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## Online HOA Newsletters

*by Richard Thompson*

In homeowner associations, consistent and effective communication is extremely important to build consensus and to keep the gossip mill at bay. Besides the timely distribution of meeting minutes, newsletters are key to this charge. While printed newsletters have been the norm (and local printers thank you), the internet offers a wonderful alternative to publish newsletters online and eliminate printing, mailing, labeling and postage costs.

Online newsletters offer a number of really cool features that printed copy either can't or would be very expensive to duplicate. They can include color for no extra charge so pictures, graphics and fonts can shine with chromatic intensity. The same feature for printed newsletters ratchets up the cost considerably.

Text, graphics and pictures can be hyperlinked to the HOA's website or other internet locations. Newsletter ads can be linked to the vendor's website where the vendor can prattle on endlessly about the benefits of the product or service. You can even add sound and video features to really jazz it up!

Online newsletters can be delivered to the reader in a variety of ways:

**Email Newsletters** appear within the email message itself and include all the newsletter bells and whistles like fonts, color and graphics. Internet websites like constantcontact.com offer customizable newsletter templates that are easy to use, track delivery and other ingenious features that are free for distribution lists of 50 or less and very inexpensive for larger lists.

**PDF Newsletters** convert Word and WordPerfect documents into a Portable Document Format using Adobe Acrobat software. A companion software called Adobe Reader is available free at adobe.com to enable viewers to open PDF files. PDF newsletters can be mailed as attachments or posted on the HOA's website. Emailing PDF files works well if the file size is relatively small (under 250k). Larger files cause problems for dial up users or those that have a limited email inbox capacity.

**Word Processor or Publisher Software Newsletters.** Both Word and WordPerfect have newsletter composing capability. There are also newsletter specific software like Microsoft Publisher that are layman friendly and come with templates and other helpful features. These files can be distributed as email attachments.

**Website Newsletters** are directly published to the HOA's own website. Both website posted and PDF newsletters offer a number of advantages in that past newsletters can be archived and each newsletter can be searched by key words.

When crafting the newsletter itself, there are a number of basic formatting recommendations:

- Use of Fonts. Use only a few different fonts and type sizes. Newsletters are commonly done in

Times Roman and Arial, which are easiest to read. Choose one of these for your basic text and several of the thousands of others for titles. Use bold, italics and color sparingly and for emphasis.

- Use Columns. Follow the example of magazines and newspapers by using two or three columns. Articles are much easier to read in that layout.
- Use Pictures & Graphics. Images make the newsletter more eye-catching. But keep the file size small (10-50k) so they don't slow the load time for viewers that are still using dial up connections.
- Use Text Boxes. Text boxes are floating fields can be placed anywhere in the newsletter either lining up with columns or straddling them. The background can be shaded with color and the borders have a number of options.

Getting the word out that the newsletter is available is a snap. Simply email a distribution list that the newsletter is available and attach it or include a link to the newsletter's location. It's helpful to include a brief description of articles to woo better response.

One obstacle to email newsletters is delivering the goods to computer challenged members. But let's face it, there is a high price associated with printed communications in both labor and hard costs. These costs often discourage newsletter production or reduce the frequency.

Fortunately, there is no law that says newsletters, meeting minutes and other HOA communications (other than legal notices) need to be snail mailed. To encourage use of email delivery, why not give consenting members a credit of \$25 a year? The HOA will save an unnecessary expense, reduce paper and the members that drive the savings enjoy the savings.

If your newsletters are not all they could be, why not explore the fascinating world of online publishing? Dramatically lower the cost and production work while improving the quality of the product. This is good news indeed.

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