

Technology Solutions

Volume 8. Issue 1.



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What I've Learned in 10 Years of Business

Lee O'Conner // President // @Lee_Ellipse

When I learned my topic for this spring's Technology Solutions was to be what I learned in 10 years of business at Ellipse, I wondered how I would get all that in just a one page article! In 1999, I was working on my undergraduate degree as a psychology major after spending years working on a social work and substance abuse degree. I then tacked on a minor in Corporate Communications (Public Relations) to get started on understanding the world of business. Although it may not seem like a normal transition from psychology to running a software company, the shift came easily. After 10 years, I really do like the world of business. I thought about how much I learned, read, experienced and taught myself over the years and I really am amazed at all I've accomplished. I would also add that tenacity, determination and fear of failure are great motivators and will prompt someone to find inner strength and skills not yet tapped. For me, that skill was leadership. So first and foremost, I learned to celebrate success in business.

Below are just a few tidbits that help me in my business every day. I am not sure if any of them can be found in books on business, management theory or leadership, but maybe someday I will write them in more detail, publish a book and go on the TV talk show circuit as the new expert on business.

Business really is a contact sport.
Every day you have to talk to your

customers, your employees and those people around you and not just by email or phone. Sometimes it's best to see them in person, since face to face meetings help reduce miscommunications and can lead to building even better relationships.

Don't ask people to do something that you've not done or are not willing to do yourself.

Read books and newspapers, but stay away from television. NPR and Market Place are great ways to *learn about the world*, business and the market place.

You should *always have people smarter than you in your business*, people who bring talent in a specific skill set that you don't. There are many people who do that for me. I ask a lot of questions. I think forward and run the plays in my head so that I see as many options as possible when it comes time to make a decision. I also reflect to see if mistakes were made in the past and how I learned from those. All this leads to better decisions and better business.

Be honest when you are not listening. I get so much information and try to multitask, that sometimes I stop listening to what someone is telling me. When that happens I look at them and say, "I am sorry, I wasn't listening. Can you say that again?" I wish some of our customers would do that, it makes communication so much easier.

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Don't let plane rookies ruin your business trips. *A two-hour flight is like a mini-vacation.* No one can call, email or come to your door to interrupt you. I take that time to do the Sudoku puzzle, take a nap, read the sports page or just look out the window. Take the time for yourself, but eat before boarding.

It takes three times as long to get something done as you think it will. I cannot explain how I figured this out, but I did and even after 10 years it still holds true. Think about it and time things for yourself and you will see that I am right. My theory is supported by hundreds of examples. Maybe that's a second book.

Finally, *give back to the community.* Not just from a company space, but from a personal space. All the money and success in the world will not matter if you don't make a difference in someone's life.



Top 10 Great Things about Multifamily

Lisa Benson // CEO

- 1) The members of the industry are always sincere and interested in the human aspect of business relationships. Those of us onsite are there because of our compassionate intentions to make the lives of the residents fulfilling and gracious.
- 2) It's the residents that make life entertaining and interesting. I remember running into a past resident from a decade prior, when I was out onsite, and it made me so proud that she remembered me from the property I worked for.
- 3) The real estate market is where the country's wealth is created. If high density residential housing wasn't such a valuable place for earned income, then our economy would certainly be much less resilient to change.
- 4) Apartments make great starter homes for the young. Just think, if it were not for apartments, would college students have to live at home until they were 22?
- 5) Many small companies are founded within the apartment industry, Ellipse Communications, Inc. included. It only stands to reason that our market seeds new products and services, especially since there are so many properties to choose from while driving around town.
- 6) There are more swimming pools per capita in an apartment community than in a traditional housing development. So, to think about it, that would also be indicative of fewer tanned people living in traditional housing as well.
- 7) The multifamily industry is a great launching pad for professional careers. The first time I got a sales job after a previous multifamily career, my future boss told me that he valued my experience in apartments due to my well rounded business knowledge.
- 8) The local apartment community is a great place to meet other folks like ourselves. Think about it, how many folks do you know that started dating their neighbor?
- 9) Apartments are frequently the first thing implemented when engaging a demographic improvement within a neighborhood. That, and a Walgreens.
- 10) The best thing about the multifamily industry is our ability to party at the hotel bar during NAA or in crazy costumes at Multifamily Brainstorming! There are more deals done and friendships forged during each year's education conference than any other business vertical.



