

Social media for managing property customers

Delivering an environment in which customers can interact seamlessly with the online world provides for better investment outcomes, writes GRAHAM LAUREN.

Post Facebook, everybody now knows how to use social media to write online, upload and share material and to make comments about items uploaded by others. Our new proficiency in using this form of shared online communication can be described as mass 'internet social literacy'.

When captured on mirroring private internal corporate workplace social technologies, those documented thoughts, ideas, opinions and wishes can be summarised and acted on.

Using it, companies can find better ways of doing pretty much anything.

As those skills are now found in every employee in every company and, in turn, every customer of each of those businesses, this is especially important in property.

People have a closer relationship to the places in which they work and live than with any other product but, in them, they are also captive audiences experiencing the product.

So, whether for home or work, the best-fitting premises, and, therefore, most likely the best investment, will generally be one that provides positive user feeling, comfort and utility.

In a fully connected world, how property providers deliver this is key to sustained product quality, productivity and reputation.

And even where it is not directly and

obviously present, the influence of people's use of social media is changing customer expectations, with implications for the product and the property expertise required to deliver it.

THE CUSTOMER

The massive societal shift precipitated by people's increasing comfort in expressing themselves online isn't lost on those property types swept up in it.

Melinda van der Westhuizen, ISPT general manager commercial services, says, "I had a conversation with colleagues an hour ago, in a business meeting, and something we'd all simultaneously seen on LinkedIn came up.

"So, the new customer just looks like society to me. In addition to face-to-face, that's how the users of our buildings, and our community, are connecting."

Louise Monger, AMP Capital's head of property management, office and industrial, says, according to its research, "In the shift between now and 2025, with four generations now in the workforce, our challenge is that many would rate their experience with technology in the home or on their personal device significantly more highly than in the workplace."

Van der Westhuizen says coming from regional shopping centre management and completing an MBA since, her instincts are innately customer-centric.

"I studied organisational behaviour and have done a lot of change management in the organisations I've worked in, so I start with human beings.

"Embracing the customer-centred approach to decision-making and building design and operation is what makes an office so exciting. Everyone has to be part of the solution. You don't start by writing their plan yourself."

The responsibility and focus of Graeme Scannell, head of workplace experience at accounting software provider MYOB on its single-organisation workplace, provides another perspective.

He says, "I guarantee 100 percent of our staff have touched social media in some way at least three or four times each by the time

they turn up in the office."

He also sees close up another side effect of the workplace social influence of the internet.

"I'm not saying we are there yet, as a company, or as an industry, but the gig economy is gaining a lot of ground and a lot of growth, where people may have three or four jobs in the future at the same time, even though they may operate in a client environment.

"They may come in for one project, but be working on two. Over time, there will be a move more towards that gig economy."

This is not lost on ISPT's van der Westhuizen.

THE WORKPLACE PRODUCT OFFERING

As a landlord, van der Westhuizen is responsible nationally for 31 assets and \$8 billion worth of offices.

She says, "What I love in the property industry, when it all ticks along, is the ability to influence overall results and portfolio-wide initiatives and to have a keen and motivated group of people working towards a common goal.

"I think there's never been a better time to start with the customer to improve how you design your buildings and how they interact within a community.

"In that way, co-working has really assisted this sector. I really think it has helped the language change from space to work points. The conversations we're having with our customers are not so much 'how many square metres do you want?' but 'how many work points do you want in this building?'"

With both large retail and office portfolios, she says, "ISPT's roots are really entwined in the customer from day one, so this has not been a difficult transition for us.

And the closer you are to customers, the better you will retain them, which is what it's all about".

RESIDENTIAL

How internet social literacy works in residential property marketing, however, is different, explains chief executive of home

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People have a closer relationship to the places in which they work and live than with any other product but, in them, they are also captive audiences experiencing the product.

builder Aqualand, John Carfi. "I don't think there's any customer who gets out of bed nowadays without checking real estate information, but housing is very different to every other property commodity.

"For most people, it's the single most important purchase they're going to make. Fundamentally, they're most attracted to location.

"Then, if you add up the long list of what they want to buy, they can't afford it."

Post-occupancy, he concedes these new social technologies offer the opportunity for response he's never had before.

"All that feedback is fantastic. But you have to be careful about responding to a market trend right now that may not be so popular in three to five years."

In the light of the two big problems revealing themselves in collapsing apartment blocks at Sydney's Homebush and Mascot, taking steps to engage the socially internet literate customer demonstrates commitment also to the long-term quality of your product, to the benefit of buyers.

Johnny Daher, founder of Parramatta apartment developer Developcorp, says, "If you do not move with the times, there is no way you will survive without using the latest technology to do this."

But as much as internet social literacy offers in monitoring trends, there are still some problems it can't fix, such as, Carfi says, understanding, "Why didn't you buy our product?"

THE EXPERTISE AND CHANGING PRACTITIONER CAPABILITY

Previously, in the January 2017 issue of FM, we suggested that new influences in building design, technology and new ways of working would force evolution in FM roles.

Now, the influence of internet social literacy seems to be accelerating the creation of a new breed of FM practitioner.

In a one-company set up, Scannell is a perfect example. "I'm part of something called employee experience. I think any company's opportunity is about people. But my background is really in the physical."

At even the multi-workplace provider scale, it is bringing to property the language of change management and human resources, with discussions of organisational well-being and culture now a norm, it seems.

Monger says, "The challenge is twofold. In building Quay Quarter Tower in Sydney, we're looking at how we can have a seamless technology experience that will really enhance the customer experience, as those who can meet user expectations will certainly offer differentiation when it comes to attracting talent.

"But what we've seen over the last probably five years – enhanced by the addition of flexible workspaces that we've introduced – is a significant change in the way landlords create communities within a building."

She also believes the facility management profession will evolve over the next decade, driving efficiency by automating technical services and redeploying much of the saving into customer experience.

However, she says, "It's not impossible, but it's very difficult currently to find people that have great technical skill, who can also really play that customer service role.

Meanwhile, van der Westhuizen says, "Property has always been a fixed cost, historically. A commitment was really made longer term, because that tended to suit the landlord.

"But this is very much a changing space now, where we are all focused on future trends, and it's not so much a property conversation. So, if a customer wants to talk about how many work points they need, versus how many square metres, we need to start talking to them in terms of work points.

"And I think the more we engage and listen, so that we're thinking the same way with the uses of our buildings, of course, it's going to result in a more satisfying, bespoke environment.

"I don't think it's impossible to retrain your ear. But, ultimately, if you stick with the premise of starting with customer service, you can't go wrong, and there will be choice."

But, she says, "I don't think generic space has a place going forward."●

→ *Graham Lauren, director of Shiro Architects, is developing a specialist internet social literacy briefing practice.*