FORTHEA

MULTIFAMILY MARKETING

2026

MULTIFAMILY MARKETING TRENDS REPORT

The 2026 Shift: How AI-Leasing, Video, SEO, and Paid Media are Driving Multifamily Marketing

Q2 2026

Contents

ABOUT FORTHEA

The Forthea-sourced insights in this report are grounded in one of the most industry-specific first-party data sets in multifamily digital marketing, built over 20 years of active campaign management across 600+ properties, with several client relationships spanning more than a decade of continuous leasing data. That long-term presence across hundreds of properties, markets, and leasing cycles gives a clear view of what moves the needle in multifamily marketing, patterns that only become visible at scale and over time.

SECTION 01

Executive Summary

Multifamily Marketing Trends Report 2026

PAGE AT A GLANCE — EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Multifamily marketing has entered a performance-gap era where operators with diversified digital marketing programs are outleasing competitors on both cost and speed.
- ILS remains the most-used channel. SEO delivers an 11x lower cost per lease than ILS but is subject to a volume ceiling tied to brand search demand. The goal is reducing ILS dependence, not eliminating it.
- Video is #1 for lead quality, conversion, and applications across every major industry survey.
- AI-powered leasing automation cuts response time from hours to minutes, recovering leads that would otherwise be lost to faster competitors.
- 98% of renters start their search online; 19% now sign a lease without ever touring in person.
- PPC generates signed leases at $663 to $1,166 per lease versus $980 to $2,149 for Apartments.com. An extra month of concession on a $1,700 unit costs more than an entire month of paid search spend at most properties. Operators who know their cost per lease by channel can deliberate between spending on paid media and offering rent-free terms.

Multifamily marketing is dividing into two tiers. Operators who run integrated digital programs that combine video, AI leasing, organic search, paid media, and first-party data infrastructure consistently outperform competitors on cost per lease, leasing velocity, and resident retention. Those still relying on a single ILS channel and manual leasing workflows are paying more per lease and falling behind.

This report is built for multifamily executives responsible for driving leasing performance and defending budget decisions to ownership. It draws on a curated collection of the most current industry research (IBISWorld, SatisFacts), studies conducted by industry suppliers (Yardi, Apartments.com, EliseAI, J.Turner Research), and Forthea's own first-party data gathered across 20 years of digital campaign management in multifamily.

Each section covers the channels and technologies that matter most to leasing performance today. Industry research sets the benchmark. Forthea portfolio data shows what those benchmarks look like in practice. This report gives marketing leaders a clear, honest picture of where investment is generating returns and where it is not.

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

Multifamily is entering a two-speed market. Operators implementing AI-driven leasing, integrated data infrastructure, and diversified digital channels are pulling measurably ahead on cost-per-lease and retention. Those still dependent on ILS and manual response workflows face disadvantages as renter expectations continue to accelerate.

Key Findings

The renter journey has fundamentally changed. Renters are making decisions online before they ever contact a leasing office, and 19% now sign leases without ever touring in person. The property website, organic search visibility, paid media presence, and online reputation have collectively become the leasing office for a growing share of the market.

Channel economics are shifting in ways most operators are not tracking. Multi-year lease attribution modeling shows PPC generates signed leases at $663 to $1,166 per lease, compared to $980 to $2,149 for Apartments.com. ILS costs rose 119% over a three-year analysis period, while PPC costs rose 76%, and the gap continues to widen. Paid social generated leases at $68 to $119 per lease, though at modest volume, which makes it an efficient incremental source rather than a primary leasing driver.

AI is no longer a future consideration. Properties using AI leasing report a 46% tour conversion rate compared to 19% without it. AI referral traffic to apartment websites has grown dramatically over the past 12 months. Analysis shows that organic search maturity directly predicts AI referral traffic volume. The content infrastructure built for traditional SEO is the same infrastructure that earns visibility in ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews.

Paid media is an asset protection tool, not just a marketing line item. An extra month of concession on a $1,700 unit permanently removes $1,700 from the rent roll, thereby compressing NOI, cap rate, and asset valuation. A signed lease generated through paid search at $663 to $1,166 produces the same occupancy outcome at a fraction of the cost and at full asking rent. For properties approaching a sale or refinance, this is a capital strategy decision.

What follows is a section-by-section breakdown of the market, the channels, the technology, and the data, with enough specificity to support budget conversations, vendor evaluations, and strategic planning at every level of a marketing organization.

34% U.S. apartment rental industry profit margin above-GDP revenue growth with low volatility (IBISWorld, February 2026)

98% of apartment searchers use online resources; 20% use online sources exclusively (Criterion B, 2025 data)

73% of renters visited an ILS such as Apartments.com or Rent. in their most recent apartment search (Zego/AppFolio research)

68% of multifamily marketers currently use an ILS as their primary paid channel (Apartments.com Survey, n=18,000+ communities)

9.5% average lead-to-lease conversion rate for organic SEO traffic vs. 2.0% for ILS traffic an 11x cost-per-lease differential (Yardi)

46% of multifamily marketers rank video marketing as the #1 driver of both high-quality leads and conversions (Apartments.com Industry Survey)

19% of recent renters signed a lease without ever touring in person up from near-zero pre-pandemic (Zillow Rental Consumer Housing Trends Report)

SECTION 01

Market Context

The Market Backdrop: Why Marketing Matters More than Ever

After absorbing one of the largest waves of new supply in a generation, the multifamily sector is transitioning from a developer's market to an operator's market. Rent growth is stabilizing, vacancy is normalizing, and the cost of a lost lease has never been higher. Marketing precision is now a direct driver of NOI.

The Renter Decision Journey Has Fundamentally Changed

The old model of advertising awareness to tour-to-lease is now compressed and digitized. Zillow's rental consumer research found that in 2018, 16% of renters took five or more in-person tours. By 2024, only 9% did, and the typical renter now takes just one. One in five people never tours at all before signing. The implication is that digital presence, including photos, video, virtual tours, reviews, and floor plan pages, is increasingly your primary leasing office.

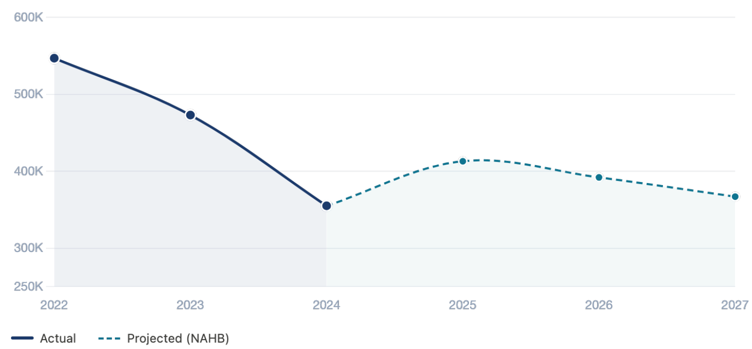
As Supply Evens Out, Performance Gaps Widen

New apartment construction has slowed significantly from its peak of 547,000 starts in 2022, falling to approximately 234,900 market-rate starts in the 12 months through Q3 2025. The lowest volume in over a decade. The market is rebalancing as a result (NAHB, February 2026; Viking Capital 2025 Market Recap).