Our Theme Words for 2010



Ellipse SYMPHONYSM

Apartment Toolbox[®]
content management for your leasing & management operation
www.apartmenttoolbox.com

SnapShotSM
real-time updates to your ILS for hassle-free online marketing
www.snapshot.com

Relate 24/7SM
your prospect follow-up & resident retention email marketing machine
www.relate247.com

Progressive Websites
your first impression and home base on the web

Resident Portal
powerful online amenity for your residents
www.ellipsesresidentportal.com

Net Mystery ShopperSM
the training tool to measure your team's performance
www.netmysteryshopper.com

Portfolio Reporting
your customized Monday Morning Report management tool
www.multifamilyreporting.com

ESA Ellipse Service AdvisorSM
customer relationship management tool for your service team
www.ellipseserviceadvisor.com

Enhance them with this

U Ellipse UniversitySM
your online learning management and training system
www.ellipseuniversity.com

Internet Telecom
Click to Chat and Click to Call - your contact center solution

How to Make Your Website a "Ten"

Jennifer Bird // Business Development Manager
Naveen Nawaz // Creative Director
Julie Ramey // Net Mystery ShopperSM Director

- 1) Never use ALL CAPS to write your message, welcome text, etc. as this is considered YELLING in cyber space. Only use ALL CAPS to draw attention to a word or phrase that is important to the sentence just as you would with **bold**, underline and *italicize*. While we are on this topic, don't write sentences in all **bold**, underline and *italics* either. It's **hard to read**.
- 2) STOP using scrolling text! It too, is hard to read and distracts your audience from your message.
- 3) Too much clip art can also be a bad thing. Moving or animated clip art can also distract from your message. The more clip art you use will slowdown the load time for your website. There is no need to make a resident dizzy while they check out the community bulletin board.
- 4) Do spell check and have a peer review the copy you write before posting it to your home page, floor plan details/descriptions and/or bulletin board. There is nothing more embarrassing than having a potential resident tell you have a spelling error on your website. Not such a great first impression, is it?
- 5) Do keep your welcome text, specials, floor plan details/descriptions, calendar and bulletin board up-to-date and not just because a mystery shopper may stop by your website. If you want to keep residents engaged, make your website one of their amenities.
- 6) Put your floor plan details and descriptions to work for you. Write descriptions that create the perfect vision in the minds of potential residents. Allow them to "see" how amazing your units are with interesting, flattering descriptions and be sure to include the very best features in the details.
- 7) Make the most of your bulletin board and calendar. Let residents know when and where the next community event is being held. Host games like BINGO on your calendar. Remind residents of special services you offer like movie rentals, complimentary gift-wrapping, coffee and cookies in the office – whatever it is that makes your community special.
- 8) Set up an auto responder to the email that



comes to you from the contact form on your website. Let it tell potential residents that you are dedicated to a timely response. Let them know that you will be responding soon with a personal email that will address any questions or comments they made when submitting the contact form.

9) Stay away from dark background colors on your website, especially black. Monitors can render dark colors in different tones/shades and this can make white or light colored text hard to read.

10) Potential residents often look through your website before visiting your property in person. Most of all – get the word out! Let the world know that you have this amazing website! Put your website address (URL) on EVERYTHING – signs, letters, emails, notices, business cards – the list is endless.

