

LISTENING TO RESIDENTS

GETTING THE MOST FROM A
MULTIFAMILY CUSTOMER
FEEDBACK PROGRAM



Overview

Table of Contents

Start with a plan	3
DIY versus outsourcing	3
Getting started	4
Honing in	7
Optimizing value	8

Success in multifamily management comes down to a confluence of skills lining up to deliver high quality accommodations to renters, often against the backdrop of fierce competition. But even if you are the most talented owner or manager out there, there is no way to succeed without keeping an ear to the feedback of the residents. After all, it is them more than anyone that determines whether a property succeeds or fails.

However, the point many managers may not realize is that there are more ways than deliberate, purpose-built surveys to collect valid resident feedback. In fact, every interaction with a resident, from the moment they walk through the door as a prospective renter to the 2am service request for a broken thermostat, is a potentially illuminatory opportunity to collect actionable information from the renter base.

Of course, there is plenty of information that could be collected that is not helpful or actionable. If your building is smaller, it may be difficult to act on a resident desire for a rooftop lounge. But alternate solutions could present themselves from the answers you receive, like offering discounts to a nearby rooftop lounge. In the end, all of your feedback data should go towards the three ultimate goals in multifamily management: Encouraging prospective residents to sign new leases, encouraging existing residents to renew their leases, or promoting referral rates amongst your existing renters. To achieve these goals, we've broken down the scope of feedback collection into three levels of sophistication, with increasing degrees of time and money required for each.

Start with a plan

While parts of your feedback research campaign can be persistent, recurring whenever someone new tours your property or submits a maintenance request, you should still pick a discrete, specific goal and construct a plan to achieve it. Think less along the lines of “are residents satisfied with my management performance?” and more along the lines of “are residents satisfied with my service call response time?” or “what amenities would my residents like to see?”

At the same time, keep in mind your dream list of questions to answer, ignoring practicality or feasibility. There is nothing stopping you from asking multiple subsequent questions that feed into a larger overall picture, like that aforementioned general “management performance” one. However, be aware of survey fatigue amongst your respondents. There are two types of fatigue to know: fatigue due to long, taxing surveys, and fatigue due to bombardment by too many surveys, both yours and those of others. **According to leading survey tool provider Qualtrics**, a good survey frequency is half as often as your customers (or residents) interact with you. In the apartment context that would mean surveying is appropriate every other service call or engagement event. Of course, easier surveys can be performed more frequently.

DIY versus outsourcing

The first question you will want to answer is whether to manage the feedback process yourself or look to an outside expert. There are a range of research companies, like Grace Hill or SoGoSurvey, that can handle entire research campaigns by themselves. However, with the plethora of modern survey tools now available to the average property manager, the utility of these solutions may be limited. Interestingly, Grace Hill itself was founded with an emphasis on training apartment personnel training before switching to gradually adopting more of a feedback focus with the acquisition of research specialists Kingsley Associates.

This points to some of the realities of the apartment business versus the office world: shorter lease lengths and many more opportunities for landlord-resident interactions make for easier feedback gathering, at the cost of higher stakes (residents are always in “whether to renew” mode, whereas office tenants on five or 10-year leases may not be preoccupied with that decision).

With that in mind, these outsourced options can be wise choices to engage if you have particularly large amounts of feedback you’d like to gather, where you may not wish to bog down senior staff with the task of coordinating numerous surveys across broad geographies, or in situations where the questions themselves are particularly complex. Engaging one of these companies, while potentially costly, will allow you to be mostly hands-off throughout the project, while also giving you a leg up on the resulting data analysis and benchmarking (internally and against other properties) that we will discuss later on.

Getting started

The first step is deciding how to go about collecting feedback in an organized manner. There are two main methods of achieving these goals: surveying on a fixed schedule (for example, annually), and conducting point-of-service or “lifecycle” feedback collection.

Periodic surveys

Expectations for response

Do not go into your survey with unrealistic expectations. Even if you offer a tantalizing reward, you may not break a 50 percent response rate. If you’re only surveying a few hundred people, do not expect to be able to answer all of your most complex questions. If you collect 100 total responses, don’t forget that each respondent will represent 1 percent of your total results. Offer too many choices and it may be hard to gain actionable intelligence between option A, with 20 percent of the response, and option B, with 24 percent.