Looking ahead, CBRE forecasts average multifamily rents growing at 3.1% annually over the next five years, above the historical average of 2.7%. This forecast will favor operators with strong retention and consistent digital visibility (CBRE U.S. Real Estate Market Outlook, 2025).

Multifamily construction starts (buildings with 5+ units, 000s of units)

2022 peak	2024 actual	Decline from peak
547K	355K	–35%



Sources: NAHB (February 2026); CRE Daily. 2023 estimated from NAHB's reported 25% year-over-year decline in 2024. 2025–2027 are NAHB projections as of February 2026.

Demand Remains Intact

The cost gap between buying and renting is a central driver of demand. Average newly originated mortgage payments have run 35% above average apartment rents, keeping a significant share of would-be buyers in the rental market.

The primary renter cohort, Americans between the ages of 20 and 34, numbered approximately 68 million as of the most recent Census data, with projections showing that cohort growing by more than 670,000 through the early 2030s.

The average U.S. renter now allocates 30% of income to rent, reflecting years in which rent growth outpaced wage gains. That cost burden has not pushed renters into homeownership. Elevated mortgage rates and tight credit have made the path inaccessible for many households. At the same time, national rental vacancy reached 7.1% at the end of Q3 2025, up from 5.6% at the end of 2021. This normalization gives renters more options and increases the competitive pressure on operators to market and retain more effectively.

$1,741 Average U.S. asking rent as of early 2026, rebounding after five consecutive months of softness (Yardi Matrix)

35% Premium to buy vs. rent nationally, sustaining renter demand (CBRE)

30% Share of income the average U.S. renter pays in rent, reflecting years in which rent growth outpaced wage gains

7.1% National rental vacancy rate at end of Q3 2025 up from 5.6% at end of 2021, increasing competitive pressure on operators

35% of renters cite building amenities (gym, business center, lounge) as a deciding factor when choosing a rental property (Zillow 2025 Housing Trends Report)

55.1% Multifamily retention rate in the most recent measured quarter up from 54.6% the prior year and well above the 50.7% pre-pandemic decade average (RealPage)

SECTION 02

SEO & AEO

The Highest-Converting Channels in Multifamily

PAGE AT A GLANCE — SEO + AEO/GEO

- SEO delivers the highest conversion rate of any channel with 9.5% lead-to-lease at $87 cost-per-lease vs $1,005 for ILS.
- AI Overviews now appear in 34% of real estate searches. AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) is no longer optional for forward-looking SEO strategies.
- Google Business Profile management, schema markup, and review consistency are the three fastest local SEO wins for most communities.
- Major ILS platforms dominate competitive search terms via massive backlink authority. Floor plan pages and neighborhood content are the best counter-strategy.

Among digital traffic sources, organic search often delivers the highest return in multifamily marketing. It is also the most misunderstood as it's underinvested when budgets are tight and the first to show compounding returns once it gains traction.

The SEO Landscape

Yardi's study of 979 apartment communities shows that organic search converts at 9.5%, with a cost per lease of $87, compared to ILS platforms, which average 2.0% conversion at $1,005 per lease. It's not clear if the $87 includes agency fees, engineering costs, or brand-keyword bid floor needed to defend it.

This research signals that organic search delivers an 11x lower cost per lease but is constrained by a volume ceiling tied to brand and category demand. The goal is reducing ILS dependence, not eliminating it.

SEO compounds over time as organic rankings build authority. The constraint is the timeline. Organic search optimization takes six to nine months to build meaningfully. Operators who began investing in SEO in 2024 and 2025 are now capturing that return. Those who deferred the investment continue paying only through ILS.

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What Sustained SEO Investment Delivers: A Three-Portfolio Analysis

Trailing 12 months, 2025–2026

Forthea's analysis of organic search performance across three client portfolios shows what a managed SEO program delivers against the multifamily industry benchmark for organic lead conversion rate. All three portfolios outperform the benchmark.

	Portfolio A	Portfolio B	Portfolio C	Industry Benchmark
Portfolio size	39	27	17	—
SEO program tenure	5+ yrs	2 yrs	12mos	—
Organic lead conversion rate	20.0%	11.2%	7.0%	3.4%
YoY page 1 keyword growth	+77.5%	+135%	+87.5%	—
Total non-brand keywords	6,945	4,513	4,417	—

Organic lead conversion rate reflects GA4 event completions including applications submitted, tour scheduling, contact form submissions, and inbound phone calls divided by total organic sessions. This measures website-level lead generation, not lease conversion. All data retrieved from BrightEdge organic analytics platform.

The variance across portfolios reflects tenure. **Portfolio A** has maintained a sustained SEO program reflecting the compounding return of long-term investment in domain authority, content depth, and technical infrastructure. **Portfolio B** is showing strong gains in year two when optimizations accelerate. **Portfolio C** is a newer engagement, consistent with the visibility gains available early in a structured SEO program when opportunity is highest.

What the First 90 Days of SEO Investment Can Look Like

January through March 2026 | 38 properties | New SEO program

Portfolio D partnered with Forthea in Dec 2025 with an organic lead conversion rate of 2.0%, below the 3.4% multifamily industry benchmark. Within 90 days of structured SEO optimization, the portfolio crossed the benchmark for the first time.

Metric	No SEO	90 Days SEO
Organic lead conversion rate	2.0%	3.5%
Industry benchmark	3.4%	3.4%
Avg monthly organic sessions per property	1,843	2,160
Properties in portfolio	38	38

The conversion improvement from 2.0% to 3.5% in 90 days reflects the fastest-moving elements of an SEO program. Average monthly organic sessions per property increased 17% over the same period, meaning more traffic arrived and converted at a higher rate simultaneously.

The compounding returns visible in Portfolio A (20.0% CVR after 5+ years) and Portfolio B (11.2% after 2 years) start here. The first 90 days establish the technical and structural foundation that every subsequent month builds on.

The ILS Competition and How to Win

Major ILS platforms hold massive backlink profiles accumulated over decades of optimization, allowing them to dominate Google page-one results for high-intent apartment search terms.

