

TECHNOLOGY Matters

SHEDDING SOME LIGHT ON THE MANY MYSTERIES OF OUR FAST-PACED HIGH TECH WORLD.



Surfing the Technology Wave



Check out RentalHomePros.com to learn how NARPM® members are working together to manage their listings, aggregate data, and distribute their listings to the masses. RentalHomePros.com and this article have been brought to you by Epic River (www.epicriver.com). Epic River uses best practices in design, development, and product management to accelerate your ability to move from idea to delivered product. Contact us to learn how to future-proof your business.

Do you desire to future-proof your business in today's uncertain world? Where would you even start? When would you find the time? For busy property managers in this economy, finding time to stay on top of technology trends can be daunting, but it doesn't have to be. There are several practices outlined below that can help you stay on top of the curve without going out of your mind.

THE SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION RACE

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is all the rage, just ask the mountains of companies and consultants that have emerged solely to help you "get to the top" of the Google search results. SEO is clearly important, generating traffic to your website and increasing your presence in local markets. However, if you can hire a SEO consultant and achieve that coveted top spot, how do you keep the property manager next door from doing the same thing? SEO should only be a part of your website strategy. Focus on content and usability of your website. It won't help if people find your site, but are confused by what they find there. Avoid spending time and money on gimmicks to increase rankings, links, or traffic and instead, focus on building a great site with relevant, up-to-date information and functionality. SEO only pays off if the user finds what they are looking for when they get to your site. And, if you can't afford to spend the time or money building up your search rankings, you can use free rental marketing sites like Craigslist, Google, Yahoo, or Hotpads, who have high search rankings and can drive traffic back to your site, increasing your ranking organically and sustainably.

WEBSITE HOSTING

Web hosting is an area where things have significantly changed in the last couple years. A few years ago, you would have to spend anywhere from \$20 to \$200 a month to have a reputable company host your website. Today, your website can be hosted for just a few dollars a month or even free! If you are currently paying more than ten dollars a month, it would be worth investigating hosting providers such as godaddy.

com or sites.google.com. You can likely save money and take advantage of the legion of ever-growing features these companies provide to make the most out of your website.

SOFTWARE AS A SERVICE

Software as a Service (SaaS) is a trend that is picking up steam and can save you money. If you are willing to use a slightly smaller feature set, you can avoid the significant cost of purchasing and upgrading productivity tools like Microsoft Office, Sharepoint, and Exchange by setting up a Google Apps account for e-mail, calendars, word processing, spreadsheets, collaboration, presentations, and videos. There is nothing to download or install, and the documents and tools can be safely and securely accessed on any computer or mobile device, wherever you have Internet access. These alternatives to costly software products allow you to save money, and have a more portable and distributed work force. In fact, this article was written, collaborated on, and proofread using Google Docs!

WEBSITE DOMAIN NAMES

An alarming trend, especially common in the rental market, is third-parties registering your website address for you and inadvertently owning the domain. Your company's biggest asset is its name and, subsequently, your website address. Your website name becomes your identity as you work for years promoting your website to capture customers. By having a third party, such as your hosting provider, own your domain, they are, in effect, owning your identity. You can find out who your domain name is registered to by visiting www.networksolutions.com/whois. Make sure that your name or company is listed as the "Registrant." In addition, make sure that you have access to a control panel where you can manage your domain and take advantage of new features or move to a new hosting provider in the future.

THE SHIFT IN ADVERTISING

There was once a time when advertising in the local paper was an effective way to get your property

rented. However, we have seen a significant shift in how properties are advertised as Internet usage among individuals continues to rise at record levels. More and more people are looking toward online resources to find their rentals and using sites like Craigslist.org and Facebook.com to find them. In 1999, no one had heard of Craigslist, yet today it gets more than 20 billion page views per month. In 2003, Facebook didn't exist; now they have over 200 million active users. In this day and age, it is impossible to predict what is coming next. So what can you do? The best policy is to be flexible and make sure all of your property listing data is in an open system that allows for the data to be pushed, pulled, or exchanged with whatever comes next.

MOBILE USAGE

One of the most significant generation specific trends in recent years is toward mobile usage. The next generation of renters is using the mobile phone as a platform for exchanging information other than voice. According to Nielson Mobile, Short Message Service (SMS) or "texting" overtook voice calls in the end of 2007, and a typical U.S. teenager sends or receives 1,742 messages per month while making or receiving only 231 calls. In addition to text messages, mobile phones have now become multi-function devices with the capability to browse the Internet. The release of Apple's iPhone, Google's Android mobile platform, the Blackberry, and Microsoft's Mobile Windows platform have vaulted mobile phones into mobile computers. All of these trends add to an overwhelming demand for mobile accessible information and a significant marketing opportunity for property managers.

Two easy ways to take advantage of mobile technology are to advertise your properties via SMS, and ensure that your website is mobile browser-friendly or create a mobile version of your website.

LOCATION AWARE

Mobile phones are not only becoming mobile computing environments, but they are also now Global Position System (GPS) devices. Virtually all new mobile phones are now GPS-enabled, making them location aware. Location aware applications know where you are and can give you information based on your current location. Applications are now available that let you know what friends are closest to you, what is near you (coffee, cheap gas, or a favorite restaurant), or let you share your day and life based on location. Harnessing this technology creates opportunities for property managers to make potential renters aware of what properties are available that are close to their current location. In addition, vendors could use this technology to monitor and direct employees to pending service calls close to where they are currently working.

OPEN INTEGRATION/"COOPETITION"

Open integration or "coopetition" is not necessarily a new trend, but always hard for new technology markets to grasp. The idea of open integration is that the entire market benefits if everyone can exchange information easily and without unnecessary costs. This idea is difficult for vendors to embrace because they feel they are giving away a potential opportunity to sell an additional product or service when they openly provide data. As a result, vendors who do not provide open integration run the risk of becoming irrelevant in the market because they cannot meet all the needs of their customers and are unwilling to work with vendors who can augment their product offering. Coopetition is the realization that your business cannot succeed without an ecosystem of competitive products that round out your product offering.

When choosing technology vendors to assist in the running of your business, make sure that they provide open integration to their products and play well within the rental marketplace.


DISTRIBUTED WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Distributed work environments break down the walls of a company and allow employees to work at multiple locations, at home, and overseas. Free or low-cost technology has enabled this trend through e-mail, instant messaging, web conferencing, remote desktop, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), and web-enabled applications. Some cost saving examples that are quick and easy to implement are:

- **Use of VOIP Technology:** Reduces phone costs significantly; allows phone numbers to ring remotely so that users can work from home or in alternative office locations, and be answered in other countries to utilize cheaper off-shore labor.
- **Remote Desktop Capability:** Provides access to your internal computers remotely, allowing employees to work from home, or for off-site or off-shore IT consultants to manage networks, mail servers, or do data-entry.
- **Web-enabled Applications:** These applications make remote access automatic and usually have a subscription fee. Initially, these services may seem more expensive until you factor in hardware, backup, support, and maintenance costs.

DATA IS KING

Ultimately, software vendors come and go, but your data stays. Vendor features and services change constantly and it is in your best interest to make sure that you can easily get your data out of one application and into another. You do not want to be held hostage to increasing prices or to an obsolete product.

If you remember only one thing from this article, remember that the only constant is change. 

Constantly test and re-evaluate your backup strategies to ensure that you do not lose your precious data to catastrophe or just inadvertent user deletion.

There are several good online backup companies that will safely and securely backup your data and provide for easy recovery.