

TAMING TROLLS

Quieting the Roars of Disgruntled Residents

BY PRIYANKA AGARWAL

When it comes to apartment communities, online reviews run the gammut.

“Management – beyond words to describe how bad. They have attitude about everything. They delay, ignore and make excuses when it comes to addressing any problem. The building is in a fantastic location with unlimited potential for greatness. The problems have increased over the years and management's attitude has got worse. There is consistent marijuana use as you walk down the halls and ride the elevators. There is consistent prostitution in your face. Too many options in downtown Dallas to give this one a consideration.”

This reviewer has no relationship with the apartment community he or she was addressing.

Online reputation can take a huge hit overnight when a property is swamped by similarly written 1- and 2-star reviews. Some are posted by residents who troll the property and others are provided by imposters claiming to know details of the community. Regardless of the genesis of these reviews, each has a potential to tarnish a positive image forged over an extended period. These trolls focus on one or multiple grounds, often complaining about a lack of parking availability, rude or ignorant staff, an unresponsive maintenance team, car and apartment break-ins, among other considerations.

Online reviews – whether good or bad – have an immediate and dynamic impact on prospect traffic.

Unfortunately, trolling is part of the ratings and review process and it must be managed.

Kevin Patterson, Marketing Operations Manager of Gables Residential, defines a troll as, “A person who stirs the pot via the Internet to distract or cause angst. Trolling is when such a person does something or says something (most likely incorrect or exaggerated) to generate a response and by continuing to push the envelope. For example, you could have residents or ex-residents who troll your community, or at times, there are external associations who troll a company or communities managed by that company.”

Trolls, typically, strike a property because they feel horribly wronged, haven't received any response or communication from an initial review or because they are unreasonable in their demands. As stated in a Forbes article, “Trolls want





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attention. They want to get you angry, frustrated or uncomfortable.” Trolls find it easy to hide behind the keyboard and unleash a fury of words instantly damaging a property or company’s reputation.

To combat trolls and false reviews, it is important to understand what motivates these individuals to malign a property and how they typically perform their trolling.

Seeking attention on more than one platform – An irate resident posts the same negative review for your property on multiple review sites or often updates the review hoping that you’ll be coerced into fulfilling their “demands.” He or she wants to shame you in public.

Trashing your management company – A frustrated resident, upset with your property and management company, may harass other properties managed by your company on different review platforms with remarks such as “Never rent from the company,” even though he or she has never even set foot on that property.

Enlisting friends – It has become a trend for some angry residents to enlist their friends and family to flood a property with negative reviews, regardless of whether these individuals have any direct connection with the property. Sometimes, an enraged ex-employee will use this tactic.

Trolls have become a real menace for businesses, says Dana J. Cochran, Director of Management for a privately owned and managed apartment company. “Innocent people and businesses are being adversely impacted – some have even gone out of business. And those who manage in markets with challeng-

ing demographics must reduce cut-off point thresholds with advertisers due to occupancy issues that can be directly attributed to poor ratings with those advertising partners and others.”

Because avoiding trolls is not a realistic approach, how does a community combat their reviews politely and professionally? Following are eight strategies to deal with trolls and false reviews.

1. Get the facts.

Based on what was written in the review, gather the facts about the incident or complaint and then write a well-informed response. This can help to dispel any rumors about your property. Kristen Maynard, Social Media and Marketing Director of RE Carroll Management says, “It is good to have a plan in place so that you can respond strategically to each troll. Do some inquiry to determine the reviewer’s credibility and verify their claims and respond in a timely manner.”

In a fact-finding mission, management must:

Inquire about the status of the reviewer. Is it a prospective resident, a current or former resident, a guest or none of these?

Verify the reviewer’s claims. Talk to your onsite staff to better understand what happened. Identify whether this is one instance or whether these are a pattern. If several reviewers are complaining about towing or a nonfunctional gate, then there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Diffuse the situation. Did your team reach out to the reviewer and offer

a resolution? What was the outcome of these efforts – was the reviewer receptive to the solution offered? Did the individual who posted the review offer to take down or revise the review?

For instance, complaints that focus on security disputes are common and may become acrimonious. A former resident may have completely trashed the apartment but feels cheated could complain that their security deposit was not fully refunded. If the community has documented the damage with photographs and attempted to contact the resident to show the documentation but received no response, mention that in the response to the review: “We are sorry you feel this way. Our team has made several attempts to contact you to review the condition of your apartment upon your move-out to no avail. If you wish to discuss this further, please contact us at (email/phone number). We would be happy to go over the details with you. Thank you for your time and we wish you all the best in your new home.”

2. Unmask the reviewer.

It may be discovered that the reviewer does not live at the property. Don't hesitate to be forthright in your response. For instance, this reviewer, claiming to be a resident, trashed the property in her review - “If you want to pay for luxury living but not have luxury things this is the place for you. The worst part is not being able to take a hot shower. Sometimes the water is even ICE cold. Apparently, there

is no solution. Overall this place is not at all worth the price! Do not move here. Maintenance is a joke.”