DIY tools

As a researcher, you will likely be choosing between one of these market leading options. Note that a number of the research tool providers both listed here and beyond, including **SurveyMonkey** and **123 Form Builder**, provide templates for apartment surveys.

Google Forms: the free option, easy to use and implement but with limited templates, question options and analytics capabilities.

SurveyMonkey: The middle ground option, starting under \$400 a year, with a wide range of survey customizability options and an effective analytics tool-built in, allowing for easy visualizations without needing to make calculations in a separate application.

Typeform: The disruptive option, with an emphasis on stylish design and usability for respondents. Typeform has a wide variety of customizability options and starts at \$420 per year.

Qualtrics: The professional option, with by far the most options for customizing questions and performing advanced, enterprise-level analytics on your data. Qualtrics is also easily the most expensive option, with the cheapest plans starting in the four figures annually.

Survey design

The way you phrase your questions is one of the most critical areas in ensuring you collect valid information.

Do not lean too heavily on open-ended questions, since these can be difficult to interpret and hard to quantify (what is the difference between “I like my property manager” and “I am OK with my property manager”?). However, if you plan to conduct a large enough survey, and have allocated an appropriate amount of resources to the effort, consider using open-

ended questions or even individual panel discussions or one-on-one interviews to inform the questions and responses you will include in your full-on survey.

Avoid leading your respondents. If you are asking about resident perspectives on your amenities, for instance, avoid using suggestive question prompts like “I like my building’s amenity package because...” Instead, use more neutral language to reach the same goal answers. When phrasing answers, don’t include multiple answers within the same option. It can be easy to accidentally suggest answers such as “I enjoy my building’s events and amenities” when in reality these are two separate responses. Similarly, watch out for subliminal cues, like question order or even the presence of typos, that could influence your responses. Be aware of acquiescence bias in questions that suggest agreement, since some respondents may be inclined to find commonality with other viewpoints. Instead of saying “I agree that my service requests are handled promptly,” consider phrasing it like a question: “Are my service requests handled promptly?” with yes/no answers instead of agree/disagree.

Execution

As important as designing the right survey is properly implementing it. A multi-stage pretest, first with employees to confirm proper spelling and appropriate length, and then with several residents, can be a useful tool in ironing out the kinks in your survey. Consider selecting a small pool of respondents to take the test before your entire respondent base in order to test different question and answer combinations, and help scope in on more effective combinations.

If you use a tenant experience platform, you’ll have an easy way to distribute your survey. If not, email or text distribution is the obvious solution, but depending on your demographics you may begin to slant your responses away from older, less tech-friendly residents. Keep in mind also the day and time you send your survey prompts. Depending on the industries your residents work in, you may find different levels of success by targeting different promo emails for the week versus the weekend, and morning versus night.

In a similar vein, be prepared to pay up if you want responses. Consider the difference between offering a fixed reward, like an Amazon gift card, versus registering participants in a sweepstakes for a larger prize. While raffles can be cheaper, there is **some evidence from research in other fields** that they are less productive than offering a guaranteed response. However, even with a guaranteed reward, consider adding an additional opt-in step for respondents to claim their reward, like requiring them to fill out a separate form emailed a day or two after survey completion. Many respondents may opt out or neglect to complete this step, potentially cutting down on your costs.

Do your research

While collecting feedback is important, don’t forget to apply pre-existing research conclusions whenever possible, since these will save both time and money. Academic literature is very much worth exploring in particular in order to scope in on actionable insights for your portfolio. While much of this information is often difficult to uncover without an expensive research database subscription, the COVID-19 outbreak has prompted database provider JSTOR to offer 100 free articles per month through the end of the year, up from the typical limit of 6 with a free account.

Other feedback collection methods

Point-of-service feedback collection

To ramp up the power of your feedback program, consider automatically following up with your residents through an automatic email or text, if appropriate, after certain routine interactions, like maintenance calls, rent payment or events. The benefits of these micro-feedback opportunities are twofold. First, they are more convenient and quick for residents to participate in, and second, they allow for careful monitoring of specific issues and their trends over time. Even a minute drop in service satisfaction could be captured if your residents submit a simple “rate your satisfaction from 1 to 10” response form after each engagement.

