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Develop a Tenant Handbook

Keeping your tenants informed of building rules and regulations will heighten your efficiency and operations. Make sure your tenant handbooks are accessible and regularly updated.

By Janet Liao



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If your tenants can't easily find information about your building guidelines, chances are, it will make your job as a property owner or manager a lot harder. "Usually, the person that we do an orientation with is the office manager and not the person who signed the lease, and he or she is not aware of the rules and regulations attached to that lease agreement," says Alfreda Green, property manager at Urban Innovations, a Chicago-based property management firm specializing in commercial loft space. Providing a handbook containing basic building information and rules helps facilitate communication among you, your tenants, and their employees to help you better manage your properties.

Break It Down

Tenant handbooks take on a variety of formats—from traditional printed versions to interactive, online handbooks. Regardless of the format you choose, be sure to clearly spell out your policies so that your tenants better understand the terms of their lease.

Don't assume that just because the information is listed in the lease, the tenant will automatically understand it. "A tenant handbook explains the tenant's basic duties in common terms, as opposed to the legal language contained in the tenant's lease," says Zachary Schorr, an attorney at Schorr Law, Los Angeles, Calif.

"A tenant handbook must be precise and easy to understand," says Ken Cleaveland, director of government and public affairs for the Building Owners and Managers Association of San Francisco. Cleaveland suggests organizing the handbook into sections, such as building operation and hours, moving and delivery guidelines, buildings services and facilities, maintenance requests, elevator service, parking, mail, etc.

Urban Innovations divides its tenant handbooks into three sections: general building information, tenant services and emergency procedures. To make sure that new tenants understand the policies, the company requires a face-to-face meeting to discuss rules and procedures prior to move-in, Green says.

Organizing the handbook into clearly defined sections makes it easier for tenants to find the specific information they need. For example, an office manager will need to know building codes, key personnel contacts, building services and protocols for submitting maintenance and service requests, while other employees will need information on emergency procedures, Green says.

Keep it Updated

Keeping handbooks updated will not only save your tenants the time of having to contact you every time they have a question, it also saves you the time of having to answer basic questions over and over again. Staying on top of building codes and making any necessary updates to emergency procedures is also important for the safety of your tenants.

"In almost every state, building codes change every three years and that's when you'll need a complete review of your handbook," Cleaveland says. Make sure that your current policies are code compliant, and that you update building codes accordingly, especially fire and life safety codes.

Green agrees that the most crucial information in a tenant handbook is the emergency procedures and evacuation maps. "Tenants need to be reminded of what to do in the event of an emergency," she says. "The tenant is responsible for the safety of its employees and they need to know how to react properly and to safely evacuate the building."

Take It Online

Web-based applications can make updating and distributing information even easier, as phone numbers, e-mails and building personnel information can change often. "As information changes rapidly, keeping handbooks up-to-date and disturbing print copies can be burdensome, costly, wasteful and inefficient," says Ian E. O'Neil, a founding principal of Electronic Tenant Handbooks in Washington D.C., a company that creates and licenses the Electronic Tenant Handbook, and related functionality, web-based "software as a service" that enables property managers to publish and manage handbooks online.

"We used to give out a very large binder of about 40 to 50 pages, but a week later, tenants wouldn't know where it was," Green says.

Today, Urban Innovations make its tenant handbooks available on its Web site to download as in PDF format. "Tenants can refer to our Web site and look at the handbook on an as need basis," Green says.

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