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Smart Phones Become New Multifamily Zeitgeist

Mobile apps, iPads revolutionize apartment marketing and resident communication.

By: [Chris Wood](#)

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With the deployment of Campus Apartments' smart phone application this month, it became official: Multifamily mobile apps have become the de-facto software development platform for the 21st century. REITs, private operators large and small, vendors, and now student housing firms are embracing smart phone, iPad, and tablet PC applications for their low cost of entry, high user absorption, ease of use, and return on investment.

"There is a significant appetite for quick, easy access to information on-the-go, and there are no signals that this is going to change any time soon," says Peggy Abkemeier-Alford, president of Santa Monica, Calif.-based ILS [Rent.com](#), which launched apartment search applications for the iPhone, Android, and Blackberry platforms in November. "We view the world of apartment hunting as a microcosm of this larger phenomenon and believe there is significant appetite among apartment hunters for mobile access to apartment information, whether via an app or an optimized WAP site. In fact, over the past year alone, we have seen mobile traffic to our site double."

Student Sector Latches On

While student housing, with its built-in base of tech-savvy, full-service-demanding residents, is typically on the bleeding edge of new amenities and resident services, the sector is just now beginning to embrace resident mobile apps that have been developing and launching on the market-rate side for the better part of a year. "Part of that has to do with software developers, who traditionally focus on the market-rate side," says Philadelphia-based Campus Apartments' CIO Andrew Marshall.

Mobile app development in the student housing sector might also have something to do with a slower growth of mobile users in the resident demographic. Though smart phone use among teens and 20-somethings seems ubiquitous, Marshall says the universe of student smart phone users is just now beginning to hit a critical mass that makes mobile app development worthwhile. "Interestingly, there is more penetration at private and Ivy League schools than at public and state schools," Marshall says. "That's the general trend we are observing, though Android and its lower cost point seems to be leveling that out."

Campus Apartments' mobile application, launched Dec. 6 and available on the iPhone and Android platforms, allows residents to make rent payments and service requests via their smart phones, mirroring similar applications developed on the market-rate side, most recently by [Englewood, Colo.-based Archstone](#), which launched a payment and service request app for iPhone in October and has seen brisk adoption among its residents. Most recent mobile applications on the operator side seem to embrace similar functionality, relinquishing the mobile apartment search space to the ILSs.

According to Marshall, it's still too early to gauge the success of Campus Apartments' app, but hopes have been buoyed by the use of online payment functionality, which is already comprising 6 percent of December electronic rent payments. "From a transactional point of view, we think the mobile device makes a lot more sense," Marshall says. "Multitasking and high-velocity communication is what our demographic is used to."

Vendors Eye Apartment Verticals

Multifamily software vendors are also busy developing mobile applications for new and existing systems and services. Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Yardi intends to make all of its software offerings available via smart phone in the first half of 2011, while Carrollton, Texas-based RealPage unveiled new and improved smart phone and iPad applications for its OpsTechnology and PropertyWare platforms this fall.

Similar to a multifamily leasing tablet application debuted earlier this year by Scottsdale, Ariz.-based VaultWare, the PropertyWare iPad app allows leasing associates or prospects to access community videos, information, and floor plans; get unit availability and pricing; and complete the full-circle application and screening process for a lease, all in the palm of

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and complete the full circle application and screening process for a lease, all in the palm of their hands. "All of the information is right there at your fingertips," says ProeprtyWare president Sina Shekou. "The iPad is the clipboard killer: There will soon no longer be stacks of paper and hot sheets on properties you want to show with floor plans and specials—that's archaic."

Shekou says the next multifamily demographic likely to get iPad and mobile apps will be internal, and RealPage is looking at developing applications for apartment executives on the asset management frontlines as well as in the executive boardroom. "The appetite for having the entire management operation on an iPad is very high," Shekou says. "We are developing applications to manage the full life cycle of customer relationships through a device like this."

In fact, multifamily mobile is so hot that external development companies are even beginning to look to the sector as a business growth vertical. On Dec. 1, Santa Cruz, Calif.-based Esq Apps, a start-up software development team with a focus on systems for attorneys and law firms announced the launch of RentalPro, a custom "lease generator" available on iPad, iPhone, and iTouch. The software allows leasing agents to create lease documents that can be emailed or printed and signed by prospects.

"Now, instead of writing a lease, you can spend a minute on your iPhone, hit send, and your deal is ready to close," says Esq Apps founder Adam Brumm. "With RentalPro, all you need to do is find the tenant."