This tactic also provides an opportunity to provide a tailored follow-up to negative scores across any interaction. If you receive negative feedback for an HVAC maintenance call, for instance, you could automatically prompt a direct phone or in-person outreach from your property manager or even a higher-up within your organization as well as any type of apology gift that you deem appropriate. While it can be easy to think that feedback collection is most applicable to broad changes and high-level performance, don't discount the direct, actionable impacts of this as well.

Feedback buttons

Ever seen a “smiley face” feedback collector at a store or airport? These systems, such as the Smiley Terminal, can be mounted on walls and collect very basic information, like general satisfaction versus dissatisfaction, with the absolute minimum time commitment required from respondents. However, these systems can be vulnerable to exploitation by mischievous respondents repeatedly pushing multiple buttons, and the extreme simplicity of data gathered can be limiting in its applications. However, placing one of these systems in specific rooms, like the gym or laundry room, could prove illuminatory, particularly in conjunction (or as inspiration for) a survey. As an alternative to a physical system, amenity rooms accessed via keycard could periodically trigger an automatic text survey prompt every fifth or tenth visit.

Panels, interviews and beyond

Options like panels and direct resident interviews can be useful for providing additional context to focus areas, or as mentioned above, helping scope in on the questions and answers you'd most like to feature. However, the rewards needed for these types of more time-intensive research opportunities will likely prove much higher than survey costs would amount to.

Honing in

After you've begun collecting feedback, the next step in optimizing your resident information collection program is to begin analyzing your data in the proper context. This moves your program a step beyond mere operational tracking and response, transforming it into a strategic decision-making tool.

Benchmarking

For multifamily property owners and operators, much of the value of analyzing survey results comes from benchmarking. This is true especially for companies with portfolios of apartment communities that span multiple properties. There are a couple of ways to think about benchmarking.

Internal

Benchmarking results within a portfolio can yield important insights into customer service performance. It can identify areas of underperformance and hold operators accountable. And it can also reveal centers of excellence, creating opportunities for rewards and sharing of best practices. Some dimensions of comparison to consider when benchmarking internally:

Geography: Is service consistent across regions, states, markets, or submarkets?

Service Provider: For investors/owners, are disparate third-party operators performing according to standards?

Property/Staff: Are some management teams excelling, while others fall short?

External

One key value proposition of outsource survey providers is their ability to provide relevant external benchmarks. Market-based comparisons place survey results in context, helping to define "good" performance -- a level of service delivery that is truly differentiating. This can be an important selling point to prospective residents. Some factors to consider when evaluating whether external benchmarking is worth any additional cost:

Target: What is the appropriate service standard for my property or portfolio? Is it to be in line with the market average? Is it to be market-leading?

Location and Class: Are benchmarks available that match the geographic and quality composition of my portfolio? If I own Class B properties in secondary markets, then a benchmark weighted toward major-market Class A product may not be appropriate.

Format: Am I looking to obtain an award or certification level for marketing purposes? Will my results be publicly available (for example, on an apartment listing and review site), or is there an option to hold them close to the vest?

Optimizing Value

The final sophistication level combines everything else with the goal of optimizing renter conversion through advanced approaches.

Feeding the marketing machine

By now along the sophistication curve, your organization should be collecting information periodically through surveys as well as continuously through point-of-service questions. All of this data can answer simple questions, like where you may need to deploy more training resources for staff, but it can also help scope in on important marketing questions. For instance, you may have a general sense of who your residents are in terms of demographics, employment and other measures, but by conducting a consistent survey plan you can begin developing psychometric profiles of your renters and their priorities. Consider using an analytics and visualization tool like Microsoft PowerBI or Tableau to operationalize this data, and then feed this information into your content marketing, PPC efforts and demographic targeting to become more efficient per dollar spent.

Reputation management

Finally, it is important to consider how surveying may fit into your reputation management efforts. Since apartment rating sites first exploded about a decade ago, the challenge for establishing online rankings or ratings of apartment buildings has always been verification. Nowadays, though, options like ApartmentRatings allow for independent verification of apartment residents to ensure that they actually live at the places they are reviewing. While these systems are still vulnerable to disruption from disgruntled renters, it is a wise idea to consider encouraging your renters to share their positive experiences with sites like ApartmentRatings as a component of the rest of your feedback apparatus.



<propmodo>
GUIDEBOOK