Craigslist's Changes
What to Do?

Craig's changed his site, and apartment marketers must take note.

BY BILL SZCZYTKO

Competition for Craigslist

Apartment List, a digital platform for apartment renters, raised $15 million in venture financing as it aims to compete with Craigslist and carve out a new forum for apartment seekers, reported Forbes last month. Just two years old, the site has 1.5 million U.S. visitors each month and currently has the most listings in 72 of the top 100 markets.

We've been playing games with a free service. At the end of September, the apartment industry joked internally about the changes coming to Craigslist. We didn't actually know what they were going to be, only that they were coming. October seems to be the Craigslist month of doom. Last year, it was the "Great Ghosting Ruckus" that caused leads to vanish into a black hole of ads. Our leads dropped by half. This year, Craig and his team worked hard on finding new ways to take their service back from us freeloaders. Surprised about the Craigslist changes? Don't be.

We shouldn't have been surprised. Over the years, we've violated the Craigslist Terms of Service like Miley violated our sense of decency. We've done it to improve our vacancy. Miley did it to sell records. Some will claim to have behaved while posting, but most of us posted too often, used posting tools, regurgitated the same content, used too many capital letters and linked to external contact forms. We've been naughty.

The sledgehammer dropped, again. What makes this year's round of face slapping more difficult is we are still reeling from Google taking away our ability to track keywords. In the office, when asked for an answer to a question, I've lately been responding by "not providing," as Craigslist likes to say. We slyly thought our posting tools wouldn't let us down too. We could still track our ad views on Craigslist—there Mr. Google!—until we couldn't.

External links are dead. You can no longer post live links to your website or external contact forms. You can include a link but you will not be able to click on it. With some verbiage (Don't forget to copy and paste for more info!), you can still nudge people to do a call for action. It's uglier though, and mobile users will probably be more reluctant to do it. You ever try copying and pasting on an iPad? It's annoying.

No more external images. The days of the template are gone. Sorry everyone, but those beautiful yellow banners with brown backgrounds and purple fonts that you have cherished were replaced by white backgrounds and black text. Mr. Craig has removed your ability to include that fancy HTML code which could transform your post into something beautiful (Another good question: Is calling a Craigslist ad beautiful an oxymoron? Another blog post maybe). One workaround I have seen is to convert your pretty ad template into an image and upload that to Craigslist. Not the best solution, but better than boring.

View tracking is gone. The biggest thing posting tools have always helped with is your ability to find out if an ad has worked. Was the title effective? Is posting at 4 p.m. better than posting at 11 a.m.? Right now, it's impossible to embed any tracking code into an ad because it gets stripped. And that's not a Miley reference. What this means is you can no longer determine if your ad has been viewed. Except for when your phone rings and they say, "That ad on Craigslist." Then you'll know.
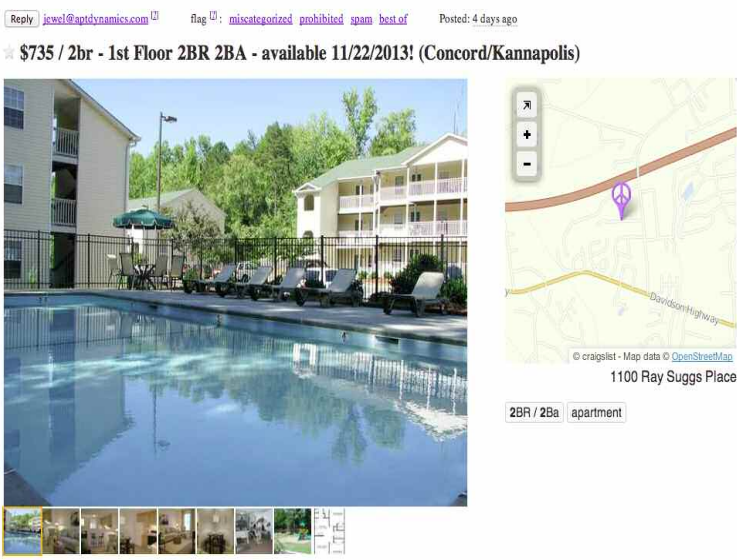
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Making New Craigslist Rules Work for You

Oh my! Craigslist no longer supports VFlyer, Smore or Postlets! RATS! But you are still in good shape: In a no-flier world, effective photos and creative content will be what differentiates your post on Craigslist! Here how:

Use short, creative headlines!

- Live here & have more free time!
- Fido's welcome!
- Tweet this Apartment Home!
- Need closets? Lots in this apartment home!
- One of a Kind 2BR! Ideal Roommate Layout!
- Walk to work, shopping & more!
- Go ahead… be Moved.
- Delight yourself here!
- Walk or bike to XX from here!
- Brand new appliances!
- No neighbors above you!
- 1st floor available soon! Reserve it today!
- 2BR 2 Full Baths—Move In TODAY!
- Live Connected… Live at ___ Apartments!
- Charming 1BD Close to UNC! Stop by TODAY!
- Brand New, Wooded View, F2 is JUST FOR YOU!

