

COMMUNICATIONS

By: Sara E. Barry, CAM CMCA PCAM
Director of Operations for Wolf Rifkin Shapiro, Schulman & Rabkin, LLP

Every aspect of community Association operations, service and rules, involve some aspect of communications. The more effective and useful communications that occur in a community, the more effective, realistic and successful will be its management and operations. Though much of the community association's specific responsibilities center on physical and financial aspects, its success hinges on effectively dealing with the human aspects that involve communication, involvement and participation. Good communications support good decisions making by assuring informed decision makers at all levels. Effective communications help to assure harmony in the community and voluntary compliance with rules and restrictions. Each of the various parties involved in community associations, the Board management, contractors, consultants, advisors, and the owners, have responsibilities toward effective communications. The most difficult aspect of communications in associations is assuring that owners and residents have ample and effective opportunities to both receive and provide input. There are a variety of options available to association leaders and managers to facilitate good owner and resident communications.

Let's look at some of the various important types of communications available to common interest communities:

A. INFORM THE PROSPECTIVE BUYER

1. The first step in assuring an informed citizenry is to inform the prospective buyer:
 - a. Provide an information booklet, brochure or packet that describes the Association, its rules, fees and operations.
 - b. Provide legal documents, public offering statements or other disclosure materials, which set the legal framework within which the Association operates.
 - c. Provide the budget and other information regarding the current operating plans for the Association.

It made sense in the past, but now N.R.S. 116.4109 requires that "a unit's owner shall furnish to a purchaser before execution of any contract for sale of a unit, or otherwise before conveyance: (a) A copy of the declaration, plans, the bylaws and the rules or regulations of the association; (b) A statement setting forth the amount of the monthly assessment for common expenses and any unpaid assessment of any kind currently due from the selling unit's owner; (c) The current operating budget of the association and a financial statement for the association; and (d) A statement of any unsatisfied judgments or pending legal actions against the association and the status of any pending legal actions relating to the common-interest community of which the unit's

owner has actual knowledge.”

2. New residents are most anxious and willing to learn about their community shortly after moving in and it is an excellent point at which to begin their involvement and participation in the association.

- a. Welcome Letters - The welcome letter advises the new owner about the specifics of each common interest community. It also gives them the names and numbers of the key individuals in your community who they can contact for more information. Should be provided to all new residents, which sets forth all the information needed to be a good citizen, such as the rules and regulations and descriptions of the procedures for involvement, service requests, emergencies, etc.
- b. Welcome Booklet - The booklet expands on the welcome letter by adding important information of which each new owner should be aware and/or information which will be helpful. This can include all the Board and Committee member names, City Services and any other unique information in a useful booklet format which can be kept handy for the new owners use. A letter is normally set aside after it is read.
- c. Welcome Committee – Greeting new residents is a good tool for stimulating social interaction, seeking the involvement of new residents in activities and governance of the Association and for providing information about the community and the Association.

B. NEWSLETTER

In addition to the one-time communication with the prospective buyer and the new resident, the Association must establish an ongoing program of communication with residents and owners. (Note that this program should be geared not only to owners, but also to tenants and to absentee owners.) There are various techniques to utilize in ongoing resident communications.

The Newsletter is the primary vehicle for periodic communications with residents throughout the year. Newsletters can be used to provide financial and operational status, reports and information on significant decisions of the Board and committees and information on rules and regulations. Newsletters are also a good vehicle for providing social and community news regarding events and activities of interest to residents. A well – crafted newsletter should have the primary goal of closing the information and communication gaps between leadership and the membership of the Association. It should not reach beyond its ability to be sustained by its limited objectives and talent resources. Whether published monthly, bimonthly or quarterly, it should appear with reliable regularity so that it becomes an anticipated and welcome event in the life of Association members.

An effective newsletter, however, must be premised on board-adopted policies and:

Newsletters Should Be:

1. Easy and fun to read
2. Full of important information
3. Written in the third person
4. Published regularly and consistently
5. Be about people
6. Build Morale
7. Enhance Teamwork
8. Inspire Community Spirit
9. Designed for readability
10. A quality document with tasteful graphics published on tasteful paper
11. A calendar for upcoming Association functions, i.e. board meetings, committee meetings, etc.
12. A notification for scheduled inspections (pest, fire, elevator, etc.) and changes in service levels.
13. Sent to any outside interested parties, i.e. attorney, CPA or interested government officials.

Newsletters Should Not Be:

1. Filled with non common interest community information (i.e., recipes)
2. In the past tense
3. Over a couple of pages (Think about what you do with lengthy publications. They compete for valuable time and many times don't get read.)
4. Geared only to owners (Tenants are a critical part of any community and must be made welcome.)
5. Self-serving
6. Just trivia
7. Easily Confused with other publications
8. Misleading or targeted at any group
9. An avenue for any one individual's personal agenda

C. ANNUAL REPORTS

Normally the annual report of most Association's consists of the CPA's rather boring review or audit. While it is a very critical report to advise owners of the financial position of the Association, it does not let owners know about the achievements of the Board and it's committees.

The Annual Report can be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of owners, but is an additional excellent opportunity to provide current status information to residents, set the framework for the coming year and solicit owner input and involvement and opinions regarding the status of the Association. As all owners normally do not attend the annual meeting of owners, a separate written report prepared by the Board celebrating the achievements, seeking help and communication information which is critical for the smooth operation of the community should be included in the Annual Report.

D. SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Association initiated activities are a good tool for stimulating social interaction in communications among the residents. Holiday parties, July 4th picnics, Chili Cooking Contests, Easter egg hunts, visits with Santa Claus or block picnics can be good tools for stimulating social harmony and interaction between the residents and the community leaders. Many associations that don't allow garage sales in their communities have a once a year community garage sale that not only allows residents to work together towards a common goal, but helps to clean out those garages where cars should be parked. Don't overlook the willingness of local government officials to attend some of these functions which would allow owners to further communicate on a larger scale.

E. BULLETIN BOARDS

A centrally attractive bulletin board not only allows for additional notices to be placed announcing events, but also provides a location where residents can meet and discuss current issues.

F. INTERNET

Several large communities have their own televised programs, but this can be very costly and time consuming to produce.

The next best solution is to develop a web-site for your community that not only allows for dissemination of information to the owners, but also can include information to all parties involved in the resale market. Think of the calls that could be eliminated if information requested by assessors, realtors, lenders and title companies was listed on your web site. We will include the addresses of several samples, which we think show good examples of association sites within the next couple of months.