

Two Emerging Trends Forge The Apartment of the Future

As the multifamily industry embraces intelligent buildings and self-service apartments, the importance of telecom infrastructure comes into greater focus.

By Rick Haughey / NMHC

Apartment development and management companies realize they haven't given telecommunications planning its due. The clarion call: 92 percent of renters surveyed in the 2020 NMHC/Kingsley Resident Preferences Survey said high-speed internet access is important. But providing internet access to residents is just the start, because apartment communities increasingly rely on telecom infrastructure for a variety of functions.

Advances in technology, significant investments in new PropTech and changing consumer demands have made telecom arguably the most important utility in any apartment community. Two emerging and interconnected trends – intelligent buildings and self-service apartments – are poised to solidify the importance of telecommunications planning when developing new apartment communities or retrofitting existing ones.

FROM SMART HOMES TO INTELLIGENT BUILDINGS

Let's look first at intelligent buildings. It started with a novel new thermostat, Nest, which led the way as a cool new smart-home amenity meant to help market apartments and save residents money on energy bills. From there, smart locks made their way into pilot programs and are now widely adopted in new and existing communities. Some communities are starting to take it further and install smart lighting, smart

refrigerators and other smart devices – and then market the whole package as a premium smart apartment.

Resident interest in these features is clear. The NMHC/Kingsley survey, which includes responses from nearly 373,000 apartment residents, shows more than 75 percent of respondents are interested in smart thermostats, more than 70 percent are interested in smart lighting and more than 60 percent are interested in smart locks. Voice-activated technology is making headway as well, with residents bringing their own devices in most cases. The survey shows that more than one-third of respondents now have voice-activated technology in their apartments.

The initial ad hoc approach to smart-home tech created challenges because these new systems were not integrated, creating an operational headache. As the technology advanced and began to scale, however, new building-focused technologies emerged, as opposed to resident-focused technologies. These building-system technologies include smart locks in addition to sensors, monitoring systems and better, user-friendly building-analytics tools. Integrating these technologies allows apartment firms much more control over their building operations.

The advent of building-focused technology corresponds with a more strategic, holistic approach to building and apartment

automation. Rather than banking on a rent bump for cool new apartment tech, the focus now is on saving money and reducing risk through the installation of new tech. These money-saving features range from sensor technology to detect leaks to energy efficiency tools and building usage data analytics to gather important building information.

SELF-SERVICE APARTMENTS ARE HERE

Just as new tech jobs have a multiplier effect on local economies when new firms spin off from existing firms, the tech that began as a simple rethinking of thermostats expanded to make intelligent buildings possible. This technology also enabled new business models, such as the short-term rental of apartments, and led the multifamily industry to the point at which a completely self-service apartment will soon be viable.

The entire resident experience – from searching for an apartment to renewal or move-out – soon could be completely automated. Digital leasing assistants powered by artificial intelligence are available now and have improved so much that prospective residents are coming in to leasing offices asking for nonhuman leasing agents as if they were human.

Interested prospects can view floor plans, rents and availability online and can schedule a self-guided tour with a quick automated screening. They can then use codes from the self-guided tours to open smart locks at the entrance and at the unit. They can process paperless leases online, then use their cellphones to reserve the loading dock for their moving trucks and schedule the movers.

Once they become residents, they can use 24/7 package lockers to pick up packages and view the lobby screen to monitor local transportation options. They can use the rideshare waiting area for an Uber or Lyft or rent a car, bike or scooter. If they have a plug-in hybrid or an electric car, chargers are available in the garage. Residents also can schedule a dog walker or dry cleaner or have pizza delivered through their phones and send a building-access code to a guest entering the building. If they need maintenance in their units, they can call third-party maintenance teams to schedule repairs.

TELECOM INFRASTRUCTURE IS KEY

Making this vision of the future workable will take integrated and seamless telecommunications planning and execution. This requires not only significant infrastructure but also a thoughtful and strategic approach and as much flexibility as possible given an ever-changing telecom landscape.

Whether the technology is 5G, managed Wi-Fi or a smart-home network protocol, apartment residents don't care how it works – they just want it to work seamlessly. They want a strong signal when they move from the street to the lobby to their apartment and through all the common spaces in between. The NMHC/Kingsley survey shows that more than 60 percent of residents want great and consistently strong cellphone coverage where they live, and more than 40 percent checked for cellphone coverage while they toured a multifamily community. They want perfection: all the new

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technology and access controls to work as they should, all the time, without fail. Once again, telecom is at the center of it all.

The sooner the apartment industry moves telecom planning front and center, the sooner the apartment of the future arrives. When it finally does, it will be a connected and convenient hub for all involved parties: residents, operators and anyone who comes through the lobby door. Until then, the multifamily home industry needs to give telecom its due and build the most flexible and powerful telecom infrastructure possible to pave the way. ❖

Rick Haughey is vice president of technology initiatives at the National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC) in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at rhaughey@nmhc.org.

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