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Write good content.

Many Craigslist listings include the phrases "free rent," "specials," "FREE" or "discount" in the headline. Those are poor word choices—and are discouraged—because they increase the number of spam/fake responses you receive. Write a specific "listing" that focuses on the special features for one particular address and include property pictures.

Show your best photos first.

Use images shot professionally and/or take a few "fresh" ones with your smartphone.

Ask which ad they saw.

When asking prospective residents how they heard about your community, the response "Craigslist" should no longer be accepted as a suitable answer, Justin Coleman of C.L.A.S.S. writes. Follow-up and ask prospects if there was a particular ad they remember seeing. Was there possibly a headline title that stood out that grabbed their attention, or was the font unique and that is what drew their eyes to your ad? By determining the exact ad seen, marketers are able to identify which wording piqued interest and what time of the day the ad was viewed, Coleman adds.

One more thing.

Whenever I post ads with new content, I copy the content onto an ever-growing Word document. This document enables me to capture all ads I've done. This helps, because if I happen to be having a dry, uncreative day, I can recycle an ad from the master document and tweak it slightly to fit my current availability at that moment. It's a time-saver, because now I don't have to start from scratch with each listing.

If you are getting leases from Craigslist—keep posting! Just find new ways to follow their rules!

—*Mary Gwyn, Apartment Dynamics, posted on NAA Connect*

Still More Advice: Craiglist's New Rules

Practically every Craigslist template ever written can now be put through the shredder. Many of the most commonly-used HTML tags in Craigslist have now been disallowed. This includes images, tables, most text mark-up and anything but the most bare-bones of links.

By obliterating all hyperlinks, Craigslist is now officially a member of the pre-1995 Web, writes Peter Schuh of Chicago-based ShowMojo.com.

Schuh aims to explain what the new rules on Craigslist mean to its users by offering this operational advice.

Craigslist photo gallery. When selecting photos to upload, use the Control key (Command key on the Mac) to select all the photos you want to upload in one go.

Raising the bar for readability. Your template and over-sized photos will no longer carry the day. Because of aesthetic limitations brought on by the new rules, prospective residents are now going to have to scroll page after page of mind-numbing text. So structure yours for an easy and quick read, with the most important items first.

Details matter more. Phrases such as ''laundry onsite,'' ''dishwasher'' and ''two blocks from Starbucks'' will help to carry the day.

Clear call to action. This strategy is now a force-multiplier. Again, the inspired and inspiring templates with sweeping views of the community are gone.

Let's break up. Break up your listing into short paragraphs, using headers, bullets, numbering, bolded text and italics to make your ad easier to look at and consume. No one wants to simply see a wall of text, writes Brandon Turner, Senior Editor of BiggerPockets.com.

Make your brand stand out. Your brand and logo are no longer going to be able to be shown, at least in photo form. Instead, be sure to use your company name often and bold it whenever possible. Simply surround your with tags to make your text bold (i.e., (text here)).

Host your own listings. If you don't have your own website, create one for your listings. Although you can't included a clickable link to your website, people can still type in your website name and visit your site. This way, you can include more photos of the property, videos, or other cool features.

Bang your head against the wall. The largest frustration with the change comes from a lack of communication from Craigslist, writes Turner.

Craigslist has offered no explanation or details on what they did, how many people it has affected or what their plans are for the future.

There is speculation that this change may be a lead up to additional monetizing strategies from Craigslist, though no proof has been received on that note, Turner writes.

The recent changes are yet another example in a long line of attempts from Craigslist to stifle progress and collaboration, says Blake Pierson, CEO, Lovely. ''The changes to HTML postings may be driven by a desire to level the playing field for all those posting to Craigslist, at best, however it's our belief that responding to demonstrated customer desire by hindering innovation is not the best approach for the industry at large,'' Pierson says. ''As a result of Craigslist's decisions, alternative listings tools have seen increased traffic and popularity among owners and renters looking for a more robust search experience.''

Analyze posting data. While it is unfortunate that Craigslist has disabled view tracking, it makes listening to the available metrics even more important, says Shawn Donald, WebListers.

View tracking is only one of many available metrics. One thing remains constant: Craigslist will change and posting strategies will need to adapt.

Staying atop of what works best on Craigslist can be a daunting task, especially when keeping entire teams apprised of the best strategies. By using a service that analyzes posting behavior and patterns it can not only ensure your ads are live and working, but it can make sure you have the most up-to-date and effective posting strategy.