Leadership Tactics in the Multifamily Industry

Fatema Lotia // Project Manager

Contrasting with high unemployment rates and lack of development opportunities, industry leaders are optimistic and say the future of the multifamily housing industry is brighter than ever. The US economy has demonstrated that demographic studies and demand statistics are on the same side as the multifamily industry since the turn of 2010. In this article I intend to highlight strategic tactics that aim to help the industry thrive through establishing relationships in tough times depending on the stage of development a company may be undergoing.

In order to establish strong roots during stormy economic trends, industries must focus their efforts and commitments to quality and excellence. Companies gain momentum through building relationships with people, products, services and partnership. Ellipse Communications, Inc. was founded under those pillars that in turn breed company growth and value. Brands are built by a community inside the company and through its partners, potential customers and even competitors. The brand exists within a community, and the community benefits from the brand.

Multifamily professionals have learned to

discern customer needs through the use of resident surveys to improve fundamentals. Executives looking for objective feedback find that implementing such programs through Ellipse created Resident Surveys enables them to receive input on an array of topics from leasing processes to property conditions. Residents understand a property's dynamic as the end users, and have opinions that could improve property operations. By providing an avenue for information to flow from the customers up to property management, the industry can implement programs that improve customer satisfaction and increase contract renewals and resident retention.

One of the most valuable and scarce resources in the multifamily industry is a company's best employees. Many companies are scrutinizing the bottom line, including HR managers, because of economic needs to cut costs in order to survive. Though employee turnover is an integral part of the corporate culture, retaining the best is critical for a multifamily leader's survival. Some resident

opinions about a property correlate directly with that of the onsite staff professionals. Star employees respond with loyalty and diligence to sincere employers, especially during times of economic uncertainty while maintaining high moral standards within their roles.

These are a few points that can assist industry leaders in creating a strong base for themselves during 2010. In order to weather economic trends successfully, leaders may go through many difficult choices and often have no easy door to stumble through. Industry leaders must breed morality and strength in strategy in order to stand firm and gain winning leads when the economy finally turns.



Ten Topics for An Apartment Blog

Elysa Rice // Emerging Media Consultant // @TheEllipseCow

When it comes to marketing your apartments... do the words "social media" and "blogging" strike a chord of excitement mixed with fear?

We've just returned from two days of being with the experts in the Social Media and Multifamily world. The team at MultifamilyPro organized a very successful Optimization Summits with some great speakers. There was talk of Twitter, Facebook, blogging, video, Foursquare, and many more great vehicles of social media that could all be used as avenues for joining the social space. One theme that I noticed was a hesitation to get started for fear of not knowing what to talk about.

As an apartment resident and an avid blogger, *here are some topics I'd like to read about were my apartment to have a blog.*

1) DIY: "Do-It-Yourself." There are numerous websites with projects that may be fun for your residents. A quick Google search for the terms "DIY apartment" will give you a few starting ideas.

2) Community and City Events: An apartment blog is a great platform to share upcoming events in your city. When.com and Eventful.com are just two of many event based websites that can be a great resource for upcoming happenings in your community. While the event is going on, your team and/or a few of your residents may want to take pictures and write a quick review of the event.

3) Local Restaurants: Let's face it, everyone's gotta eat. I'd recommend a recurring restaurant review theme as a great way to "crowd-source" your residents. An example blog topic may be "Pizza Delivery Showdown" where you compare delivery time and quality of 3 different pizza places in your area. Keep in mind these types of articles could easily be written by a resident.

4) Resident Community Photos: Most properties have professional photos on their website but imagine the possibility of community submitted photos as blog posts. One property had a "Snow Person Contest"; residents made snow men/women on the property and then submitted their photos.

5) Hyperlocal News: Is there a new dry cleaner opening up? Or was a resident given an award? A great way to create a sense of community is to share what's going on in your very local community. Something to note, there are probably already several hyperlocal blogs in your city that you could link to. In Dallas (where we are based) there are 10 great blogs that show up on the first page of Google for "hyperlocal Dallas".



