

# How to Conquer the Craigslist Chaos



# Who Should Read This eBook?

## This eBook will:

- Describe new restrictions implemented by Craigslist in October of 2013
- Explain how changes made to Craigslist at that time affect your marketing strategy
- Share ideas for maximizing Craigslist's value to your community

## Does this eBook fit with your goals?

**Keep Reading.**

## Think others might benefit from this?

**Share this eBook.**





Rentping Media brings big company marketing capabilities to small and medium-sized apartment companies to help generate cost-effective leases through an integrated apartment marketing strategy.



# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: What happened? .....	6
Chapter 2: What has been taken away? .....	7
Chapter 3: How does this change apartment marketing? .....	9
Chapter 4: Maximizing Craigslist.....	10
Chapter 5: Why You Need Your Own Web Presence.....	12

# Introduction

By now everyone in the multifamily industry is well aware of the recent changes to Craigslist. It's been covered by many different multifamily observers and marketers and has wreaked enough havoc on the industry to get everyone's attention. This eBook is written to answer the question: "What happens next?" To answer that question, we've broken the discussion into five chapters.

1. What exactly happened?
2. What has been taken away?
3. How does this change apartment marketing?
4. How do you get the most from Craigslist?
5. Your own web presence is more important than ever.

# Chapter One

## What Happened?

Take one look at Craigslist and you know that the owners of the site aren't terribly concerned with trendiness or staying on top of technological changes. Craigslist has never been interested in being the best place for companies to buy and sell goods on the web. (That's what Amazon and eBay are for, FYI.)

Craigslist has always been about helping ordinary people buy or sell one specific thing they're looking for. Have a garage sale coming up? Put up a post on Craigslist. Do you own a duplex and you're looking for tenants? Craigslist. Need short-term help on a home improvement project? Craigslist. That's who Craigslist is designed to help. Craig Newmark himself--the Craig in "craigslist"--has said as much in multiple interviews. Take this quote from [a Huffington Post](#) interview published in 2012: "Most people assume I run Craigslist, but I don't. It's run by a small group of very smart people who have stayed loyal to the idea that it should be simple, fast, mostly free, and 'bottom-up' oriented."<sup>1</sup>

Here's the moral of the story: When you're using someone else's tools on the web you have to remember that the tool will always be used to do what the owner wants it to do. Craigslist is about helping ordinary people exchange goods and services. Are you a huge multifamily company with several thousand units? Craigslist was never meant to help you. Sorry.

The latest round of changes are meant to protect and preserve that focus for the popular web classifieds service. While Craigslist's desire has always been to focus on ordinary, private people, their actual rules and technology also opened the door for a lot of other people to use (and, sadly, abuse) the service. This round of changes is bringing Craigslist's actual capabilities into line with Craigslist's vision.

So what changed specifically? Here's the rundown:

- The image tag has been disabled.
- The hyperlink tag has also been disabled.
- Links of any kind have been disabled, but specific kinds of links were re-enabled at the time of writing this eBook (November 11, 2013). Whether Craigslist will keep those links active is yet to be seen.
- Tracking codes have been disabled.

1. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-diamond/erica-diamond-interviews-\\_b\\_1364628.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/erica-diamond/erica-diamond-interviews-_b_1364628.html)



# Chapter Two

## What has been taken away?

These changes mean several common practices in apartment marketing on Craigslist will no longer function as they did before the changes. The most notable change is that HTML templates no longer work. That bright, gaudy background filled with photos, graphics, and text that looked like Word Art from Microsoft Word circa 2003? Gone. As far as we're concerned, good riddance to those. They didn't work, they created visual clutter on the site, and they misled marketers into thinking they were doing good work when really they were just creating art prize ads that didn't produce. No one will miss those templates.

**\$820 / 1br - 730 ft<sup>2</sup> APARTMENT**

LAUNDRY ON SITE  
WE EXCEPT PETS  
NEW APPLIANCES  
LOCATED IN BEAUTIFUL AREA  
FREE HEAT, FREE WATER  
BEAUTIFUL WHITE WALLS  
SPACIOUS BATHROOM

THIS APARTMENT IS VERY VERY VERY VERY VERY NICE. YOU WILL LIKE IT A LOT WE PROMISE. YOU SHOULD RENT THIS APARTMENT. WE PROMISE YOU WILL LOVE LIVING HERE. IT IS A NICE APARTMENT WITH BEAUTIFUL VIEWS, AND LOTS OF SPACE. THERE IS ONE BEDROOM AND ONE BATHROOM. THE BEDROOM IS LARGE ENOUGH TO HAVE A KING SIZE BED. THE BATHROOM COMES WITH A TOILET. THERE IS ALSO A SINK IN THE BATHROOM.