This is not a challenge for multifamily websites that can be solved with SEO content alone. It requires a disciplined, multi-layered approach. Each element below builds toward stronger organic visibility and AI search presence.

- **Floor plan page optimization:** Generic descriptions like 'spacious floorplan available' no longer hold ranking position. Winning floor plan pages include specific features (quartz countertops, walk-in closets, smart home access), emotional hooks (proximity to parks, pet-friendly perks), and targeted long-tail keyword integration. These pages are where renters make shortlist decisions and where ILS platforms are most beatable.
- **Google Business Profile (GBP) dominance:** GBP is the front door for local apartment searches. Treat it as a live social channel with weekly posts, photo updates, Q&A management, and proactive review solicitation.
- **Schema markup and structured data:** Implementing apartment schema (including pricing, availability, amenity data, and social profile links) tells Google and AI exactly what your community offers, improving both traditional ranking and AI Overview inclusion.
- **Topical authority content:** Neighborhood guides, renter FAQ pages, local employer and commute content, and moving tips build the signals that Google's ranking model rewards. This content also serves as the primary source material for AI answers.
- **ILS listing consistency:** Mismatched property names, addresses, phone numbers, or amenity data across ILS platforms, Google, Yelp, and Facebook are a direct ranking penalty. Consistency across all data sources is a foundational requirement for SEO.

Answer Engine Optimization (AEO): The Next Frontier

The search landscape is shifting in ways that require a strategic response. AI-powered answer engines are becoming a meaningful part of how renters discover apartment communities. Google's AI Overviews now appear in 34% of real estate searches per Advanced Web Ranking, up from near zero in mid-2024. Platforms like Claude, Copilot, and ChatGPT's browsing capabilities are gaining adoption among younger renters who prefer conversational search experiences.

According to BrightEdge, AI search currently drives less than 1% of referral traffic, yet Ahrefs' data shows visitors from AI platforms convert at 23x higher rates than from traditional search.

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

The operators making the highest-ROI marketing investment right now are those building SEO and AEO programs that reduce long-term dependence on ILS spend. At $87 per lease versus $1,005, the math makes the case.

What AEO Requires in Practice

AEO isn't a new strategy that replaces SEO. It's the next layer. What helps you rank in search also helps AI engines surface your property in their answers.

- **Structured, question-and-answer content:** AI systems prefer content that directly answers specific renter questions. Pages organized around 'What is the pet policy at [community]?' or 'What is included in rent at [community]?' are more likely to be surfaced in AI answers than unstructured property descriptions.
- **Schema markup for AI readability:** Structured data makes property information machine-readable, enabling AI engines to confidently include community details in generated responses.
- **Fee transparency content:** Renter frustration over hidden fees is one of the most-searched topics in apartment discovery. Communities that publish clear, specific fee information are both legally better positioned and more likely to be featured in AI answers.
- **Multi-platform optimization:** Optimizing for Bing and Claude alongside Google diversifies AI visibility. Bing's ChatGPT integration specifically draws from Bing-indexed content, making Bing SEO meaningful for the first time in a decade.
- **Social media:** As of mid-2025, Google began indexing social posts. An active, community-specific social content strategy now contributes directly to organic search visibility, not just social engagement.

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AI Referral Traffic Across Managed Properties: A First Look at an Emerging Channel

Trailing 12 months, 2025–2026 | A subset of Forthea's multifamily portfolio

No published benchmark exists for AI referral traffic to multifamily apartment websites. The data below is drawn from 123 properties across four client portfolios. It is a representative sample from Forthea's broader management of 600+ multifamily properties and one of the first systematic analyses of this channel at the portfolio level.

Portfolio	Properties	AI Sessions (T12 mos)	Avg Per Property
Portfolio A (5+ yrs SEO)	39	8,557	219
Portfolio B (2 yrs SEO)	27	1,797	106
Portfolio C (12 mo SEO)	17	2,144	79
Portfolio D (3 mo SEO)	40	3,046	76
Combined	123	15,544	126

The pattern is consistent. Properties with longer SEO program tenure receive nearly 3x more AI referral traffic per property than newer programs. The content infrastructure built for traditional organic search covers topical authority, structured data, floor plan page depth, and neighborhood content. It is the same infrastructure AI engines draw from when generating apartment recommendations.

These figures are a floor, not a ceiling. A meaningful share of AI-driven visits arrive without referrer data and are misclassified as direct traffic in standard analytics, meaning actual AI traffic across these portfolios is higher than what is captured here.

The operators investing in content depth and AEO infrastructure today are building the asset that determines AI search visibility tomorrow.

SECTION 03

Paid Media

Building a Full-Funnel Strategy that Converts

PAGE AT A GLANCE — PAID MEDIA

- Paid search (PPC) captures renters at peak intent the moment they search 'apartments near me.' It is the fastest lead source and essential for lease-ups.
- Video ranks #1 for lead quality (46%), conversion (46%), and applications (49%) in every industry survey.
- Meta (Facebook + Instagram) dominates renter social media and paid social builds awareness and demand before renters enter active search.
- Geofencing is now being adopted by 40%+ of operators for the first time with hyperlocal targeting of competitor-visiting renters at low CPMs.
- A full-funnel paid strategy aligns each channel to a specific stage: Awareness (social/video) → Consideration (display/retargeting) → Conversion (PPC/ILS).
- 37% of marketers cite PPC as a top driver of high-quality leads; 38% credit it with driving applications (Apartments.com, 2024 survey).

Paid media in multifamily has historically been synonymous with ILS spending. Operators generating the best cost-per-lease run integrated, full-funnel campaigns that match each channel to a specific stage of the leasing journey.

IBISWorld's 2026 financial benchmarks show that the multifamily industry spends just 1.2% of revenue on marketing, below the broader real estate sector average of 1.43%. In a high-margin sector, this is one of the most underinvested line items relative to its potential revenue impact.

Multifamily operators who treat marketing as a strategic cost center rather than a fixed overhead item are capturing leasing performance that their peers are leaving behind.

Full-Funnel Paid Media Architecture

Funnel Stage	Primary Channels	Strategic Role
Awareness	Paid Social (Meta, TikTok), YouTube pre-roll, Display	Build brand recognition with in-market renters before active search begins
Consideration	Retargeting display, video tours, geofencing	Re-engage prospects who have shown initial interest; introduce specific unit types
Conversion	Paid Search (PPC), ILS Featured Listings	Capture high-intent searchers; drive tour bookings and applications
Retention	Email automation, resident social content	Reduce turnover; turn residents into referral and review sources

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Paid Search vs. ILS: What a Multi-Year Cost-Per-Lease Analysis Actually Shows

Multi-year marketing mix model analysis | 85-91% attribution accuracy

Most multifamily operators evaluate paid search and ILS spending separately, optimizing each in isolation. Marketing mix modeling attributes signed leases back to every channel simultaneously using regression analysis and tells a different story when examined across multiple years and dozens of properties.