6) Going Green: Blogs are a great platform to share quick tips. There is definitely not a shortage of going green quick tips to link to from your property blog. A popular article I saw this week was "Green Ways to Clean Your Vegetables".

7) Freebies on Craigslist: If I were to create a marketing campaign for Craigslist's free section I'd give it the tagline "One Man's Trash is Another's Gold." While the turnover rate of free furniture is pretty high these Freebies on Craigslist would be an interest/unique topic to write about.

8) Property Changes: It may seem counter-intuitive to say that the majority of your blog topics should not relate directly to your property. Occasionally, though if there are changes that effect your residents you may want to use your blog as a platform to share this news.

9) Top Ten Lists: Everyone loves lists. Here's a few start ideas for blogging lists: top movies at blockbuster, top movies at theater, top nail places in your city on Yelp.

10) Etsy finds: The farmer's market of hand-made items, Etsy.com is a fun place to find various apartment decorating items (be sure to include things guys and/or girls may like).

Ten Things I Love About Multifamily Housing

Anne Sadovsky // Certified Speaking Professional // @annesadovsky



I love our industry! With over 40 years under my belt I guess that is obvious. It is exciting to share just ten of the things that come to mind... I could go on and on. So, not in any priority or order, here we go:

1) *This job is equivalent to a degree in psychology.* We deal with every type of human being, every age group/generation, every culture, every bad day, and all circumstances. What an education. And a bit of a psychologist we must be since we deal with them and their "at home manners". Most do not act with us the way they do at work, with their bosses and their friends. We learn to be a pro at staying cool, reading minds and body language and handling people with kid gloves.

2) *We never stop learning.* When I started my career in 1968 the lease was one letter-size piece of paper, we shunned renters with children and we kept a keg of beer by the pool. When I think about how much I have learned about the legalities of renting housing, documents, state and federal laws, my head swims. Add on the advent of technology, especially the past 7-10 years, and then the study of the generational differences active in the workplace and as consumers, and you see that we get pretty darned smart pretty darned quick! And the neatest part is this; the way we did our job last week becomes questionable this week and obsolete the next.

3) *We develop great people skills or we don't make it in this business.* This IS the people business. We have to learn very quickly the ramifications of not handling our consumer well. Loyalty is hard earned... especially with all the deals and variety of bells and whistles we offer the renter. Many residents become loyal to US, even if not enthralled with all situations with the property, the company and even other team members. So we must be likeable, caring, interested and empathetic.

4) *Dealing with change is huge!* Again, think back on how quickly things have

changed in the past 6 months. We now learn more in a year than our ancestors learned in 50 years. Learning to change with what is changing is a necessity for survival. Likely you, all of us, have dropped the phrase "but we used to do it this way." Nobody cares. Having history is nice... probably sometimes keeps us from making the same mistake twice. But what counts now is what we learned yesterday and being geared up for new stuff tomorrow!

5) *The career opportunities are unlimited.* We have the opportunity to start leasing apartments at 18 or 19, and stay with it until we are at least my age, and that is saying something! I do know people who are in the 70s, even early 80s who are still very active in our field. Sometimes I dream of retiring and managing a nice small, expensive, beautiful apartment community until I am 90!

6) *There is a place for everyone to work in our business.* No matter the amount of education, the skill set, the experience... pretty much anyone can find a good spot in property management. Porters, groundskeepers, housekeepers, bookkeepers, salespeople, customer service, talent managers, investors, owners, executives...we run the gamut. Some people even start as groundskeepers and stay around to become regional managers, even owners. What a great opportunity.

7) *We get to help people find a home; the right home!* How many jobs could be this satisfying? People come to us with a need; sometimes urgent. We get to jump in, learn about the customers needs, compare to what we have available and be the one who solves their challenge. This really is serving our fellow man and meeting one of the most basic human needs.