IN THE KITCHEN YOU WILL FIND THE APPLIANCES. THERE IS AN OVEN AND A SINK AND A FRIDGE. WE EVEN INCLUDE A MICROWAVE. YOU WILL FIND MANY CABINETS FOR ALL OF YOUR FOOD STORAGE. YOU CAN STORE ANY KIND OF FOOD YOU COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE. BREAD, NOODLES, FRUITS, VEGETABLES, SPICES, CRACKERS, OR CANDY.

**CALL OR STOP BY FOR A TOUR TODAY!**

111-222-3333

Unfortunately, some of the other things taken away sting a bit more. You can no longer easily embed photos through HTML code. You now have to use Craigslist's cumbersome and antiquated image editor. (One time-saving tip with that image editor: Use the command key on Apple or control key on PC to select multiple images simultaneously and upload all of them at once.)

Many kinds of links to external websites are another casualty. You can no longer use photos or even text to link to external websites. So, for apartment communities that have been using Craigslist to drive traffic to your website through certain kinds of links, that functionality has now been taken away.

Based on our own testing, though, there is still a way to include hyperlinks in your posts. You can still include links in your ads if you use the full URL rather than turning text into a hyperlink. So in the two examples below, A will not work but B will:

- A. Click [here](#) to see our community!
- B. Visit our community site here: <http://www.ourcommunity.com>

The main reason for this rule is almost certainly to prevent deceptive linking in which a person sets up a link that they say is going to one site but is in reality going somewhere else.

Now, for a few days, Craigslist removed even these kinds of links from all of their posts. But, as of the time of writing (November 11, 2013), the 'B' links are working, while the 'A' links are still not working. If this changes, so that Craigslist again disallows links of any kind, then you can still include the text of your website URL, but it will not be a clickable link. Users will have to copy and paste the link to their URL bar and go to your website that way. It seems, though, that Craigslist is likely to keep these URL-based links, since their **written HTML policy** states that:

If you just want to include a link in your posting, no HTML is needed, just be sure your link starts with "http://" and it should be converted to an active link. <sup>1</sup>

Finally--and this will only concern Rentping Media clients--the video thumbnail images we created for your ads will no longer work. We had found that the best way to alert users to the walkthrough video tours is to include a large image of the apartment with a YouTube play button clearly visible in the center of the image. We made this image a clickable hyperlink so when users clicked the image--perhaps expecting it to play the video--it took them directly to the floorplan page of the community website where they could see the video. It was a slick tool while it lasted, but it's definitely not the sort of thing a normal mom-and-pop property manager is going to have access to so it, predictably, is no longer an option for Craigslist marketers.

1. <http://www.craigslist.org/about/help/faq#HTMLuse>

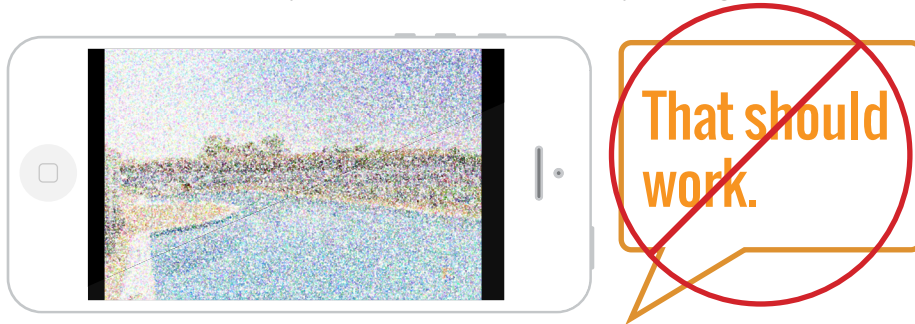




# Chapter Three

## How does this change apartment marketing?

For apartment marketers, these restrictions change marketing on several fronts. First, your photos are more important than ever. Craigslist is now shifting to nothing but black text on a white background. The lone splash of color on the site will be the photos. In other words, a huge share of the work to market your apartments successfully now falls on your photos. So don't skimp out on them. If you have a decent photographer on staff, make sure they have the equipment they need. If you don't have a good photographer and the right equipment in house, then outsource it by hiring a photographer. What you want to avoid is having blurry, poorly composed images snapped on an iPhone by the new leasing agent you hired last Tuesday. That leaves you with a low quality image which, now, leaves you with a low quality Craigslist ad.