When responding, unmask the reviewer and categorically state, “Thank you for reviewing. Our maintenance team does their best to be on top of all service requests. Our records indicate that no work orders were placed about a lack of hot water. We are unable to trace your relationship with our community. Can you please contact us at (email/phone number) so we can better understand this situation? We look forward to hearing from you.”

3. Find a permanent fix.

Actor and TV host Jeffery Hayzlett recommends candor when combating troll behavior in an article he wrote for Entrepreneur: “If what a critic is saying is true, fix the mistake and be honest about it. Let the person who wrote the complaint know you have corrected this error and explain what you did [to make it right].”

If a reviewer's concerns are echoed by other residents, bring the problem to the attention of higher-level management and find a permanent solution to the problem to prevent more negative reviews from being posted about the same subject.

4. Be consistent in your responses.

A troll may post the same review on multiple sites. While responding to such reviews, be consistent. In each

response, encourage the individual to take the conversation offline and contact the property or management company so that it can be resolved.

5. Know when and how to flag a review.

Familiarize yourself with the review policies of different review sites and ILSS. It never hurts to flag a review. According to Yelp's content guidelines, one reason it justifies removing a review is because “The review doesn't focus on the reviewer's own consumer experience.”

Google guidelines for spam and fake content state, “Your content should reflect your genuine experience at the location and should not be posted just to manipulate a place's ratings. Don't post fake content, don't post the same content multiple times and don't post content for the same place from multiple accounts.”

Remember, simply reporting a review does not guarantee that it will be removed. Depending on your company policy, you may respond to a flagged review right away or wait and watch to see if the review is removed.

For the Cardinal Group, flagging is the first step toward dealing with trolls. Ryan Sundling, Group Marketing Manager at Cardinal, shares, “First, we'll flag the review as fake or against that service's terms of service. This usually doesn't lead to the review being removed but it is worth a shot. Next, we craft a carefully worded response to these reviews. Our policy is that we respond to all reviews; the good, the bad, the ugly and even the

fake. By not responding, it's possible that we lend credibility to the review."

6. Ignore reviewers, if you must!

There are times when a resident will continue to troll a property regardless of the community's best effort to resolve

the situation. The reviewer's primary goal is to argue publicly. If he or she is indulged in mudslinging, partaking in the conversation may reflect poorly on your business. So, it might be best to ignore the troll.

"At Gables, we strive to respond to every review and specifically give an opportunity to our residents who have an issue to have that conversa-

tion taken offline and then bring it to resolution. We want to work together with residents to make things better by encouraging them to contact us and by offering solutions to their concerns. If residents decide not to contact us or to work with us and instead they prefer to keep updating their review online, it is certainly their choice. At that point, we make the decision to either continue

DIFFUSING ONLINE ANGST

*A conversation
with Susan Goff,
Director of Brand
Management,
Milestone
Management*



Here we take a deeper dive into review response management

When to Stop Responding

Our marketing team closely monitors reviews and reviewers and handles each on a case-by-case basis. With each response to a negative review, our intention is to ensure the reviewer that we are listening and that our goal is to resolve their concerns and make them feel better about our relationship moving forward. This is best accomplished offline.

So that we can engage in direct communication, we offer a communication channel based on the specific content and/or the associates with whom the reviewer may have had the unsatisfactory

experience. When a reviewer has "opted out" of direct communication, either directly or it is implied, but continues to update their reviews, we choose to opt out of the conversation online as well. This typically happens after three back-and-forth exchanges with the reviewer.

Whether the reviewer is simply trying to keep their negative review at the top of the feed or are updating the thread by adding our previous responses as further so-called "evidence" of what they perceive to be our fault, we weigh the risks and benefits of ending the cycle. If the reviewer's primary intent is to publish grievances online as a cathartic means of what they may consider to be vindication, we might have to accept

that this is their process and acknowledge that we are only fueling this fire by continuing to respond.

When the Best Staff Is 'Beat Up'

While it may seem like "delivering superior customer service" is not the key point of the message that ends our participation in the reviewer's rhetoric, it is crucial to understand how persistent negative reviewers can affect morale and deplete time and energy from our teams – particularly when our incredibly valued onsite associates are involved. These associates are the face of our company. It is very difficult for them to convey excellence during their jobs if they are continuously beaten down or are having to answer

the online discussion, or stop responding. Typically, that's the course one must take with trolls," says Patterson.

7. Understand how ILSs operate.

When navigating online reviews, it is important to understand the

ILSs' methodologies. A management company is likely to have a conflict of interest with ILSs because of the advertising dollars involved. Ultimately, the ILS is focused on the enduser and will use its discretion to feature content.