Metric	PPC vs Apartments.com	PPC vs Zillow
PPC outperforms in	74–83% of properties	86–96% of properties
PPC cost advantage	32–46% lower cost per lease	46–83% lower cost per lease
PPC cost per lease range	$663–$1,166	$663–$1,166
ILS cost per lease range	$980–$2,149	$1,558–$1,962

Based on multi-year lease attribution modeling. Cost per lease reflects actual move-ins, not website conversions or leads.

Two findings stand out from the multi-year data. First, the paid media environment is getting more expensive across every channel. PPC cost per lease increased 76% over a three-year analysis period. Apartments.com increased 119%. Zillow increased 15%. There is no scenario where paid media gets cheaper. Operators who are not measuring cost per lease by channel are making budget decisions without knowing whether their spend is keeping pace with rising costs or falling behind.

Second, the PPC advantage over ILS is widening even as both get more expensive. PPC was 32% cheaper per lease than Apartments.com at the start of the three-year analysis period. By the end it was 46% cheaper. The gap grew because ILS costs rose faster than PPC costs. Operators who recognized this trend early and reallocated budget accordingly have a structural cost advantage that compounds over time.

The controllability option. PPC is a digital channel where budget can be increased today and generate additional leases this month. Organic search (SEO) compounds over months. ILS packages are fixed commitments. When a property needs to accelerate leasing velocity, whether to hit an occupancy target, respond to a concession-heavy competitor, or prepare for a sale, paid search is the lever that moves fast enough to matter when impressions are limited due to budget.

The rent roll consideration. An extra month of concession on a $1,700 unit costs $1,700 in lost rent revenue, and that lost revenue flows directly through to NOI, cap rate, and asset valuation. A signed lease generated through paid search costs a fraction of that. For properties being positioned for a sale or refinance, paying $663 to $1,166 per lease through paid media to avoid an extra $1,700 concession is not a marketing expense. It is an asset protection strategy.

Internet Listing Services (ILS): Still Foundational, But Under Pressure

ILS platforms remain the most widely used paid marketing channel, with 68% of multifamily marketers using them according to the major ILS Apartments.com 2024 survey of over 18,000 communities. Three-quarters of marketing teams plan to maintain or increase ILS investment.

The cost-efficiency story is more complicated. Yardi found ILS platforms average a 2.0% lead-to-lease conversion rate at approximately $1,005 per lease. Against a backdrop where 72% of marketing leaders cite lead quality as a top concern. That means tracking cost-per-lease by platform and unit type and eliminating sources that do not convert, rather than relying on set-it-and-forget-it packages.

Concessions are a critical part of the competitive landscape. According to Zillow's 2025 Housing Trends Report, 58% of renters said concessions were advertised or offered upfront during their search, with reduced rent and first month free leading the list. This means ILS listings that do not prominently feature concessions and incentives are at a visibility disadvantage in markets where competitors widely use them.

Paid Search (PPC): High-Intent, High-Speed

Paid search remains essential for lease-up properties and communities in competitive markets. It captures renters at peak intent, when they are actively typing location-specific apartment searches into Google, and drives qualified traffic immediately.

Among multifamily marketers, 37% cite PPC as a top driver of high-quality leads and 38% credit it with driving applications (Apartments.com 2024 Survey).

Paid search strategy in multifamily has evolved significantly beyond simple keyword bidding. High-performing PPC strategies in multifamily now include:

- **Tightly segmented ad groups by unit type and floor plan:** Matching ad copy to specific renter intent (e.g., 'pet-friendly 2BR with garage in [neighborhood]') dramatically improves click-through and quality scores.
- **Smart bidding and automated rules:** Google's automated bidding algorithms outperform manual bidding for most multifamily accounts at sufficient conversion volume. The key is feeding the algorithm clean conversion data, including tour bookings and applications, not just website visits.
- **Remarketing audiences:** Visitors who viewed floor plans or pricing pages but did not convert are high-value retargeting segments. Re-engaging them with specific unit promotions or concessions recaptures the intent that PPC generated but didn't immediately close.
- **Early campaign launch for peak leasing season:** Paid search campaigns require a learning phase before Google's algorithm optimizes targeting. Launching six to eight weeks before peak leasing season allows campaigns to perform at their best when traffic is highest.

Video: The #1 Performing Paid Channel

No channel in multifamily marketing outperforms video across the full funnel. In the Apartments.com survey, video ranked first for lead quality (46% of respondents) and first for conversions (46%). These results have held consistent across multiple survey cycles.

The production threshold has also shifted. Zillow's rental consumer research found that 20% of prospective renters say video tours are essential, and 25% say 3D or virtual tours are essential when evaluating a community. Given that 19% now sign leases without any in-person tour, video is no longer a marketing enhancement. It is the leasing office for a substantial portion of the prospect pool.

An effective multifamily video strategy operates at two levels:

- **Property-level virtual tours:** Full-length, high-quality walkthrough videos of each unit type available on the property website, ILS listings, and YouTube. These sight-unseen conversion tools allow renters to make decisions without touring in person.
- **Short-form social video:** 15-to-60-second lifestyle content for Instagram Reels, TikTok, and Facebook that showcases amenities, resident community, and neighborhood. This content drives awareness and emotional connection well before renters begin their active search.

Paid Social: Building Demand Before Active Search Begins

Meta (Facebook and Instagram) remains the dominant social platform for multifamily marketing by a significant margin. Facebook and Instagram overwhelmingly dominate renter social media preferences, with TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat each registering below 10% in industry surveys. Paid social is rated by 36% of marketers as a top conversion channel, tied with ILS and SEO.

The strategic value of paid social is its ability to reach renters during the consideration phase before they enter an active apartment search. Meta's behavioral targeting based on life events (new job, relocation intent, household size changes), income indicators, and geographic proximity makes it uniquely suited to building awareness and demand among the right audiences at the right time.

Upper-funnel social investment directly improves the efficiency of lower-funnel paid search, because renters who have seen a community's ads are more likely to click and convert when they subsequently encounter PPC search ads.

Paid social generated leases at $68 to $119 per lease in the three-year Forthea analysis. That efficiency reflects a typically modest budget, often around $1,000 per month per property, which limits total lease volume even as the per-lease cost remains compelling. The data does not suggest paid social can replace higher-volume channels. It suggests that operators not running paid social are leaving an efficient incremental lease source on the table.