Additionally, search engines (especially Google) will now become more important. Prospective residents will see your ad on Craigslist, but now that Craigslist keeps changing the rules on what kinds of links they will allow, users will probably increasingly look for your community by typing the name into Google. This means that you need to own that top organic spot on Google because if someone else is beating you there, you're losing clicks on your own keywords--and those keywords are more valuable than ever due to the Craigslist restrictions. (This also makes protecting your community with defensive AdWords campaigns more important--you don't want rivals showing up above you in the organic search because they bought an ad on your keyword and you failed to buy an ad of your own to protect it.)

On a related note, your website itself is also more important. Perhaps before you thought you could slack on the web design piece because your Craigslist listings carried more of the weight. But now you really need a website that provides prospective residents with relevant, easily accessed content that gives them useful information about your community. If you're failing to do that now, there is no other option out there to allow you to scrape by. Your websites are now shouldering a heavy share of the marketing burden than ever before.

# Chapter Four

## Maximizing Craigslist

We should begin by repeating what was said in chapter one: Craigslist was never meant to help large apartment companies or even larger multifamily communities. As such, its creators aren't terribly concerned with creating a tool that property managers and marketing directors find helpful. Up to this point, the rules of Craigslist haven't necessarily reflected the intent, but now they're coming into alignment. So you should probably reset your expectations with Craigslist.

That said, Craigslist is still a valuable resource. These changes affect advertisers on Craigslist, but they don't really impact the users. So there's no real compelling reason to think the user base will dramatically drop off right away. So you should still use Craigslist, you just need to use it within the limits these new rules impose. How do you do that well? We have a few proposals:

- Professional photos
- Bullet points in your ads
- Print the URL (and give users a reason to actually go to your site)
- Publish your pet policy
- Include your leasing office's phone number

We already covered photos in chapter three. Engaging professional photos are more important than ever on Craigslist. It's the one easy way to make your community stand out. So don't be lazy, don't cut corners, and don't look for shortcuts.

Bullet points may not seem like an obvious way to help your Craigslist posts, but usability studies from the Nielsen Norman Group found that 79% of internet users **do not read every word** on a web page.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they scan the page. This makes things like bulleted lists, numbered lists, bold text, header text, and so on extremely valuable to users. So in your marketing copy, use bulleted lists to share quick, relevant pieces of information about the apartment that can't really be conveyed in the photos. It might look something like this:

A two bedroom apartment in Sunny Lane Apartments is now available. Amenities include:

- Washer/dryer hookup
- Off-street parking
- Central air
- Dishwasher and disposal

1. <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-users-read-on-the-web/>

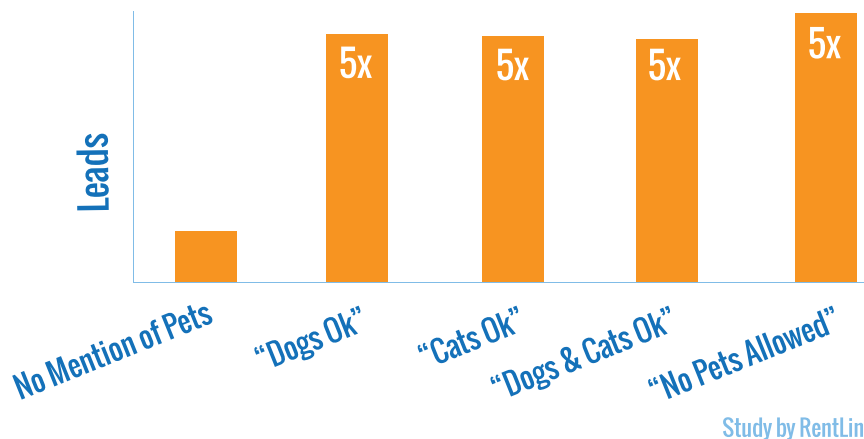


Third, even though it your website URL may or may not be clickable, you should still include the URL. Best case, Craigslist will continue to allow URLs beginning with “http://” to be hyperlinks; worst case, users will still have the ability to copy and paste the URL to go to your website. Whatever you need to do, make sure to provide users with the easiest route possible to access your website.

But in addition to providing the URL to your website, you should give users a reason to actually check out your website. Don’t just assume that if you include the URL that they’ll naturally be curious enough to copy and paste it. Because having no links forces the user to take an extra step to visit your website, it’s really important that you make it worth their while to do so. So, include some sort of compelling call to action like, “Visit our website to see a full walkthrough video tour of this specific floorplan!”