Apartments.com uses a moderation process and community managers have an opportunity to flag the reviews.

Additionally, a community that has a

contract with an ILS does not guarantee that a review the community flags will be removed, or that a negative review will not be published. Still, it makes flagging the review's process easy and the community can either flag the review on its dashboard directly or contact the ILSs' company representative to assist with flagging a questionable review. According to some management companies,

for a dead-end scenario.

So, for the sake of delivering superior internal customer service, we end our participation and stand behind our associates. And, for the most part, a persistently negative reviewer will stop after their final word. In these cases, we continue to monitor the situation for any further reviews and determine our course as it comes.

Prospective Residents are Perceptive

Fortunately, our customers are knowledgeable and perceptive enough to determine what is a legitimate conversation. They understand when an online review situation is an ongoing battle and they know that nothing a company does in some cases will fully satisfy the reviewer. As a consumer myself, I take time to inspect positive and negative reviews, and owner/company responses and my decision is based on my

perception of the average of those circumstances. I absolutely trust that our educated, prospective residents take a similar approach when doing their due diligence and can appreciate our method when we need to be firm and end the cycle.

Handle Reviewers Intuitively

We intuitively handle persistent negative reviewers. We closely monitor an exasperated reviewer and based on experience, we have developed a sixth sense when it comes to knowing who is likely to relentlessly review and/or debate responses. Our team proactively approaches reviewers such as these and attempts to take the conversation offline. To do so, we offer them an open-door policy: They can talk when they are ready to talk, and we let them know that we are here to listen to them when the time comes.

Be Forthright and Factual

After a negative review is posted, we immediately use our property management software to determine the relationship between the reviewer and our community. If the software doesn't indicate that the reviewer lives at the property, we double-check by asking our onsite team. If the reviewer still cannot be positively identified, we may conclude that the review is false. Depending on who the reviewer is – anonymous or not – we typically write to them, "We are trying to determine your situation because the experience you've described does not sound familiar. We'd like an opportunity to talk to you, so please give us a call and let us know how we can help you."

Hold Teams Accountable

Sometimes a customer simply wants to speak to a supervisor. I've been that person before! From my experience,

nothing is more frustrating than trying to leave feedback or resolve an issue – designed to provide an opportunity for a company to improve itself – only to feel like the remarks were unwanted or that I (the customer) am not worthy. If I can't speak to a supervisor when I truly need to, this is exactly how it makes me feel and I am then likely to "take it out" on the customer service rep who is unfortunate enough to have taken my call. In my opinion, all companies should include the email address of a corporate or regional representative when responding to highly negative reviews. In addition to delivering superior exterior customer service, it is just as important, if not more so, to take the burden off the onsite teams and hold the regionals accountable in the interest of morale and quality internal customer service.



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when compared to generic review sites, the frequency of trolls and false reviews on ILSs is far less.

Whit Lanier, Senior Director, B2B Marketing Products for RentPath, says ILSs' should have a well-articulated moderation policy that describes which content is and is not acceptable on the site and how it will handle content that falls in the blurry middle ground. It's hard to define what a troll is, but if the moderation policy is well written it should cover troll-like behavior."

Gregg Waggoner, B2B Product Manager at RentPath says, "it's important for us to provide an honest forum for our users and fair representation for our clients, which we know can be a bit like walking a tightrope. Ultimately, RentPath is responsible for the content which appears on our sites."

RentPath moderates all review content before it hits its site, Lanier says. "Our moderation process mixes automation with manual (human eyes)," Waggoner says. "We view hundreds of reviews per day on average."

Lanier says that once a review is live, anyone (consumer or property manager) can flag a review for additional moderation and re-examination. RentPath estimates that between 75 and 200 reviews are flagged by users each week, and all flagged reviews are manually moderated by its team.

Lanier says RentPath had a recent example where a resident for one of its clients wrote a scathing review.

"The reviewer then called us because she felt bad," Lanier says. "She fessed up that the content of the review wasn't accurate and was motivated

by an unexpected rent increase. She requested that the review be removed. Her behavior was exceptionally rare, but it does offer a glimpse into the mind of a troll."

8. Establish a company policy.

Work with the management company to outline company guidelines on:

- What constitutes a troll;
- Who within management should receive escalated reviews;
- What contact information to include in responses; and
- How to determine if legal counsel should become involved and at what stage.

It is critical to have a consistent and well-defined policy to deal with trolls.

Bottom line: There is no running from trolls and false reviews. To safeguard a community's online reputation, deal with trolls based on facts and research both on the situation described by the troll and on the site where the review has been left.

What eventually will turn the tide in the community's favor: An absolute focus on customer service. "If we succeed in crafting a remarkable living experience, real organic reviews will come. This is the most powerful tool in combating any trolls and fake reviews," Sundling says.

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