Geofencing & Digital Display: Hyperlocal Awareness at Low CPMs

Geofencing has moved from experimental to mainstream in multifamily paid media. Over 40% of multifamily operators used geofencing for the first time in the most recent survey period, according to Rent. Properties serve targeted display ads to mobile users who are physically near a community, have recently visited a competitor's leasing office, or have browsed competitive ILS listings.

The result is hyperlocal brand awareness delivered to the highest-intent prospects, including those who have demonstrated active apartment-seeking behavior.

When layered on top of paid search and paid social, geofencing closes the gap between brand awareness and active search intent at relatively efficient CPMs, making it a cost-effective complement rather than a standalone channel.

SECTION 04

Reputation Management

Beyond the Star Rating

PAGE AT A GLANCE — REPUTATION & ANALYTICS

- Star ratings alone no longer protect leasing performance. 78% of renters are deterred by just two pest complaints on a 4.5-star property with 100+ reviews (J Turner Research).
- Google captures 88% of all multifamily review volume.
- Move-out process has the worst sentiment score in the industry at −0.70; fee/cost transparency at −0.35. Both are operational fixes with direct leasing ROI.
- The DOJ restricts algorithmic pricing, so compliance review is not optional.

Online reputation has long been recognized as a leasing driver. What has changed is how renters use it. J Turner Research's 2025 study found that 78% of prospective renters are deterred from a property rated 4.5 stars with 100+ reviews if just two reviews mention pests.

Pest complaints rose 17% in the most recent tracked year and are up 41% since 2021, now driving 18.43% of all negative reviews. Fee and charge transparency complaints featured in 33.76% of one-and two-star reviews, trending up 7% year-over-year per Multifamily Executive's 2026 analysis. These are operational failures with measurable marketing consequences. Resolving them earns far more leasing return than equivalent spend on advertising.

Sentiment analysis of over 40K Google reviews established the first industry benchmarks for review content.

+0.49	Staff & Management: highest positive sentiment and most frequently discussed topic
+0.48	Community & Environment: second strongest positive sentiment driver
+0.23	Move-in Experience: near-neutral; significant differentiation opportunity
+0.14	Maintenance: near-neutral; response speed is the top driver of improvement
−0.35	Values & Cost: key dissatisfier; fee complaints trended up 7% year-over-year
−0.70	Move-out Process: the industry's largest reputation liability by a wide margin

Google Dominates: Where Reviews Live

Google captures 88% of total multifamily review volume. Apartments.com and Facebook each account for 4%, Yelp 3%, and ApartmentRatings.com 1%. While Google is the clear priority, a complete reputation strategy addresses all five platforms, as prospects cross-reference multiple sources before scheduling a tour. Research from Zumper finds that 33% of reviewers will remove a negative review if they receive a professional response within 12 to 24 business hours.

SECTION 05

Marketing Analytics

The Analytics Stack: How Leading Multifamily Operators Make Better Decisions

PAGE AT A GLANCE — MARKETING ANALYTICS

- Multi-touch attribution is the analytics imperative. Last-click models systematically undervalue social and awareness channels by crediting only the final touchpoint.
- Cost per lease (not cost per lead) is the metric that aligns marketing spend with actual leasing outcomes.
- CRM and PMS integration is foundational. Disconnected systems create attribution gaps that make accurate budget decisions impossible.
- The analytics maturity curve runs from basic traffic reporting to NOI-connected marketing intelligence. Most operators are in the early stages.

The most consequential gap in multifamily marketing is not a channel gap. It is a measurement gap. This means budget decisions are made on incomplete data, and the channels that appear most efficient may not be driving leasing outcomes.

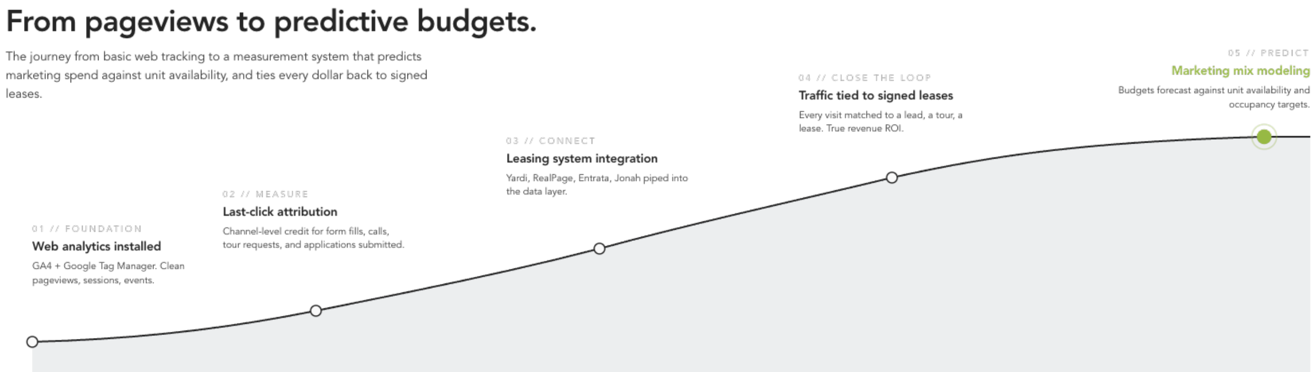
The Attribution Challenge

The average apartment renter interacts with multiple marketing touchpoints before signing a lease including an ILS listing, a Google search, a property website visit, a retargeting ad, a review site, a social media post, and a virtual tour. Last-click attribution, the default model in most analytics platforms, credits only the final touchpoint. This systematically undervalues upper-funnel channels (paid social, display, video) that build awareness and consideration, while sometimes giving more credit to lower-funnel channels (PPC, ILS) that capture the conversion. Multi-touch attribution models distribute credit across the full journey, revealing the true contribution of each channel. These assignments can be done "rules-based" or "statistically," with the latter being the gold-standard for prediction and forecasting.

The Analytics Maturity Curve

Forthea's analysis across hundreds of multifamily properties reveals a consistent analytics maturity progression:

- **Level 1 — Traffic Reporting:** Website visits, page views, bounce rates. Most properties start here. It tells you how many people visited but not what they did or where they came from.
- **Level 2 — Lead Source Tracking:** Leads attributed to channels (ILS, PPC, organic, social). Better, but still measures inputs rather than outcomes.
- **Level 3 — Cost-Per-Lease Attribution:** Marketing spend connected to signed leases by channel. This is where budget optimization becomes possible.
- **Level 4 — NOI-Connected Intelligence:** Marketing performance measured against net operating income, occupancy targets, and portfolio-level financial goals. This is where marketing becomes a strategic function rather than a cost center.



