

A vintage red rotary telephone is shown from a slightly elevated front angle. It sits on a dark, reflective surface that mirrors its form. The background is a solid, vibrant green. The entire scene is framed by a white border.

COMMUNICATION
**HOW TECHNOLOGY IS
HELPING IMPROVE
COMMUNICATION
WITH AFFORDABLE
HOUSING RESIDENTS**

We live in a world that is changing faster than ever – technology is increasing the pace of change in all aspects of our lives. We're ever more connected, and expectations have increased as a result. Despite huge strains on housing providers to increase the number of properties they can provide; residents are now expecting an even more personal experience with communication to match.

The huge improvements that have been made in one-to-one communication in the last decade have resulted in a massive network of connected individuals all expressing themselves simultaneously. With ever more connected residents, however, comes ever-increasing expectations. In this white paper, we're going to explore innovative approaches that have developed to help both large and small organisations manage their communications with their residents. We believe that technology presents the best opportunity for housing providers to get their communication right at a previously unattainable scale.

Improving Your Deliverability

One of the largest areas of waste for any housing provider when it comes to communication is sending a message without connecting with the correct person. This can take many forms – for example, a phone call to a resident whose number no longer exists or a letter to a resident's home which is never opened and instead simply thrown away. Deliverability when it comes to digital communication comes in the form of bounces and read rates – both of which demonstrate whether or not your message is hitting the right target.

So why is this important?

Improving your communication deliverability is important for a few different reasons. Firstly, it saves you and your organisation significant resources. The most obvious area of savings is in the cost of creating and delivering physical communications. Letters cost money to write, print and send. If the letter doesn't reach its intended target then those resources have been wasted. A study by the Data & Marketing Association in 2018 found that an internal mailing list had an average response of only 9%. That means that 91% of your letters are not achieving their desired outcome – making each letter effectively 10 times more expensive. That money and time could have been better spent either on another task or a more effective form of communication.

ANA/DMA 2018 Response Rate Report:
Performance and Cost Metrics Across
Direct Media:
<https://www.ana.net/miccontent/show/id/rr-2018-ana-dma-respose-rate>

Ensuring these communications are received helps reduce both the number of resources needed to get in touch, as well as the time spent executing additional recommunication campaigns. When a communication isn't received it also significantly increases the number of appointments that get missed. According to a study conducted by CIH on behalf of Mears, they had an average of 31% no access appointments – costing them an estimated £2.4 million a year. Maintenance, both planned and emergency, requires advanced notice to ensure resident's plans can be changed to accommodate the new event in their calendars. Failure to gain access to a property wastes resources both in terms of communication cost and engineer or resident liaison officer time in attending appointments that are likely to be no-shows.

Tackling No Access in Gas Servicing – CIH
Eastern Conference 2015
http://www.cih.org/resources/PDF/presentations/arch2015/.Steve_Osborne%5b1%5d.pdf

Finally, you have the cost of having to double or triple up on communication. To ensure that the greatest number of residents are reading the information being transmitted to them, housing providers are likely to send multiple copies of the same communication. This leaves residents who read the first communication feeling bombarded and reduces the likelihood that they will do the same in future. Ideally, communication to residents should be viewed as impactful and important – but this degrades over time as tactics to ensure higher read rates become more aggressive.

How do you improve your deliverability?

One of the best ways to improve deliverability is to take advantage of the digital nature of some forms of

communication. One of the deliverability problems with letters is the inability to track engagement. For the most important of documents, you can get signed postage – ensuring at least that the letter was delivered to the correct address and received – but this does not guarantee that the letter has been read.

This form of sending, however, isn't viable at scale due to the prohibitive costs associated with signed postage. As a result, appointment letter sends are nearly always untrackable. Digital channels, on the other hand, have deliverability metrics built right into their very functionality. Text messages can be tracked, ensuring they are received – not to mention the fact that texts can be up to 300 times cheaper. Other forms of digital communication have the same – email and in-home IOT devices have these metrics without any cost. Digital communication is also better at responding to signals that a message has remained unread. All of these technologies have some form of unread resend technology – ensuring you cut down on message fatigue. Phone numbers and emails, however, can go out of date. This leads to an unfortunate side effect of traditional digital communication channels.