8) *We make life long friends.* For one of the biggest industries in America, it is also a very, very small world. Because we tend to get in, and stay in, or if we leave we come back, it is important not to burn bridges. We make long term friends all over the country... because our skills are transferable. We can move from city to city, place to place and do

what we do. Everywhere we go, we make friends. Because we have this industry in common, we stay friends. Now, the fun part is with today's technology, we network and keep in touch and send happy birthday emails. Friends forever!

9) *We help each other.* It is pretty rare in competitive businesses that people share tips, experience and information as freely as we do. We are, after all, in this together. We have learned that when we help each other, it begins to solve all our issues. Mentor/mentee opportunities arise daily: some informal, and some in planned situations. The associations and websites keep us learning from one another...quite a blessing when we need market research or a great idea!



10) *The apartment industry is never going to go away and will never be obsolete!*

As long as mankind occupies this planet, and continues to grow the population, there will be apartments. We will always need to stack homes on top of homes and be aware of land conservation. As each generation ages the need for services, management and convenience grows. As young people continue to leave home for the first time, affordable places to begin their adult life will be necessary. Talk about job security!

So that is my ten...and I am sure that everyone who reads this is going to say "What about...?" Remember, I was limited to ten!

Every day, celebrate your decision to be involved some way in property management. Whether you picked us, or we picked you, those of us who are true veterans are really glad you are here. Someday you may be writing about all you love about our industry... I hope I am still around to read it!

Ten Things You'll Love About Apartment Toolbox®

Joe Foster // Training // @Joe_Ellipse

To Celebrate the Apartment Toolbox® receiving a face-lift, we have compiled a "Hot 10" list of features—5 Things You Didn't Know about Apartment Toolbox®, and 5 New Features of Apartment Toolbox® 4.0.

1) You can put *YouTube* on your bulletin board—Most every office has an employee who seems to find the newest "it" video on YouTube before anyone else. One manager's time-wasting problem staff member is the digital native's resident outreach tool! Having a cool, unique (family friendly) "video of the month/week/day" will give your residents a reason to visit your Resident Section consistently. Just cut and paste your embed code into the source code of your Bulletin Board! No idea what any of that means? Call the Training Department, and we'll have you posting the next "Chocolate Rain" in minutes.

2) You can send *tell-a-friend postcards to prospects.* If your website features a Contact Form, your Apartment Toolbox® most likely features Contact Tracking, a web-based method of answering contact forms. More than a monitoring tool, Contact Tracking allows you to respond from the property's email address using one of your snazzy Tell-a-Friend Postcards. Clicking "send postcard" will reroute your browser to the Tell-a-Friend Postcard page of your website, filling in the recipient's name and email address. For initial outreach, nothing says Class A property management like an email postcard in a prospect's inbox.

3) You can get to it on your *SmartPhone* Although feature-rich enough to be a stand alone product, Apartment Toolbox® is designed to work within a standard web browser. Web browsing through a mobile phone becomes more and more like a desktop every day. With that, and with some restriction on features, Apartment Toolbox® is accessible through most mobile browsers. Update rent rates on the road, send Tell-A-Friend Postcards from a beach in Bali.

4) *Custom Search Text* This may be the single most-neglected feature in your Apartment Toolbox®. This is a simple way to make your website more attractive to Google. Fill your search text boxes with

as many words and phrases that will evoke your community as you can think of—there's no limit. Think of it as anticipating what a renter might search for that would result in finding your community. An Austin, TX based community might include "Apartments in Austin" or "Apartments near UT" or even "longhorns apartments". None of these phrases will appear *on* the website, but they are

attached *to* the website, specifically the back end of your site that Search Engines (Google and the other ones) index.

5) *Analytics* What's a Visit vs a PageView? Why does my site have Robots and Spiders? Where does my website traffic come from, geographically? Intricate details about your website's traffic are stored in the analytics. What did they search for to find us? What sort of computer did they use? Pretty much anything you'd want to know (save an address and phone number) are available to you. We'll be more than happy to walk you through your website's Analytics in a training call.