The Analytics Stack: How Leading Multifamily Operators Make Better Decisions

At the foundation of the modern multifamily marketing operation sits a connected set of platforms that share data across the leasing lifecycle. Property Management Systems serve as systems of record for accounting, resident data, unit availability, and lease economics. Every downstream marketing technology must integrate with the PMS to access real-time pricing and availability.

Layered above the PMS are specialized platforms that transform operational data into marketing intelligence:

- **CRM and leasing automation:** CRM platforms centralize lead-to-lease workflows and automate prospect communication. Real-time PMS integration is a compliance and accuracy requirement. A chatbot quoting outdated pricing exposes properties to Fair Housing liability.
- **Property website infrastructure:** Multifamily websites are built on platforms that integrate directly with property management and leasing software so that floor plan pages, pricing, and availability reflect real-time inventory rather than manually updated data. With 98% of renters beginning their search online, the website effectively serves as the leasing office for a growing share of prospects.
- **Revenue management:** These tools dynamically price units based on occupancy, lease expirations, and demand signals. Ongoing federal antitrust litigation is scrutinizing how algorithmic pricing software uses competitor data to generate rent recommendations. A proposed 2025 DOJ settlement establishes restrictions on real-time competitor data inputs and requires independent oversight of how these tools operate. Operators using algorithmic pricing tools should consult their vendors and legal counsel to understand how evolving compliance requirements may affect their revenue management workflows.
- **Reputation management platforms:** Platforms aggregate reviews across Google, Apple, Yelp, Apartments.com, Facebook, and ApartmentRatings into unified dashboards with sentiment monitoring.
- **Attribution and analytics:** Multi-touch attribution frameworks connect marketing spend to signed leases across all channels. Single last-click attribution undervalues social and awareness channels and overvalues the ILS that happens to be last-touched before conversion.

> ANALYTICS IMPERATIVE
> Multifamily operators making the most accurate budget allocation decisions have one thing in common. They know cost-per-lease by channel not just cost-per-lead. Building that visibility requires CRM discipline, multi-touch attribution, and a willingness to question whether the channel that appears to drive the most leads is signing the most leases.

SECTION 06

AI Applications in Multifamily

What Operators are Doing Right Now

PAGE AT A GLANCE — AI APPLICATIONS

- AI lead scoring combines behavioral signals (page views, email opens, time-to-tour-request) with demographic data to rank prospects by lease likelihood.
- Predictive renewal analytics are identifying at-risk residents 60–90 days before lease expiration enabling proactive retention outreach before residents decide to leave.
- AI leasing automation delivers a 46% tour conversion rate versus 19% without it, with 85% of operators reporting higher lead-to-lease conversion rates (Funnel Leasing/Kane Realty Corp, 2025; EliseAI; AppFolio).
- SatisFacts study found that 90% of renters prefer human customer service over chatbots or AI. Renters cited humans' better understanding of their needs (61%), more thorough explanations (53%), and lower likelihood of frustration (52%) as top reasons.
- AI tools that exceed sales goals: 65% of businesses using generative AI in CRM are 83% more likely to exceed sales goals (Salesforce State of Sales).

Artificial intelligence has moved from pilot program to production across the multifamily industry. The applications span the entire marketing and leasing funnel from initial lead capture through renewal.

1. AI-Powered Lead Scoring

The most persistent efficiency problem in multifamily leasing is time allocation. Leasing associates spend the same amount of energy on prospects who will never convert and on prospects who are ready to sign. AI lead scoring solves this by ranking every inbound lead by predicted likelihood of leasing, allowing teams to prioritize follow-up with high-intent prospects before those prospects accept a competing offer.

Modern AI lead scoring models in multifamily combine multiple signal categories:

- **Behavioral signals:** Page depth and dwell time on floor plan pages, pricing interactions, virtual tour completion rates, email open rates and click-through patterns, and time-to-tour-request from first inquiry.
- **Demographic and lifecycle signals:** Desired move-in timeline, income-to-rent ratio, household size alignment with available unit types, and lease expiration triggers for renewal scoring.
- **Engagement velocity:** How quickly a prospect responds to outreach, the number of touchpoints before engagement, and whether their behavior pattern matches historical high-conversion profiles.

Platforms implement lead scoring that combines these inputs and surfaces high probability leads to leasing teams in real time, with the scoring logic documented for transparency and Fair Housing compliance review. Properties that consistently apply predictive lead scoring report reduced wasted follow-up and improved team efficiency in converting prospects most likely to lease.

2. AI Leasing Assistants: The Response Speed Imperative

One of the most significant factors in converting an inbound inquiry into a tour booking is response time. When response time exceeds 90 minutes, approximately 50% of potential leads are lost (EliseAI). For a portfolio investing hundreds of thousands annually across every marketing channel to generate those leads, a slow response is not an operational inconvenience. It is a marketing investment that disappears before a tour is ever scheduled.

AI leasing assistants operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, engaging prospects within minutes of inquiry regardless of time zone, weekend schedule, or leasing office hours. Documented outcomes from AI leasing platforms show measurable impact across the funnel. Properties using AI-assisted automation report a 44.8% boost in lead-to-lease conversions and a 30% increase in lead-to-tour conversions, while staff save up to 10 hours per week previously spent on routine follow-up tasks (Nurture Boss).

The Funnel Leasing / Kane Realty Corp study of 6,000 units further found that prospects engaging with AI during their initial search achieved a 46% tour conversion rate compared to just 19% without it. A 27-point gap driven almost entirely by response speed and availability.

The workflow these systems automate includes initial inquiry response, qualification questions (move-in timeline, unit type, budget), tour scheduling with CRM sync, automated follow-up sequences for non-responsive leads, application guidance, and post-tour nurture campaigns. Human leasing associates re-engage at the high-value moments, including in-person tours, application review, and lease negotiation.

It's important to note that a SatisFacts study found that 90% of renters prefer human customer service to chatbots or AI, and NPS scores for human service agents outpaced those for AI by 72 points. Renters cited humans' better understanding of their needs (61%), more thorough explanations (53%), and lower likelihood of frustration (52%) as top reasons.

For operators, the challenge is knowing where automation helps and where it costs you a lease. For marketing teams, it raises a harder question about where the funnel breaks down.

Fair Housing and the Expanding Scrutiny of AI

The DOJ's Antitrust Division stated, "With the rise of algorithmic and artificial intelligence tools, we will remain at the forefront of vigorous antitrust enforcement." That signals broader scrutiny ahead for AI tools that influence housing decisions, including lead scoring and tenant screening. HUD issued guidance in May 2024 confirming that the Fair Housing Act applies to housing decisions regardless of who makes them and the technology used, and that housing providers remain responsible for ensuring compliance even when screening is outsourced to a third-party company.

