



Apartment Marketing: Guidelines for Using Craigslist

Authored for



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By Charity Hisle

“I recently toured with a locator, they pay someone to post ads on craigslist eight hours a day/sevendays a week. How are we going to compete with that?”

- Anonymous Property Manager



About Grace Hill, Inc.

Grace Hill, Inc. is the multifamily industry's leading provider of state-of-the-art online education, providing training alternatives that significantly reduce the overhead of educating employees and clients. The company celebrated the delivery of one million multifamily courses in 2009.

In addition to offering numerous course titles to the public via the Apartment Management Learning Center, Grace Hill builds private Learning Management Systems for apartment industry clients to better manage their associates' education efforts. Furthermore, Grace Hill's in-house development team creates customized training solutions for individual clients, including property owners, managers and suppliers.

Grace Hill is based in Augusta, Georgia and has team members located throughout the country. Reach the Grace Hill team on [Facebook](#), Twitter [@GraceHill](#), call toll free (866) GRACEHILL (866-472-2344) or visit <http://www.gracehill.com>.

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Who is Charity?

Charity Hisle is a social media consultant, speaker and trainer. After several years in the printing and Multifamily industries, she developed a love for social media marketing and became excited about the implications of social media marketing for small business. In an effort to generate awareness concerning the benefits of leveraging social media, she established an engagement training [blog](#) and became a full-time social media consultant.

Charity is regarded by industry professionals as an emerging leader and is known for her innovative and unique insights on using social media strategies to attract and retain customers. Her previous experience includes directing new media marketing initiatives, planning and implementing Internet marketing campaigns, e-mail marketing campaigns, and classified listings strategies. Charity's classified listings strategies and best practices guidelines have resulted in hundreds of leads and leases for apartment communities nationwide.

In January, Charity was [appointed](#) as Operations Manager for [Community Sherpa](#), a [Network Communications, Inc./Apartment Finder](#) social media service provider. She is originally from Pensacola, Florida. Charity currently resides with her husband Peter, three children, and two chihuahuas in metro Atlanta. You can reach Charity on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) and Twitter [@CharityHisle](#).





Apartment Marketing Guidelines for Using Craigslist

Organizations create marketing strategies for all types of media use including newspapers, magazines, and even Internet Listing Services. Why not expand these strategies to include a plan for how your organization uses Craigslist? Many companies view Craigslist as a "free" source of leads. However, the labor needed to post on Craigslist requires financial investment from your most valuable resource: employees. Ads placed on Craigslist are frequently removed, thereby creating financial loss.

As a successful Craigslist marketer, I have established unique and effective strategies for approaching Craigslist. Put simply, I follow the rules of Craigslist and utilize basic SEO (Search Engine Optimization) marketing techniques. While every property management company is different, most are in the process of establishing Craigslist policies and guidelines. Some are successful; most are not. In this guide I will share with you my successful techniques.

First, let us get to know the users of Craigslist. The average user has at least some college education and is between 25 and 44 years old. Unlike other classified sites, these users access Craigslist from both home and work. What does this mean? It means that although most Craigslist users are looking for a deal, they are educated and employed; making them the perfect target audience for apartment listings!

"No one's renting your one-bedroom for \$3,500, no matter how much work you put into it."

- Anonymous Craigslist User





Why “Page 1” Doesn’t Matter.

We all know the drill: post as many ads in a single day as possible and hope to generate a few leads. There is a similar situation within email marketing called “spray and pray.” This term is certainly an adequate representation of how Craigslist is currently being used. Craigslist has become crowded with multiple postings for the same property. Inevitably, these duplicate listings overwhelm and frustrate Craigslist users and reduce opportunities for your property.

“How many listings should I post on Craigslist per day?”

This single question is asked more frequently than any other. I have successfully implemented Craigslist strategies that include posting a single available unit only once per day. In some cases I recommend posting only three days per week. By following Craigslist [terms of use](#) and not posting the same ad within 48-72 hours I have significantly reduced flagging and removal of ads thereby increasing ad visibility and the generation of unique leads.

“Who’s flagging and removing my ads?”

