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New digs are just a few clicks away

James Turner

Ah, the delights of apartment hunting.

Who among us, fresh out of school, didn't spend a leisurely Sunday trying to remember if w/w meant wall-to-wall carpet or whitewall tires?

And after seeing apartments described as "intimate," and then looking like closets with sinks, many apartment hunters have gained a new respect for the flexibility of the English language.

Given the confusing and frustrating mess that looking for an apartment can turn into, it was just a matter of time before the Web stepped in to impose some order.

With a few mouse clicks, renters can find that "2br 1st flr w/u w w/w, w/d, a/c" that they've always dreamed of.

Sites break down roughly into two categories.

Regional sites focus on specific geographic areas, and not surprisingly, are usually run by local newspapers.

Fighting them tooth and nail for your monthly rent check are national search engines.

We did a little head-to-head comparison to see how they ranked on a hypothetical apartment search for a two-bedroom apartment in the Nashua, N.H., area.

The requirements were air conditioning, a dishwasher, and laundry on site.

First stop, the easy-to-remember apartments.com. With a few check marks indicating my search criteria, this national search engine returned nine New Hampshire properties, four in Nashua. Unfortunately, the summary display failed to list any of the three amenities I wanted.

But I quickly found out that this didn't mean the properties lacked what I was looking for, it just meant those details weren't placed into the database correctly.

Clicking to a specific property gave me a wealth of information, including floor plans, photographs of model apartments, and details of the shared facilities. Other pages described community and cultural activities available.

Moving to another search engine, rent.net, I zeroed in on eight Nashua apartments with two bedrooms in less than a minute.

In addition, rent.net offered a 360-degree image of one of the locations, allowing me to look around the apartment as if I were standing in it, as well as the usual pictures of the facilities, floor plans, and model apartments.

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Online rental agreements were available for those ready to apply.

As for regional sites, I clicked on boston.com, which contains links to the Boston Globe. I soon discovered that this Web site now uses apartment.com's database.

The Manchester Union Leader newspaper's online classifieds had plenty of Manchester apartments, but none in Nashua. And searching the online classifieds of the Nashua Telegraph yielded only five apartments for rent, with no pictures, comprehensive amenities lists, or applications available. But they did have lots of abbreviations to puzzle out.

*James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web surfer.

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