Research shows that AI-powered screening tools, which run checks on credit scores, eviction records, and criminal backgrounds, routinely return incorrect or outdated information, resulting in denied applications. For operators adopting AI lead scoring to prioritize prospects and automate follow-up, the same fair housing exposure applies. Efficiency gains from automation do not create a compliance exception. Operators who deploy these tools without auditing their outputs for impact are taking on legal risk they may not yet fully see.

3. AI-Generated Content at Scale

Multifamily marketing teams face a chronic challenge in content production. Dozens or hundreds of communities, each requiring individualized floor plan descriptions, ILS listing copy, email campaigns, social posts, and blog content, all updated continuously as availability and pricing change.

AI content generation tools are dramatically reducing this workload, but they still require human oversight to avoid the risk of homogenized output that Google's Helpful Content updates penalize.

The primary applications in active use across multifamily portfolios include:

- **ILS listing copy optimization:** AI tools generate and A/B test listing descriptions, headlines, and amenity highlights at scale, with performance data feeding back into copy improvements. Properties treating ILS profiles as dynamic digital showrooms rather than static directory entries see meaningfully higher click-through and inquiry rates.
- **Email campaign personalization:** AI-powered email platforms segment prospect and resident lists by behavioral profile and generate personalized content variants at scale. Leads receiving nurture emails spend 47% more than non-nurtured leads (Annuitas Group), and segmented campaigns drive up to 760% higher revenue versus non-segmented campaigns (Campaign Monitor). These figures that translate directly to multifamily, where lifecycle-based email sequences are increasingly used to move prospects from inquiry to application and residents from lease expiration to renewal.
- **Social media content calendars:** AI tools draft platform-specific social posts, caption options, and hashtag strategies from property photography and amenity data, reducing content creation time while maintaining brand consistency across a portfolio.
- **Chatbot and website FAQ content:** AI-maintained FAQ pages and chatbot knowledge bases are updated automatically when pricing, policies, or availability change, eliminating outdated information that can lead to both poor renter experiences and Fair Housing risk.
- **Reputation response drafting:** Tools use AI to draft review responses that align with brand voice, flag high-risk content (pest mentions, security complaints, fee disputes) for human escalation, and maintain response time standards across a portfolio without requiring individual community attention.

4. Predictive Analytics: Renewal and Retention Intelligence

Resident retention is the highest-ROI lever in multifamily operations. The cost of acquiring a new resident through advertising (at ILS-level economics of $1,005+ per lease) far exceeds the cost of retaining an existing one. AI-powered retention analytics are enabling a proactive renewal strategy that was previously difficult at portfolio scale.

Predictive renewal models analyze combinations of:

- **Engagement signals:** Maintenance request frequency and satisfaction, amenity utilization rates, payment history, and resident portal engagement patterns.
- **External signals:** Local job market conditions, comparable-unit availability, and pricing competitiveness relative to new-lease rates.
- **Lifecycle triggers:** Days to lease expiration, number of previous renewals, length of tenancy, and unit type (single residents have historically different renewal patterns than families).

Properties deploying these models are identifying at-risk residents 60 to 90 days before lease expiration. This window enables proactive outreach, renewal incentive offers, or unit transfer discussions well before the resident begins an active apartment search. RealPage data shows Q1 retention at 55.1%, up from 54.6% the prior year.

5. AI-Powered Pricing and Market Intelligence

Data-driven pricing remains a meaningful competitive advantage over manual pricing. The question is which data inputs are permissible and how to architect pricing models within compliance boundaries.

The prohibition of real-time nonpublic competitor data requires model training data to be at least 12 months old. This shifts the advantage toward operators with strong internal data assets, including historical occupancy data by unit type and floor, seasonal demand patterns by lease term, and conversion rate data by price point. AI tools that operate within compliant boundaries, using an operator's own historical performance data and publicly available market signals, still provide meaningful pricing precision over manual adjustments.

Looking Ahead: AI Applications on the Horizon

IBISWorld's 2026 national industry outlook forecasts AI automation as the defining operational shift of the next five years, confirming this is not a future consideration but a present one. Owners are expected to implement AI for lead scoring, dynamic pricing, maintenance triage, fraud detection, and portfolio analytics. Meanwhile, residents will interact through chatbots, self-guided tours, smart locks, and app-based service requests.

IBISWorld forecasts these tools will centralize leasing and back-office operations, enabling a single team to manage multiple properties while reducing reliance on on-site staff. Properties delivering consistent, tech-enabled service will gain measurable advantages in both retention and online reputation.

The following specific applications are in early deployment or active development across the multifamily industry and merit executive attention:

- Computer vision for maintenance and inspections
- Dynamic ad creative generation
- Conversational leasing on social platforms
- Voice search optimization

SECTION 07

From Insight to Action

What's Working, What's Obsolete & What's on the Horizon

PAGE AT A GLANCE — STRATEGIC SCORECARD & RECOMMENDATIONS

- What's working: Multi-channel digital integration, video-first content, AI leasing automation, SEO investments, reputation management.
- What's obsolete: ILS-only strategy, manual pricing without data, cost-per-lead as primary KPI, aggregate star-rating obsession, disconnected tech platforms.
- What's next: AEO/GEO for AI search, social commerce leasing, predictive lead scoring, smart home as marketing asset, sustainability content.
- Top 6 recommendations: Rebalance toward SEO/AEO → Build video-first content → Deploy AI leasing with PMS integration → Fix review sentiment operations → Build first-party data infrastructure → Audit revenue management compliance.

What's Working: High Conviction Investments

- **Multi-channel digital integration:** Properties running coordinated paid search, paid social, SEO, AEO, and ILS campaigns outperform single-channel operators on both lead volume and quality. Approximately 75% of marketing teams are increasing cross-channel digital investment even on flat budgets, per Rent. survey data.
- **Video and virtual content:** Video leads across all performance metrics in major industry surveys. Virtual tours are now a renter expectation. With 19% of renters now signing leases without an in-person tour, video is the leasing office for nearly one in five prospects.
- **AI-powered leasing automation:** Sub-5-minute response times are now achievable at scale, and the conversion data is compelling. Properties using AI-assisted automation report a 44.8% boost in lead-to-lease conversions and a 30% increase in lead-to-tour conversions versus manual follow-up (Nurture Boss). Prospects engaging with AI during their initial search achieved a 46% tour conversion rate compared to just 19% without it (Funnel Leasing / Kane Realty Corp, 2025). What was a competitive advantage 18 months ago is now table stakes for any property receiving significant inbound lead volume.
- **Reputation content management:** Higher review volume and stronger review content (particularly on maintenance, staff responsiveness, and move-in) drive measurably higher lead-to-lease conversion rates. Review sentiment, and not solely star ratings, is the critical metric.

