

## **A web site for your association... WHY?**

Nirvana within an association could be attained if every member was completely informed on every topic, every topic adequately debated, consensus formed and all members informed of the status of various projects through completion, but, alas, in the past there have been many obstacles that prevented associations from reaching this state of being.

It can be so frustrating. Your community Board Meeting is over and you have information that needs to get out to your residents as quickly as possible, or maybe the Board needs feedback from the residents about whether or not to proceed with an idea they have. How do you go about this? Well, until recently, you might have had someone on the Board create an information flyer or survey on paper, make a bunch of photo copies, and hand deliver one to each residence in your community (or worse yet, mail them). This method is costly in both time and money and in the end; it's not very effective. Days, or even weeks, may go by before the information gets out and most residents don't return surveys because it's a hassle for them. Another alternative is to use the old stand-by "phone-tree", where various people are responsible for calling a portion of the residents on the phone. Anyone who has tried this knows it quickly turns into an extended game of answering machines, busy signals and phone tag. Once again, this is a very inefficient way to communicate with the residents of your community.

With the Information Super Highway making its way into business and living rooms across the world it has become so easy to share information and after all, isn't that what an association needs to do so that it can create a sense of community and unify the residents.

Your community can now have its own web site that will disseminate information out to your residents quickly and very cost effectively. You can post announcements on your web site for residents to read and you can post survey questions online that residents can answer at their convenience by just pointing and clicking. No more filling out and returning forms. But this is just the beginning. An interactive community web site also lets your community have an online events calendar so residents can see at a glance what is going on around the neighborhood; a message board for them to post questions and comments to each other and the Board of directors; a chat room for

live interaction among residents; an address book where residents can go to lookup their neighbors phone number or find a 4<sup>th</sup> for tennis; Garage sale listings, Home for Sale listings; online community documents including Bylaws, Covenants, Newsletters and much, much more. The community can even sell ads on their web site to local product and service providers and keep that money for the community.

Since privacy is always an issue when you are talking about the Internet, you would want to make sure that **only** residents had access to certain information on your site (such as the address book). This is handled by having both public and private areas.

The public portion is available to everyone on the Internet but should allow access to only a few features that you choose, such as the Homes for Sale and Classified ads as well as some general information about your community including pictures. This is a great way for those who are considering moving to your neighborhood to get a flavor of the residents. Are you a highly diverse group? Lots of kids in the neighborhood? Great school district? All of this can be detailed on the community home page so that those seeking your type of community can readily find it!

The private portion should be where the meat of your content resides. In order to get to the "good stuff" each resident should be assigned their own login ID and password that would get them inside so that there is no anonymity on the site. Here is where the items mentioned above could be stored.

Having such a web site gives your community the power and flexibility to get information and news out to your residents at a moments notice, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It allows your residents to keep up with community happenings, interact with their neighbors, Board members, and committee members, and do all of this on their own time schedule, whether that is late at night, after putting the kids to bed or while on a lunch break at work.

The benefits of an interactive community web site range from:

- Increased Property Values - with access to the association rules and regulations on-line, there's no more excuses for non-compliance

- Increased awareness of community issues - information is so quickly disseminated you'll find your-self sharing way more and way more often!
- Increased resident participation - now resident can give input more on their own time schedule
- Feeling amongst residents that the board is hearing their concerns and seeing what happens as a result - it gives the residents a voice!
- Less burden on the Board - frequently asked questions can be posted on the web site
- Less burden on the Property Manager - residents can have access to forms and community documents that they need instead of waiting for copies to be sent from the manager.

When searching for a web site provider there are a number of options:

A) **Have an "in-house" person create the web site**. Sometimes a volunteer can be easily found. Items to be concerned about include: making sure the web site can be easily up-dated by many members of the community, the association has final say on content not creator of site and time-frame to completion.

B) **Hire a professional firm who specializes in web design**. Items to be concerned about include: costs, viability of firm and time-frame.

C) **Hire a firm who specializes in Association web sites and has a template**. Items to be concerned with include: **uniqueness** – will the site portray the uniqueness of your community or does every site look exactly the same?, **viability of firm** - make sure you think their business model can endure - will they be here six months from now? How **customizable** is it? If I'm a condo does it have to have a Home for Sale feature or can it be a Condo for Sale? Are you trapped in a web site with no flexibility or room for growth?

In summary, there really is no down side to a web site in fact, The web site can help neighbors get to know neighbors again!

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AtHomeNet specializes in affordable customized interactive web sites for community associations.