THE NEW Apartment Toolbox®!

1) *A page for everything, and everything in its page.* Longtime Apartment Toolbox® users are doubtlessly familiar with the Edit Property page and it's seemingly endless morass of



checkboxes and lists. Apartment Toolbox® 4.0 gives direct, one page, no-scrolling access to all of your dynamic content. Amenities reside on an Amenities page: your SEO search text has a home all it's own.

2) *Drag and drop lists*—Perhaps you'd like that new yoga center to be on the top of your amenities list. Drag it to the top of the list from the Apartment Toolbox®, and it's done. Let's lead your Photos Page with that lovely poolside exterior shot. Click-Drag-Drop—there's not even a "save" button.

3) Administrative *access reform*—anyone with access to multiple communities will no longer have to re-select which community they're working with every time they move to a new section of the website manager. A dropdown box keeps you locked on one property until you're done there.

4) *WYSIWYG*—What You See Is What You Get. With the new Apartment Toolbox®, the only features you'll be able to access are the features you can use. This results in a gentler learning curve and a more intuitive experience.

5) *Less Is More*—We want you to be comfortable using our beloved Apartment Toolbox® and years of feedback indicated to us that the homepage was perhaps a bit busy. Our talented designers and developers have pared down Apartment Toolbox® 4.0 to the essentials, tucking some sections away and doing away with redundant features outright.

Choose Your Corporate Website Administration

I want Ellipse SymphonySM!

Ellipse SymphonySM is the most advanced suite of technology tools available to the property management industry today. Designed to help you maximize your marketing, leasing, resident retention and managing opportunities successfully, Ellipse SymphonySM sets the standard for others to follow.

Apartment Toolbox[®] Gold

Our Apartment Toolbox[®] Gold provides pre-determined navigational centers for business applications under a hierarchy of administrative controls with password and function protection. This cost-effective solution is specifically developed for management organizations supporting a portfolio of 5,000 to 15,000 units.

Apartment Toolbox[®] Platinum

Large property management organizations supporting a portfolio of over 25,000 active units or higher will find this dynamic product impressive. Modular in design, this suite consists of a comprehensive set of services that provide timely, relevant property and communications data to all members within the company's hierarchy.

Choose Your Executive Tools

Satisfaction Survey Center

SuiteMate[®]

Occupancy Layout

EllipseNetSM

Ellipse Service AdvisorSM

SnapShotSM

Relate 24/7SM

Net Mystery ShopperSM

Portfolio Reporting



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or Shop Online at
www.ellipseinc.com

*Many of the Ellipse products are on a subscription based service and remain the property or intellectual property of Ellipse Communications, Inc.

Choose Your Website Presence

Ellipse Communications, Inc. can work to create integrated corporate and community website marketing campaigns, encompassing advanced website services for marketing efforts. Custom designs, graphics and Adobe Flash[®] technology elements will complete these sophisticated presences.

Better Than CompetitiveSM Website

Basic Website

Enhanced Website

Advanced Website

Corporate Website

Corporate Leasing Center Website

Golf Trip Option

Don't know what you want? Let's talk about it on the course.

Choose Your Website Plug-ins

visit www.ellipseinc.com for a complete description of each item.

Logo Design

Marketing Support

Floorplan Redraws

Virtual Move-InsSM

Calendar/Newsletter

Bulletin Board

Job Posting Board

Resident Portal

Meet the Staff Profiles

Secured On-line Application

Site Map

Pick-A-Floor/Sitemap

Tell-A-Friend Postcard

"Flash" Introduction

Virtual Guest CardSM

Resident Links with Image Control

Welcome Text Editor

Resident Referral Center

Photo Upload

Resident Links Center

Specials Coupon Control

Click to Call

Click to Chat

Tell Us About You

Company Name: _____

Contact Person: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____ Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____ Current Website: _____

Special Comments: _____
