University Towers at North Carolina State University

How the vendor (and product/service) solved a unique need for the operator and its project (s).

While most of its competitors are offering mobile-device applications or stripped-down websites to promote their collegiate housing properties for smartphone users, EdR took a different approach that accomplished its goals better, faster and cheaper while catering directly to the needs of its cellphone-addicted prospects and customers at its University Towers community at North Carolina State University.

The successful solution has since been deployed across EdR's entire portfolio of owned and managed properties — 70 in all.

Rather than going the app route, which would require tailoring to specific mobile device operating systems, EdR rolled out dedicated mobile websites that offer nearly the same functionality as the full-scale websites and work with any mobile device, despite the operating system running it.

EdR recognized that people searching for collegiate housing would not want to have to download an app just to view a property. By taking the mobile-website route, a "barrier" to website entry was eliminated. Once potential renters become tenants, they use the same mobile websites to access resident portals to pay rent, schedule a tanning session or request maintenance, for example, without downloading a specific app.

The mobile-dedicated websites also allow EdR to keep its branding consistent across platforms, using the same photos and other graphics. Keeping information consistent on the mobile and full-scale sites also is seamless since changes made on the core version automatically flow to the mobile version — also eliminating redundancy in effort for keeping the content up to date. The content management system allows for real-time updates, so information is always fresh and accurate.

How the solution saved the operator money and time

EdR saved significantly on the costs that would have accompanied developing device-specific apps. EdR's research showed that among those accessing our property websites, 63% used Apple products, 31% used Android and 3% used other mobile devices.

EdR worked with a Nashville, Tenn.-based mobile graphic-design specialist — QR Revolution — to develop a template that was then customized for all but one of the 70 communities it owns and/or manages (one recently acquired property already had its own customized mobile website). Development of the template cost less than $15,000. The customization for each property was done internally. Launching the mobile websites took less than three months and was completed on in January 2011.

While smartphones and other mobile devices could access the standard websites for each property, these tended to be hard to navigate because they were designed for larger viewing screens. The new mobile-specific websites use dynamic scaling to size the graphics appropriately for the screen dimensions of the device accessing them, whether it's a smartphone or a tablet. When smartphone

users go to an EdR property website, their devices is recognized and the browser automatically redirects to the mobile websites. This transfer is transparent to the user.

All the elements available on the full-scale websites — floor plans, amenities, photos and videos — are accessible and functional through the mobile-device websites except the online application, which would have been tedious to complete from a smartphone. If potential renters need directions to a property, then the mobile website's navigation software can get them there. Links to social media such as Facebook and Twitter also assist EdR in driving traffic to its properties, in a virtual sense.

Because these websites are a significant marketing tool for EdR's properties, retaining the full functionality of the core website is gaining importance as the number of students using mobile devices grows.

Return on investment of the solution

The iReserve section of the mobile website especially provides a significant return on investment since it nearly eliminates staff time and effort for reserving amenities in addition to the convenience it affords residents. This EdR-exclusive web application allows our residents to reserve certain amenities — tennis courts, tanning beds, grills, etc. — online using a desktop computer, tablet device or smartphone.

iReserve comprises a web-based application, an administrative website for property staff to process the reservations and a page in WEBster (our content management system) to add, edit and delete amenities, as needed.

When a resource is added to iRESERVE, the property decides which days of the week the resource is available, what time the resource "opens" and "closes," what the default duration of a reservation is (i.e., 20 minutes for a tanning-bed slot) and whether the resident has to "check in" with a staff member to use the resource.

Whether accessed via desktop, tablet version or smartphone, iRESERVE's functionality is identical. iRESERVE validates users to ensure the person reserving the amenity should have access but prevents the properties from having to maintain a separate resident roster. Students make their reservations through iRESERVE and have the ability to change or delete the information if their plans change.

From the first quarter of 2011 to the first quarter of 2012, EdR saw a 163% increase in the number of people using mobile devices to access our property websites. At University Towers, Google Analytics statistics show 11,251 "hits" via mobile devices and 4,635 reservations for amenities made through iReserve.

Portfolio-wide, 20,000 reservations have been made via iReserve, representing significant time-savings for staff and demonstrating that students have embraced the technology.

The metrics also demonstrate that users are having a quality experience with the mobile websites since they average three to five minutes per visit.

Summary of Results

In addition to labor-reduction in terms of time and money, the mobile websites offer the benefits of speeding EdR's message to its target audience as well as representing a savings over the cost of advertisements.

Return on investment increases whenever a student spends time on these mobile websites. These sites also represent an edge over competitors in the marketplace since they offer full-website capabilities and functionality. There are no cut corners from the full desktop website.

These websites also demonstrate EdR keen interest in connecting with our residents and their every need. The sophistication of the mobile websites also sends the message that EdR is tech-savvy and responsive and will attend to the students' technological needs, especially Wi-Fi capability and sufficient bandwidth for these heavy users of internet-based services.