

Developing an Effective Communications Program for Your Community in the Digital Age

by Jeffrey C. O'Brien, Mansfield, Tanick & Cohen, P.A.

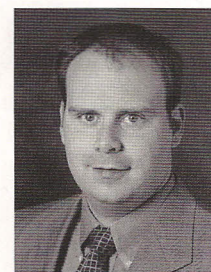
If you're an association manager or board member, communicating effectively with the members of your association is critical, especially since many association disputes arise from misunderstandings and/or miscommunications. With the explosion of communications technology in recent years – including the internet, email and social media – associations *need* to use these tools to interact with their residents.

The three basic elements for your association's effective digital communications strategy are the following:

Community Intranet

An "intranet" is a private computer network that uses Internet Protocol technologies to securely share any part of an organization's information or operational systems *within* that organization. The term is used in contrast to *internet*, a network between many different organizations.

For associations, a community intranet is an excellent means to warehouse the association's governing documents, rules and regulations, meeting minutes and upcoming board meeting agendas for review and download by residents. An intranet could also host a community directory and a community calendar. One word of caution: the intranet should be password protected and accessible *only* to residents and management. Otherwise, the information posted on the intranet could be accessed by outsiders.



O'BRIEN

Email Communications (Constant Contact, Evite, SurveyMonkey)

Association life can be busy. Board meetings, member meetings and community events all regularly occur within a CIC community. Sending out notices of these meetings and events via mail can be expensive and time consuming. Giving no notice at all (or relying on the community intranet) can lead to missed notices, hard feelings and upset residents. Fortunately, a number of email-related communications tools have been created

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There are a couple of ways to deal with this issue, depending on what is most comfortable for your board. The first, and probably the best solution for not "ruffling anyone's feathers," is to have only one board member assigned to give direction to the manager. My suggestion is for it to be the board president. However, if the president is one of the offending board members, or is too busy or not comfortable giving direction, it would be best if the board chooses the best fit for the job, regardless of position or tenure.

Another option is that when these two timing consuming board members ask the manager to do something the rest of the board feels is unrealistic or a waste of time, the rest of board members take

turns speaking up on behalf of the manager. They may even suggest that these two board members take on the tasks themselves. ■

If you have a question for the Board Members Forum, please email it to information@cicmidwest.com and note that you would like it included in this column. You can also post your questions on the CIC Midwest Email Hotline on LinkedIn. To join the CIC Midwest LinkedIn Group, email information@cicmidwest.com. This group is for CIC Midwest members only.

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Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go. ~T.S. Eliot

A deadline is negative inspiration. Still, it's better than no inspiration at all. ~Rita Mae Brown

There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all. ~Peter Drucker

We are too busy mopping the floor to turn off the faucet. ~Author Unknown

We're still not where we're going, but we're not where we were. ~Natash Jasefowitz

When the horse is dead, get off. ~Author Unknown

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that can be utilized to provide timely notices of community activities in a cost effective manner.

For example, Constant Contact is an email marketing tool that allows the user to send e-newsletters, surveys and event invites to one or more customized email distribution lists. "Evites" can be used to create event invitations with a personalized touch, and SurveyMonkey and Yahoo each provide a platform for customized survey creation. Surveys are an excellent tool to take "informal polls" of residents on important association matters where the board is permitted to take action without member consent. A smart board will gauge the temperature of the members about important decisions prior to their official vote on the decisions. To do otherwise risks alienating members who feel shut out of the process.

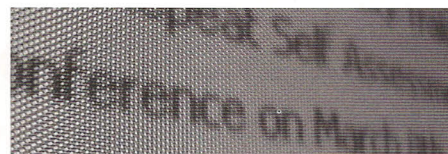
Social Media (LinkedIn, Facebook/Ning)

Marketing professionals have focused a lot of attention on using social media to

promote one's business. However, social media's ability to foster group discussion and interaction also makes these tools a perfect means of engaging association residents and fostering interaction among them, and not only regarding association matters. For example, if a resident has a good experience with a vendor (say, a painter), the resident might wish to share the positive experience with his/her neighbors. Conversely, a bad experience may also warrant a comment. Social media could also be used – especially in the current economy – for residents to interact to find job opportunities.

Facebook allows for the creation of closed groups, meaning that the group administrators must grant access to persons seeking to join the group. Thus, a Facebook group that allows members to post links to events, photos and/or other discussion topics is an excellent idea.

Another useful site is Ning (www.ning.com), which allows for the creation of custom social media sites that boast their own



personal URL address. A Ning site allows for each member of the site to customize their own profile page, and provide fellow members with background information about themselves. It can be an excellent means for association residents to get to know one another.

Associations need to effectively communicate with their members in order to ensure a smooth running, harmonious community. While an effective communications strategy is not a guarantee that an association will eliminate all its issues, a forward-thinking association and its management need to include these low cost, easy-to-use digital tools in their communications plan. ■

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