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To Be or Not To Be? How to Handle Cutting Amenities During COVID-19

Amenities are a hot topic in resident reviews—and complaints. Here's how property managers can balance the rough path to reopening with renter satisfaction.

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Amenities have been a hot topic of discussion among apartment residents in online reviews. Residents are most outraged about the lack of rent concessions or reimbursement despite the amenities being closed for several months. Yet others are upset about rent increases, even though most amenities are off-limits or have opened with social distancing restrictions. Some residents have expressed that they have chosen not to renew their leases because of the “management’s handling of the pandemic.”

Residents are also frustrated about the mixed messaging or lack of communication about plans to open amenities, especially the pool. Property teams can find themselves in a catch-22 situation where they are bound to get criticism in either case—whether they open the amenities with new social distancing guidelines or do not open them at all.

Amenities, Reimbursement, and Rent Increases

There has been an outpouring of complaints regarding properties not reimbursing the amenity fee or offering a rent credit or rent discount, despite amenities being closed for several months. Some residents have expressed that they were “promised” reimbursement, but nothing has come through. Some mention that other apartments have reimbursed their residents, but their community has not.

Residents are most upset when they see a rent increase in a time when they do not have access to any of the amenities. Some have opted not to renew their leases for this reason. The irony is that the rent increase that drives away some residents is also often necessary to better serve residents, even when the amenities remain closed.

“Rent increases allow us to accentuate our service, enhance the community grounds and features, and add more events,” shares Maureen Lannon, senior vice president of marketing for Pierce Education Properties. “In consideration of the current scenario, we have kept our rent increases minimal. While some amenities are closed for the benefit of all residents, we are continuously looking for better ways to service our residents.”

Susan Goff, director of brand management at Highmark Residential, advises property teams to strategically communicate the “value” of living in a community by focusing on a “good offense.” She explains, “A good offense is your best defense on this one; we are all underwhelmed and overwhelmed at the same time. Focus on the services you can still provide, such as adding nice touches like handwritten notes attached to the air filter you are dropping off. Keeping your residents engaged with your caring team, with each other, and the neighborhood through virtual events, contests, and continuous communication, both serious/direct and playful/general across various platforms and methods, will remind them that we are all human and we can only control so much, but also that we do care.”

“We are ‘in this together,’ and if we convey that through our offense, we can ultimately curtail the sense of underwhelming value,” Goff adds.

Too Soon/Too Late

Residents have mixed feelings about opening amenities. Some reviewers accuse the management of not caring about their safety by opening the amenities too soon, which may lead to communitywide spread of the virus.

Goff emphasizes the need for transparency and accountability to manage resident relations during the pandemic. “I know ‘transparency’ is a word that has worn down tread, but I do believe it is key. While state and local mandates and CDC recommendations are factors that help us arrive to a decision, we ultimately make the decision to act responsibly for our residents as well as our employees, and our accountability for how we implement those restrictions needs to be evident in the response,” Goff explains.

Others have shared that despite their cities or states lifting restrictions and being in “Phase 3” of opening, their community has not opened the pool or other amenities. Some residents are imploring prospective residents to “not rent here” because most of the amenities are closed. Upset residents are quick to applaud competition for making amenities accessible to their residents.

Lannon advises property teams to counter this negativity by apologizing and encouraging residents to share what they would like to see while the amenities are closed. Pierce is offering more virtual events such as yoga, dance contests, lunch on the go, outside study areas, and weight training in the apartments. “We will get through this together, and we appreciate your patience as this pandemic is upon us” is often the message Lannon communicates to her residents.

Many reviewers disagree with their community’s decision to close fitness areas, arguing that equipment could be cleaned between uses and pose less danger than other common touch points like door handles. They mention that while the local gyms in the area have opened, their community gym remains closed.

Despite across-the-board complaints, there are residents who commend property teams for their efforts during these challenging times. “The COVID-19 pandemic came during our residency, and the management team and maintenance staff were truly exceptional,” reads one review. “They were very regularly communicative, supportive, and uber-vigilant with regular cleanings and disinfecting any and all common areas and elevators. The way ... teams are super supporting the residents during this pandemic and these challenging times helps give everyone that additional feeling of security that we all need.”

False Advertising

Some new residents feel disillusioned with their apartment community, citing “false advertising” regarding amenities. One resident mentioned that it would have been helpful to get a welcome packet from management to explain how the amenities work with COVID-19 so that there was no confusion about which amenities were accessible.

Lack of Clear Communication

Several reviewers have mentioned that there has been no clear communication from the property management regarding a plan to open the amenities. They complain that it is hard to get in touch with someone in the front office, and on occasion when someone is available, the individual is unable to provide any answers or assistance.

Some residents have spoken about partial and unfair treatment of residents living on the same floor as amenities such as the courtyard, grills, and lawn chairs. In contrast, residents living on the other levels do not have permission to use the common area facilities. Residents have also expressed frustration that their voice is not heard when they have shared suggestions about “creative ways” to open the amenities.

Goff encourages property teams to consider the “root of the complaint.” She elaborates, “Is it really that we shut down or restricted the pool access, which we [property management professionals] don’t feel would be surprising, or is it that we didn’t communicate it across multiple platforms, ensuring our residents have access to the most up-to-date information available before they arrived at that amenity? How we involve our residents from the beginning and keep them informed will determine the ability to mitigate the complaints.”

When property teams are thorough in their communication, residents do applaud it in reviews.

“The office team has continued to show excellent correspondence by sending emails and keeping the community up to date with pandemic changes,” reviewed a resident.

Pools and Social Distancing Enforcement

With soaring temperatures across the country, families compelled to stay home are looking to cool down in the pool. Residents have bellowed online about the enforcement of social distancing norms such as no guest policies, advance pool reservations, limited hours of usage, and restrictions

on the number of residents permitted to use the amenity, especially the pool, at one time. On being forced out of the pool, angry residents have accused the staff of disrespectful or rude behavior. In some cases, it has led to ugly altercations involving the police.

Again, Lannon emphasizes that making residents feel involved in the pandemic management process is key. “We respect our residents and their guests during this time and realize each of us has a responsibility to practice the guidelines. Please share what you would like to see happen differently” is the communication Lannon advises her property teams to share with residents. On the other hand, some residents believe that the management is not doing enough to enforce social distancing norms.

Angelique M. Wheelock, senior vice president of operations for The Donaldson Group, recommends that property teams consistently remind residents that they are doing everything they can to keep everyone safe. “We keep pushing that we are doing everything we can to keep our residents, team members, and visitors safe by following CDC, state, and local guidelines during COVID-19,” Wheelock says.

As the pandemic progresses, communities will continue to face decisions about the opening of amenities. Residents should feel involved in the managing of the pandemic response by having opportunities to share feedback and ideas, thus having a stake in curbing community spread of the virus. Ultimately, clear and consistent communication with residents is key to mitigating the complaints that may follow, and property teams will need to think creatively about new ways to engage residents and show they care.