13 Email Marketing Tips to Increase Open Rates, Click-Throughs, and Shares: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/13-email-marketing-tips-t_b_9050798?guccounter=1

English Housing Survey – Social rented sector, 2017-2018: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/829741/EHS_SRS_report_revised_Sept_19.pdf

Utilising these systems requires you and your organisation to ensure that every resident's contact details are kept up to date. This is especially difficult in the social housing space because there is lower than average adoption of broadband internet and smartphones, not to mention that last year 245,000 social households moved property. Luckily in-home IOT devices do not have the same disadvantage. These devices are locked to a properties address, cannot be removed from the property and are often in positions of very high visibility in the property. Switchee's smart thermostat, for example, replaces a standard thermostat in a central location and with its two-way communication allows you to take advantage of the instant and trackable nature of digital communication without the costs associated with both traditional and digital communications. This ensures the resident in the property both receives the message as well as engages with it.

Improving Your Engagement

Once you've improved your delivery rates – the next hurdle housing providers face is getting the right level of engagement. Where delivery is ensuring that the right person gets the communication at the right time and in the right place,

Data & Marketing Association - 2018
Direct Mail Facts & Figures:
<https://dma.org.uk/article/2018-direct-mail-facts-figures>

engagement is about ensuring that the resident reads what you are sending them. In the case of letters, this means not having the letter go straight in the bin when they read who it's from. For direct mail, one research piece by the Data and Marketing Association found that only 20.8% of people opened a piece of mail addressed to them within 28 days. This is not a good sign for timely appointments. For phone calls, this means getting an engaged listener who will take the appropriate action. For digital channels, this means ensuring residents read and understand the message in its entirety and take the appropriate action to respond.

So why is this important?

Residents that are disengaged result in huge problems that can span their entire tenancy. Where an engaged tenant will make emergency repairs, scheduled maintenance and inspections relatively hassle-free, a disengaged resident is going to be nearly impossible to pin down for dates. Research suggests that on average, it takes anywhere from 2 to 3 visits to gain access to a property – with a percentage of those eventually getting to the legal stage to ensure entrance into the property. Ensuring your residents are engaging with your communications helps to foster a relationship of co-operation. It also helps you keep them up to date on the latest challenges they might be facing when it comes to their benefits, housing allocation or any number of other issues you might need to discuss with them.

The financial element is also hugely important as a resident who is engaging with the content you are sending is much more likely to adjust their behaviour to advice. For example, when a resident's heating pattern is causing condensation, damp and mould. The long-term savings that come from this can be in the tens of thousands. Missed appointments are also less likely with a resident who has received and read a communication and who feels they have been given ample time to adjust their schedule. All of these elements work to create a much more productive and functional relationship that benefits both housing provider and resident equally.

How do you improve your engagement?

There are a few ways to improve your message engagement. These methods nearly all require a digital communication channel – as traditional communication channels do not

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How much is a claim for housing
disrepair worth?
<https://www.anthonysgold.co.uk/latest/blog/much-claim-housing-disrepair-worth/>

respond fast enough, have the flexibility or the scale to take advantage of these methods.

The first big improvement that can be made is through personalisation. The communications where you can include more personalisation depend on your organisation. A national housing provider, for example, is likely to see huge improvements in engagement when it starts to personalise communication on a geographic basis. Local tenants want information on local issues. Sending unnecessary communications about changes that won't affect a tenant is a great way to get them to tune your communications out. Lots of national communications – like rent statements and company announcements can also be personalised with local information. Smaller local organisations are likely to see more improvements through personalisation based on experience – for example, those with histories of suffering condensation, damp and mould can be sent communications specific to their circumstances. Certain levels of personalisation are possible with traditional communication channels, but truly local personalisation can only really be achieved with digital channels – especially when it comes to thousands of properties and individualised messages. According to a recent survey, 88% of respondents reported seeing a measurable improvement due to the personalisation of their messages. These lessons from the private sector can and should be used to improve social housing communication.

