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Sharing the Good News in Homeowner Associations

by Richard Thompson

Do you have a reliable system to get information to your association members quickly and accurately? Do you request suggestions and feedback? These are all signs of a pro-active management style. Pro-active managers welcome communication because it lets them know whether they are on track or derailed. As the saying goes, "The light at the end of the tunnel may be the headlight of an oncoming train." Better to know sooner than later.

On the flip side, re-active communications keep the Board on the defensive and are indicative of a crisis management style. With crisis management, nothing gets done unless the smell of tar and feathers is in the air. Under these circumstances, it's unlikely that the end result will be good. If this is the kind of style your Board has been practicing, consider what kind of environment this creates.

Failure to communicate makes fertile ground for rumor. And rumors can trample on the Board's initiative and planning. While it's best to head rumors off at the pass, rumors can sometimes be a way for the Board to identify some un-addressed issues. To deal with them, you might title a newsletter article "Rumor Has It..." and dispel the rumor with the facts.

Here are some great ways to "tell it like it is":

- **The Internet.** Bar none, the Internet is the fastest and cheapest way to interact with the membership. Most folks now have email addresses so why continue to waste time and money on duplication, labels, stamps, envelopes and the US Snail Service if you don't need to? For about \$1/day, your association can have its own website with key information posted and a turbo charged communication system. For information on a internet service custom designed for homeowner associations, see www.regenesis.net
- **Newsletters.** These can be as small as one page and as large as the LA Times, depending on how much time, budget, volunteer effort and information there is. Pick a format and catchy name and stick with it. Make the information interesting. Decide at budget time how many newsletters there will be and when they will be produced. For more on this subject, see www.regenesis.net
- **Flyer Boxes.** Flyers distributed at the mailbox, clubhouse, recycling center and other common points are a quick and cheap way to get the word out, but don't forget to mail copies to non-resident owners.
- **Message Board.** This is a very effective method if it's properly located and managed. Don't let messages stay for more than a week as they blend into the landscape. Keep the board neat and sectioned according to topic.
- **Owner Forums.** Always give owners a voice at Board Meetings by way of a pre-meeting forum designed to let them speak their mind, ask questions or offer suggestions. To facilitate this,

always hold your meetings in a location that is large enough to accommodate guests.

- **Phone Trees.** In the kind of community where folks know each other, phone trees can work well for encouraging meeting attendance, polling or passing on alerts. The idea of a phone tree is that, say, the President calls two people and those call two more, and those four call two more, etc. Each person only needs to make two calls to get all informed.
- **Welcome Packets.** These can include things like the governing documents, budgets, rules and regulations and other need-to-know information. The message should be, as the name implies, "Welcome to the neighborhood!" Include also architectural guidelines, maps, association services, clubhouse and pool schedules, a telephone directory, management and emergency information.
- **Association Phone Numbers.** This essential tool is often overlooked. Since board members and managers change, why not have a permanent association phone number with voice mail that can alert the right party? Large associations can have a voice mail system that can provide information by category or connect callers with emergency response, repairs, etc.

Clear and frequent communications is fundamental to a successful homeowner association. It builds trust and allays fears that grow when folks don't know what's going on. Rather than get ground up in a Rumor Mill, share the good news and watch harmony grow.

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