If you have something valuable on your website that you’re offering them, use that value to encourage them to visit your site. If there’s some benefit in it for the Craigslist user, they’ll be more likely to copy and paste the URL. If there is no obvious benefit other than “see one more apartment website,” then they’ll likely skip it.

Fourth, include your pet policy in the ads. A **study by RentLinx** showed that online ads that include pet policy information generate 5X more leads than ads that do not include pet policy. <sup>1</sup> So, no matter whether you do not allow any pets or whether you allow people to keep pet bears, be sure to include the information right inside your Craigslist ads.



Fifth and finally, include the leasing office phone number in the ad and make it prominent. One of the things you should always be thinking about in your marketing is how you can reduce the number of steps a prospect has to engage in before they’re talking to your leasing staff. Realistically, prospective residents are going to do a ton of research before they call you, but that doesn’t mean you should make them work to find your contact information. So make the leasing office number prominent in Craigslist ads. Include a push-to-call button on your AdWords ads. Make the number prominent on your website. A good rule of thumb is that whenever someone is engaging with your marketing material, you should give them what they need to contact you.

1. <http://news.rentlinx.com/2013/07/why-it-pays-to-put-your-pet-policy-in.html>

# Chapter Five

## Why You Need Your Own Web Presence

There was a time when companies looking to use media to promote their product needed either to do something to get the attention of newspapers or TV stations (earned media) or needed to pay to show up in print guides (paid media). The web has introduced two new types of media: owned media (company websites, blogs, etc.) and shared media (social).

Craigslist sits in a weird space between paid and shared media. Like paid media, Craigslist is a classifieds service that lists out different types of products available to purchase. Like shared media, Craigslist is free and is based on sharing media with a variety of different people. Where Craigslist works well is that it provides many of the same benefits as paid media but at no cost to most its users. Unfortunately, because it is still shared media, that means you don't have a ton of control over your own Craigslist presence (as anyone using HTML templates just learned) and that you're still sharing a single advertising space with all your competitors.

The easiest way around these many problems is to pursue what is commonly called "owned media." You need a customizable leasing tool that you don't share with competitors. You also want to have your own website that you control. That's what your community website can be. Then, you need to invest in making your own website an absolute success. Spend time improving its search engine optimization (SEO) and use paid ads (Google AdWords and Bing Ads) to drive traffic. Invest in the high-level, quality content that make your website a worthwhile place for Craigslist users get off of Craigslist and come to visit you.

There's also a broader principle here that needs to be understood. Craigslist isn't a tool intended to promote larger businesses attempting to promote their product. But other sources do not have this problem. Google, for example, isn't terribly concerned about whether your company is a large business or a mom-and-pop shop. Google wants to provide users with the most relevant information available. And if you create a website that gives people relevant information, Google is more than happy to make sure users find your site.



So by building up your own web presence, you're working the way the much larger and influential Google wants you to work. Which, in time, means more (free) organic traffic to your website and more leads for your leasing staff. So building up your own web presence isn't simply about having a cool website, it's about understanding that Google is a far more powerful marketing tool than Craigslist and that Google actually wants to point people to your site, provided your site is relevant and user-friendly.

And at the end of the day, your own web presence is all that you can control. Traffic generation sources may come and go, but the internet gives you the power to do what previous apartment marketers never imagined: building your own marketing presence where you get to play by your own rules, not someone else's. If you take full advantage of that privilege, you'll put yourself in a position to leverage traffic generation sources (even sources as popular as Craigslist) when they are helpful, and kick them to the curb when they aren't.

# Conclusion

Craigslist is an important piece of your overall apartment marketing strategy, but it's important to remember that Craigslist is only one piece of that overall strategy. Especially as Craigslist continues to tighten their restrictions, it will become all the more important for the multifamily industry to find new ways of generating traffic that don't depend on the whims of a guy named Craig.

Rentping Media helps apartment companies to generate more qualified leads and leases through a far-reaching, integrated marketing strategy. From generating high quality photos and HD walkthrough video tours, to building effective websites, to driving traffic several sources (not just Craigslist), Rentping Media is a one-stop marketing partner for multifamily companies.

If you have more questions about how Rentping Media can help you to leverage individual marketing tools, or how we can help you integrate all those marketing tools together, please request a free consultation. One of our in-house apartment marketing expert will be happy talk through your current strategy and make specific suggestions about how you can take your marketing to the next level.

[Click here to contact us for a](#) [free consultation.](#)