- **SEO and AEO as owned-channel infrastructure:** At a cost-per-lease of $87 versus $1,005 for ILS, the economics are clear. Operators who began this investment 12 to 18 months ago are now realizing the compounding return.

- **Paid media as an asset protection tool:** Operators making the most deliberate budget decisions in paid media know their cost per lease by channel, not just their cost per click or per lead. Forthea multi-year lease attribution modeling shows PPC generates signed leases at 32 to 46% lower cost than Apartments.com and 46 to 83% lower cost than Zillow, with that advantage widening over time as ILS costs have risen faster than PPC costs. More importantly, a signed lease generated through paid media at $663 to $1,166 per lease protects something ILS packages and concessions cannot, the rent roll.

What's Obsolete: Declining Returns

- **Static ILS-only strategies:** Single-ILS dependence is a high-cost, low-differentiation approach. As ILS platforms consolidate, pricing power shifts from operators to vendors.

- **Manual pricing without data infrastructure:** With algorithmic pricing under regulatory constraint, the advantage now lies in operators with strong internal historical data assets, not those pricing by intuition.

- **Volume-over-quality lead metrics:** Reporting cost-per-lead without cost-per-lease (or cost-per-move-in for operators tracking actual occupancy) as the primary KPI leads to budget misallocation toward channels generating inquiry volume but not signed leases. The most sophisticated multifamily marketing teams are now measuring marketing's direct contribution to NOI, connecting channel spend to occupied units rather than stopping at the lead.

- **Aggregate star-rating management:** Two pest complaints can override a 4.5-star rating. Review content management has superseded star-rating management as the reputation priority.

- **Disconnected tech platforms:** Property websites that aren't integrated with PMS data, AI leasing assistants that quote outdated pricing, and CRMs that don't attribute leads to channels are all sources of measurable revenue leakage.

What's on the Horizon: Innovation to Watch

- **Generative engine optimization (GEO):** AI Overviews appear in 34% of real estate searches. Operators who structure website content, schema markup, and ILS data for machine-readability will compound AI referral traffic as the share of AI search grows.

- **Social commerce and shoppable leasing:** Instagram and TikTok are evolving into direct leasing channels. Shoppable posts linking to application forms and tour scheduling are part of the renter conversion funnel.

- **Smart home as marketing asset:** Over 69% of U.S. households use smart home technology. 51% of renters with household incomes above $100,000 consider it essential. Smart home features are transitioning from an amenity to an expectation and could be prominently featured across all content and listings.

- **Sustainability as a conversion factor:** 65% of renters actively seek eco-friendly apartments per Apartments.com research. Properties without a sustainability narrative are increasingly disadvantaged in content marketing and search visibility.

About Forthea

Forthea has partnered with the nation's leading multifamily firms for 20 years to deliver high-performing digital marketing programs for owners, operators, and developers across every asset class and lifecycle stage. In a high-churn industry, our top multifamily clients average 15 or more years with us. Clients such as Hanover, Morgan Group, Dinerstein, and Venterra Living trust us because we go beyond campaign execution. Forthea connects SEO, AEO, paid media, and local search to an analytics approach that moves portfolios up the maturity curve, from basic traffic reporting to a clear view of cost per lease, cost per move-in, and where budget should shift across the portfolio to hit leasing targets. Forthea is a 4x PPC Agency of the Year and Google Premier Partner. We partner directly with Google, Meta, Yardi, RealPage, Entrata, Jonah Digital and others to connect spend to signed leases and hit leasing goals for less.

Sources & Methodology

Data sourced from: IBISWorld Apartment Rental in the US (February 2026); IBISWorld Apartment Rental in Texas (March 2026); Apartments.com 2024 Multifamily Advertising Survey (n=18,000+ communities, 1.5M+ units); Yardi Matrix National Multifamily Market Report (2026); Yardi 979-Community Cost-Per-Lease Study (2024); CBRE U.S. Real Estate Market Outlook (2025); Newmark U.S. Multifamily Capital Markets Report (Q1 2025); Cushman & Wakefield U.S. Multifamily MarketBeat (Q4 2025); Fannie Mae Multifamily Economic and Market Commentary; Zillow 2025 Rental Consumer Housing Trends Report; National Apartment Association 2026 Apartment Housing Outlook; NAHB Multifamily Construction Data (February 2026); Agency FIFTY3 Multifamily SEO Analysis (18.3M sessions, 370+ websites, 2024); Agency FIFTY3 Multifamily Reputation Sentiment Analysis (40,000+ Google reviews, Nov 2024–Nov 2025); Agency FIFTY3 Generative Engine Optimization Analysis (21M+ sessions, 390+ multifamily websites); Criterion B Multifamily Statistics (2025); Rent. State of Multifamily Marketing in 2025; J Turner Research Online Reputation Study (2025); Multifamily Executive Online Reputation Analysis (2026); RealPage Retention Data (Q1 2025); Nurture Boss AI Leasing Performance Data; Funnel Leasing / Kane Realty Corp AI Leasing Study (6,000 units, 2025); Funnel Leasing Tech Stack Analysis (2025); EliseAI Executive Survey and Lead Response Research; AppFolio Benchmark Report (2026); HubSpot AI Trends Report (2026); Affinco 2026 Content Statistics; Campaign Monitor Email Segmentation Research; Annuitas Group Lead Nurturing Research; Salesforce State of Sales (CRM and generative AI performance data); Advanced Web Ranking AI Overview Frequency Study (2025); Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Rental Vacancy Rate Data (Q3 2025); Moody's Renter Income Analysis (cited in IBISWorld); National Association of Realtors Median Home Price Data (2025); Multifamily Next Customer Journey Optimization Statistics; BC Solutions Yardi vs. RealPage Platform Comparison (2026); U.S. Census Bureau City and Town Population Totals (2023–2024); Viking Capital 2025 Multifamily Market Recap.

The research above draws on a broad set of sources: independent industry studies, research published by platforms and software vendors operating in the space, and Forthea's own multifamily portfolio data. These sources vary in their degree of independence, and we've worked to present vendor-published data objectively, treating it as a useful market signal rather than neutral evidence where appropriate. Any forecasts or forward-looking claims cited here are directional and hypothetical, not guarantees, and remain subject to revision as market conditions evolve.

This report is prepared for senior marketing leadership and is intended solely for internal strategic planning. Market conditions and platform data are current as of Q1 2026.

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Multifamily Marketing Trends Report

Q2 2026

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