knocking off a little money at move-in, but once we all jumped in, the playing field evened out.

Before you think up some clever special like “today’s weather is your first month’s rent,” I urge you to take a step back and evaluate all of your community appeal and marketing efforts.

Let’s start with the street. Is the lawn luscious? Are your flowers attracting attention or barely hanging on? Landscapers are funny. They plant flowers 2–3 inches apart as if they will be there for the next two years when you probably have your color changes two-to-three times a year. *Make* them plant all flowers right next to each other for a “pop” of attention-getting color.

Now, say it with me, “No more red begonias.” Since that is what just about every apartment community in Texas plants, red begonias in the summer and purple/yellow pansies in the winter, go for Lantana or something equally as hearty and full of color. Winter rye will really make your property stand out in the dreary wintertime. You just can’t help looking at beautiful green grass when all else is brown. Are all balconies and patios free from clutter, trash and that ugly green La-Z-Boy? How about your monument sign? Does it need a fresh coat of paint? If you need to replace your monument sign, your main identification, you need to do it now rather than later. The cost of lost traffic and leases is monumental compared to the cost of a sign replacement.

If you have flags, banners or bootleg signs out front, they must be in excellent condition. Tattered flags, sagging banners and crooked, bent bootlegs say to the customer that you have terrible management or maintenance. If you put balloons out front everyday, do you leave the dead balloons overnight or do you take scissors out front and cut them before you leave each day? The way I look at it, your residents who leave early and come home late see nothing but dead balloons each and every day. My feelings on balloons are that they should be reserved for occasional use. They look bad longer than they look good, especially with our hot seasons!

Now let's evaluate your office. I am sure the physical office is quite nice, but are your people? That's a tough one. Obviously you and they think everything is fine, but does the person who just came in?

As an industry overall, we tend to either over-do it on the greeting or blow it badly with a distant, slightly annoyed-at-being-interrupted style of greeting. This one is a biggie. We spend thousands of dollars creating an environment that makes people feel welcome and yet the person who is out front rarely smiles, rarely gets up and even worse, is rarely pleased to see someone walking in to see an apartment. That's just astonishing to me. As a marketer, I am genuinely glad a customer has arrived because that means I did my job well.

In the South, we are expected to be gracious with our visitors but so many onsite leasing teams just are not. I ask you, do you *like* paperwork? Would you rather finish that report than help someone find a home? If you answered yes, *quit*. Life is too short to waste it on a job you hate. Believe me, this all ties back to marketing. It doesn't make sense that we advertise, literally inviting people to come see our property and when they arrive, we act like we can't be bothered.

Next we need to review our marketing corridor, which is basically anything the customer sees on the way to the apartment. All areas that are common to the residents must be absolutely spotless. While you may not have a budget to replace that pool furniture or update the laundry, you have no excuse to have trashcans overflowing, fingerprints on windows or a dirty pool. Customers will forgive a lot of things but cleanliness isn't one of them.

The apartment home is where the rubber meets the road. Aren't we all leasing four walls plus or minus some frills? If our greeting was bumpy, many are able to warm up by the time they get out on the tour, but it's all for naught if the unit disappoints.

You have to begin with the outside of the door. Look for the need to paint it, replace the doorknob, pull off the doorknob year's worth of rubber bands and don't forget to look at the outside light. Typically it's full of dead bugs or at the very least crooked. When the door opens does it squeak? Or sound like the door of a haunted house? This is sending subliminal messages to the mind of your customer.

How does the apartment smell? Isn't it funny that the resident can move all their stuff out but not their smell? I strongly recommend air-oxidizing machines to clean the air. Smelly apartments only lease to people with weak olfactory glands!

Now, is it clean? Really clean? Remember that you will never get a chance to recover from showing a dirty apartment. No matter what the customer says, it's just too gross to get over.

Maybe it's time to update your finishes. This is where you can really get competitive. It's unfortunate for properties that are usually rated "B" during these market conditions in Texas. All the "A" communities and those in lease-up create such deals that a solid "B" community finds it almost impossible to compete. Well, you can if you update.

Think about the fact that 80 percent of household decisions are typically made by the female. Now let's think about what the female will notice—floors, cabinets, counters, plumbing and light fixtures. (Obviously storage, space and floor plan lay-out, but I want to focus on features you can change.)

It isn't necessary to replace everything with new—at least most of the time it isn't. Let's start with what needs attention the most out of the areas I just listed. Carpets are pretty much all beige these days and that's what is in, stay with it. But if you replace the carpet, increase your pad thickness by a ½ inch. It feels richer and the competition isn't doing it. Put in wood-look laminate flooring. It goes with everything and has proven to be quite durable for multifamily.

If you have those super dark cabinets, you might just have to paint them. The only way to know whether or not it's necessary is to listen to the prospect. Here's a telling question; "Are these the only cabinets you have?" Countertops that have been resurfaced usually have to continue to be resurfaced. If you have enough money to resurface over and over again, then by all means, continue. But in order to get the best bang for your buck, find a company that prides itself on few callbacks or just bite the bullet and replace the counters with a durable product.

Lastly, plumbing and light fixtures go a long way in updating the apartment homes. Think about what you would want if you were on a search right now. Would you want that standard brass and glass dining room chandelier or perhaps the brushed aluminum that looks cool and goes with everything? Do you like those really ugly standard faucets of the '80s, you know the ones, or would you like something that looks new?

None of what I have mentioned needs to cost a lot. It only needs to be different than what everyone else on your street offers. And you will find that owners would rather improve the real estate than give the rent away with concessions.

The next time you have to replace something, tell your service technician that you want to make the choice. Just because it's what is in all the other units in your property is absolutely no reason why you have to continue with the exact same thing. That is one

area of complaint from the average renter. The moment they think they are getting something special, that is the moment they are more likely to say yes!

Now isn't that better than offering one month free or having to be the best deal on the street? Make your best deal one that is called "getting the most for your money." The community where people stay because of how they're treated, how well we take care of the community and where it's not all vanilla just because that's the way we've always done it.

Before you say "I can't afford this, it's not in the budget"—ask yourself, "Did I budget for this vacancy? Did I budget these concessions?"

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Hopkins is an industry wunderkind, starting her career at 17 as a leasing consultant and working her way up to a multi-site property supervisor by 21. She now owns her own company, Jumpstart Marketing, and presents nationally for companies, associations and conventions. She also consults with clients on marketing, management and humor coaching. You can reach Tracey by e-mail at tracey@jumpstartonline.net or by calling 972-523-9154. www.jumpstartonline.net