Violating Craigslist terms of use, which admittedly are vague and open to interpretation, will result in the flagging and removal of ads. Anyone can flag an ad for removal: competition, former employees, residents or former residents angry at the property manager, Craigslist employees, and even those uncaring individuals that monitor the Craigslist help forums.

In the end, it doesn’t matter who is flagging ads for removal. The only issue that matters is how to create a Craigslist strategy for your organization that will reduce the time and effort wasted on posting.

“How do we prevent our ads from being flagged and removed?”

Jeffrey Lee has a few answers on the NAA blog, [APTly Spoken](#). Limiting frequency of listings, deleting old ads, and link with caution are a few great pieces of advice for reducing the flagging and removal of ads.

Do you understand how customers search?

[Rent.com](#), [Apartment Finder](#), and other organizations have compiled studies that determine how renters search for apartments. There are three main criteria renters use for searching: location, price, and unit type. Other influential keywords include “pets,” “cheap,” and “parking”.

If these results are considered when implementing a Craigslist strategy, it will not matter if an ad is on page 1. A single ad can be more effective than ten ads. In addition to the longevity of each ad, there will be increased SEO benefits. Google and other search engines show preference to unique content, and Craigslist ads are included within search results. By making ads unique and using different content in each ad, your ads will be more easily found within search results.



How Craigslist Search Works

In the Google world of today, people are accustomed to searching websites based on their own unique sets of criteria, otherwise known as filtered search. Because of this, Craigslist ads need great titles, various keywords for additional search criteria, and unit-specific rent and location information.

When searching Craigslist, the first requirements are to choose the search geographic location and the apts/housing. Results shown on this page are considered by many to be the most valuable placement. Ads are often repeatedly posted in order to maintain a presence on page 1.

There is a widely held misconception that dictates an ad must be listed on page 1 to be successful. Based on search trends, users typically enter their unit type and price, as well as other keywords before scrolling through the search results. Additionally, users can exclude all ads without images, view only ads that indicate pet-friendly communities, or search keywords listed within ad titles.

TIP: the most searched unit type is 2 bedroom.

Another misconception is that average users prefer text-only ads to HTML. In fact, most users do not prefer text-only ads. Craigslist, like many social sites, has a group of user advocates that dictate what is or is not preferred. Average users do not fall into the category of 'user advocate.' It is true that text ads are most successful on Craigslist, but not because average users prefer text-only ads. Rather, I believe HTML ads are more frequently targeted for removal by the craigslist 'user advocates' and competition within our own industry.

TIP: all ads should include at least one image.

**“Check out the posts in the CL Help forums
-search for apartments... it's ugly. The
community generally hates our existence.”**

- Anonymous Property Manager





“Should we be using Craigslist?”

This question is not asked often enough. The answer depends on the location, the price, and the property.

Every location is different. Not all locations are ideal for using Craigslist. Some Craigslist experts will advocate placing more ads, flagging and removing competitor ads, and waging a Craigslist war against brokers. The simple solution is that each location should first be analyzed for ad effectiveness before implementing a strategy. Craigslist may or may not be an effective solution for your company.

Is the property priced for Craigslist? The simple truth is that Craigslist users are looking for a deal. If there are no concessions, no deals, and if the property is the most expensive listing on the site, Craigslist is not the right option for this property.

Is the property “right” for Craigslist? Without violating federal or local fair housing laws, consider current residents before committing to Craigslist. If it is understood that a typical resident will never use Craigslist to search for their next home, common sense should prevail.

TIP: When Craigslist fails, try other free classifieds.





Formatting Ads

“Should we use HTML or text ads?”

Craigslist does not dictate the required ad format. Some Craigslist users believe that HTML is not in the ‘spirit of Craigslist’ and will remove ads that appear too corporate. However, my experience has shown that users, in general, have no deciding preference.

It is important to test ad formats to determine what works best for any given property. In many cases, text ads have been known to achieve better results. Regardless of your choice, be sure vital property information is readily available and utilize key words. Please note: tracking impressions is easier within an HTML ad.

“What’s a hybrid ad?”

A hybrid ad is a simple HTML ad that looks like plain text. The ad includes photographs placed near the bottom of the ad. This type of ad is useful if the Craigslist environment in which you are posting is hostile towards obvious HTML ads. The use of hybrid or HTML ads make impression tracking possible.

