

Pulling back the curtain: How open communication builds strong communities

By Susan Sanders

Communication rests at the heart of any relationship, large or small. Whether between a politician and his party, between a husband and wife or even between an association and its residents, the free flow of thoughts and ideas from one person to another is absolutely imperative in building a strong, successful connection. "If you have good relationships, you have happy residents," says Beth Hagan, education coordinator with the Community Association Managers Program.

And what happens without good relationships and communication? Conflict and apathy can turn a promising community into a fractured one. "Communication is the key to successful relationships of all types," Hagan says. For example, trouble within an association might occur simply because one person is unaware of what's expected of them. "You might have people who aren't aware of how important it is to abide by (the association's) rules because they haven't lived in a community before," says Hagan. Providing information and opening up lines of dialogue right when new residents move in can avoid situations like that and prevent problems for management down the road.

People need to feel welcome and part of a community in order to communicate. "Using the internet and web sites is a natural fit," Hagan says. A site that's kept up to date and includes information as well as more informal and playful items can help build relationships among members. "Seeing the rules and regulations posted and knowing that they apply to everyone and seeing pictures of the St. Patrick's Day event on the site – those all contribute to happy residents," Hagan says, because it creates a sense not only of equality but of shared experience.

It also can reduce divisions within a community, meaning fewer conflicts and potential complaints or legal issues for management. "I've seen communities where the board meeting was considered a place where other people besides the board weren't welcome," Hagan says. "When you post the board meeting agendas and the names of the people on the different committees" and other details that pull back the curtain on the mysteries of how the board functions and operates, that openness can go a long way in encouraging "a much greater sense of trust," Hagan says. "All of these things contribute to a sense of feeling included and not excluded."

Hand in hand with that sense of trust must come the knowledge that the web site is safe and secure. Sensitive documents should be kept under password protection as should board or volunteer phone numbers, providing reassurance to residents that their information is safe and that while the paths of dialogue are open, they are only open to those within the community.

Using web technology also can have the added benefit of creating actual contact between residents, especially with older residents. Associations can sponsor training sessions for its residents who are perhaps less tech-savvy than their neighbors, creating a bonding experience of sorts as participants learn to navigate the web and take advantage of all that their community site has to offer. An arrangement like this has the dual benefit of helping the resident and also making them more reachable via technology for management.

Web technology can do more than build trust and dialogue within in a community. Its capacity for instantaneous communication also can save lives and save piece of mind if disaster strikes. This is especially true for communities on the Gulf Coast and in Florida where hurricanes can strike or out west in California where wildfires can rage. Says Hagan, "Using your web site to communicate after a disaster is very important." And it's something many associations never even consider. "When we had our storms (in Florida) a few years ago, people who had evacuated were desperate to know what their property looked like or if their home was okay." By posting photos on the site, residents in remote locations could keep track of their homes and their neighbors, again building that sense of shared community. "Everyone knows how to prepare for a disaster, but I'm talking about after the disaster – where can we find water, who has power. All of those things are important. "

Creating and sustaining strong communications within a community rests in the hands of the management, board members and volunteers who invest their time and energy in the association. It requires a long-term commitment and it goes beyond just the web. Newsletters help build community as do special events and social gatherings. The web site is the hub at the center of the action, the spark that drives the heart of the community. That's why it must be kept updated to be effective. "People make the mistake of not keeping their sites updated," Hagan says. "Once you go to the site and the information you want is not there, you stop using the site. You have to make a conscious effort to get information on there."

By keeping residents informed and by creating trust and openness, association web sites can be the catalysts to building strong relationships among neighbors, the kind who talk to each other over the backyard fence, look after each other's kids, host block parties and come together to transform a street full of strangers into a community.

About the Author: Susan Sanders is the Co-Owner and Director of Marketing for AtHomeNet.com. With over 11 years of industry experience she often lectures on community association industry topics. Susan is a recognized by the state of Florida as subject matter on community association technology.