2019 Trends in Personalization Survey
Report:
<https://www.evergage.com/resources/ebooks/trends-in-personalization-survey-report/>

The second improvement can be made through A/B testing communication content. A/B testing is the process by which you directly test one option against another, using those results to inform future communications. For example – your business is likely sending monthly rental reminders. These communications have a direct impact on your profitability as a business and as such, they need to be as effective as possible. Utilising an A/B test, you can test different communication styles, content and even layout to see which improves rental arrears rates the most. This process can go on continuously – improving your regular communication incrementally. With modern technology, this process is even more straight forward. Big tech companies like Microsoft, Facebook and Google are conducting tens of thousands of controlled experiments a year – often involving millions of their users – in order to better understand their own services and how to improve them. A/B testing has also been a key component in Netflix's steady march towards their goal of perfection – with

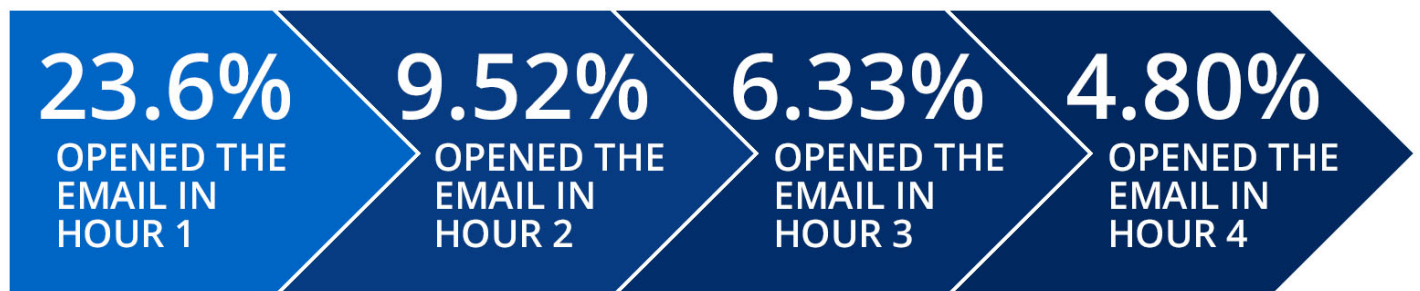
2019 Trends in Personalization Survey
Report:
<https://www.evergage.com/resources/ebooks/trends-in-personalization-survey-report/>

It's All A/Bout Testing: The Netflix Experimentation Platform:
<https://medium.com/netflix-techblog/its-all-a-bout-testing-the-netflix-experimentation-platform-4e1ca458c15>

stated Carol Jones, director of communications, marketing and public affairs at The Hyde Group, during a session at Inside Housing's recent Communications Conference:
<https://www.see-media.co.uk/2018/11/23/three-key-messages-from-the-inside-housing-communications-conference/>

their now-famous user interface. Email software, text automation platforms and in-home IOT devices all provide you with systems that you can utilise to A/B test messaging. Not only does this allow you to optimise your existing communications for more effective content, but it also gives you concrete evidence about the communication and language style that works best with your resident audience. Carol Jones, director of communications at the Hyde Group says that "If we don't have empirical data to back up our claims, we're just another idiot with an opinion". For larger businesses, this information can be shared with other areas of the company to improve their communications and for smaller businesses, this can help to generate content guidelines. These guidelines help to keep content consistent between users, as well as smooth over any staff transitions. It also helps you to build a tone of voice for your business that your residents will come to trust.

The third big improvement is in message timing. Getting a communication to a resident at the right time increases their likelihood of engaging hugely. If a resident received a communication right at the moment when they are leaving to pick their children up from school, for example, the likelihood that they will appropriately engage with its content is low. They aren't in the position to divert their attention to your message. On the whole, you only have one chance to get your message across. If a resident didn't listen to your first phone call, they aren't likely to look fondly on follow-up messages.



Best Time To Send Email – Research:
<https://www.getresponse.com/blog/best-time-to-send-email-infographic>

With 24% of all email opens occurring within the first hour, ensuring your message is delivered at the right time couldn't be more important. This is where digital communications come in. With their ability to track opens and time open, a digital communication channel can appropriately optimise a message to be sent at the right time for each individual. This is a huge departure from the days of letters where housing

providers were reliant on the letter arriving without any other important information to distract a resident.

Modern technology can help to alleviate communication problems

Housing providers today face significant challenges across their entire organisations, with shrinking budgets and increased demand. Communication doesn't have to be one of the areas where you suffer though – technology can not only help to reduce workload but also ultimately improve the quality of communication your residents receive. With the commercial world getting closer and closer to full-scale automated one-to-one communication, housing providers should not get left behind. They should take advantage of their place as a housing provider to provide better communication to their residents. Ultimately this will help to improve their financial position, help satisfy their social mission and improve the lives of their residents.



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