“Why do impressions (views) matter?”

The calculation of impressions has long been considered for ads regardless of the media used to place the ad. Impressions are helpful in determining effectiveness of posting titles, content, and unit pricing. While Craigslist ad impressions are not believed to be a valuable measurement tool, they do indicate which ads users are viewing. *Example: Are users clicking on the “FREE Rent” ad or the “NO DEPOSIT Required” ad? Is the 1 bedroom or the 2 bedroom more appealing?*





“How do I format my ad?”

Use brief paragraphs, bulleted lists and simple descriptions of the property. Prevent renters from having to scan through brochure romance copy to find relevant property information. Above all, be honest when posting ads. Using fake names to track ad success is unnecessary and can frustrate renters when they call. The most effective ways to track ad success include creating dedicated telephone numbers and email addresses for each promotion.

Below are recommendations for formatting content, contact information, price, photography, floor plans and amenities.

Contact Information

The phone number should be prominently placed in multiple locations within the ad. Often, properties bury the phone number beneath the ad content with the assumption that renters will read the entire ad. This is a basic marketing error. Place the phone number above and below the scroll (at the top of the ad and near the bottom of the ad), in a type style that stands out, near the call to action or promotional offer. Evidence shows that people gravitate towards bolded content while blocking out text above and below the bolded text. Keep this in mind when formatting your ad.

Make visiting the property as easy as possible by including the property address, neighborhood information, and directions.

I recommend using anonymous email addresses to reduce spam inquiries. Craigslist frowns on links placed within ads. However, I usually place a single link to the property web page (not the property management group website) just below the property address. If ads are being flagged and removed on a regular basis, remove the link to determine if it is causing the issue.

Price

There are three major points regarding Craigslist ad pricing:

1. Place the least expensive units on Craigslist. Remember, Craigslist users expect a deal. Properties offering concessions within posting titles get the most impressions.
2. Focus on a single unit at a time. Do not include rent ranges anywhere within the ad, and remove the ad from online once the unit is no longer available. This is to avoid accusations of 'bait and switch.'
3. Place an availability disclaimer at the bottom of each ad. This is to indicate if there are a limited number of units available at a specific rate. Also include any other disclaimer information regarding specials, promotions, and limitations. *Example: While supplies are available. Offer only available on 12 month lease or renewal. Restrictions apply, see leasing office for details.*

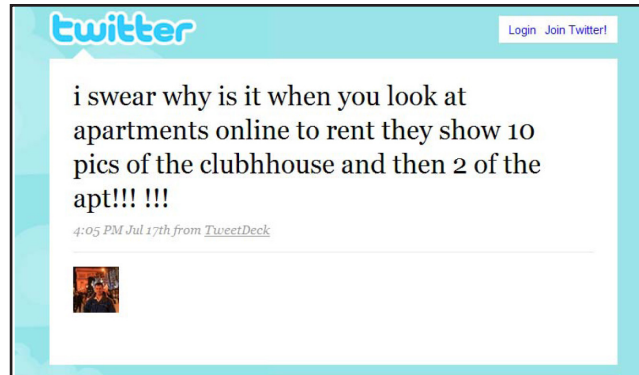


Photography

The use of unit and property pictures within ads is critical for the success of the ad. Aside from the basic search criteria limiting search results to ads with images, studies show that people are 7 times more likely to visit a property that uses photography.

When selecting the images you want to display in your ad, keep the seasons in mind. For example, in the winter show photographs of warm and inviting units while in the summer show photographs of your pool and other outdoor amenities.

TIP: Take photographs of the interior of each apartment as they become available and keep an image library on hand for your ads. Avoid placing photographs online of property signage.





Floor Plans

Include a single floor plan image within each Craigslist ad. These can be saved as .jpg files and uploaded as if they were photographs.

Amenities

List 8-10 amenities within each ad. Remember to keep the ad brief and to the point. Focus on the most important search criteria first. For example: "Pets" is one of the most frequently searched terms. If the community is pet-friendly, this information should be located at the top of the amenities list or even within the posting title. *TIP: Change up the amenities regularly to increase SEO results.*





Notes:

