



START SPREADING THE NEWS:

BY BOB GOURLEY

HOW BETTER COMMUNICATIONS CREATE BETTER COMMUNITIES

Psst! Want to know a secret?

The best way to grow mushrooms is to keep them in the dark.

Want to know another secret? That same formula will alienate condominium homeowners. After all, they're not mushrooms!

As silly as that may sound, some communities treat their homeowners like mushrooms. They keep them in the dark by not providing them with enough information about what is happening on their property. Other communities try to get the message out but fail for lack of resources or commitment. What's worse is that communities that are struggling with their communication needs are generally the same ones that struggle in other areas. Communities that communicate well tend to thrive. I have two examples to share.

My wife and I bought our first condominium in 1984. We bought in to the dream that had been promised by the billboard promoting the property. Within a year, that dream turned into a nightmare.

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The unit we had purchased was fine but the latest addition to the property was having all sorts of problems, including a developer who had just filed for bankruptcy protection. To cover the cost of hiring a new contractor and hiring a law firm to sue the old one, all unit owners were assessed \$5,000. There was no advance notice – just a note inserted with our monthly common fee statement.

What amazed me throughout the process was how little information had been shared with the homeowners about the problems the property had been experiencing. The management company had been working hard behind the scenes to line up a new contractor to finish the new units. The board had been meeting regularly to take steps to protect the homeowners' interests. Yet no one took the time to communicate these things in an open manner, which led to homeowners feeling that we had been

swindled and lied to. Rumors were rampant and they became "facts" to the uninformed.

Years later, I found myself on the other side of the coin. While serving as a board president of an aging complex, I had to make decisions that would involve homeowners parting with substantial amounts of cash to maintain and update their property. Having been through similar situations in the past as a homeowner, I decided that the best strategy was to share as much information as possible between my fellow homeowners, board members and the management company. It turned out that by sharing information, new and innovative solutions were found. Best of all, no one felt left out or uninformed. Homeowners had suggestions that actually saved money on the improvements. Instead of dividing the community, it actually brought us together. What a different result from what I had experienced almost 20 years ago!

The most successful community managers that I have known have been excellent communicators. They know that they have a story to tell and they make sure that it is told well and told often. To build a better community through better communication, board members also need to tell their story well and tell it often. It is more important than ever to make sure the channels of communication between managers, boards of directors and homeowners are as open as possible.

HOW WILL YOU TELL YOUR STORY?

There are more ways than ever to tell your story. I have found that homeowners still prefer a printed newsletter. If your association has made the move to a virtual community, your newsletter can be posted to your website as well.

Your newsletter will need to inform. It should also entertain. You can't use the medium to lecture and expect homeowners to read it or even look forward to their next issue. Be sure to include human-interest stories. Consider printing interesting statistics or stories from CAI. It needs to be graphically appealing. Let the English poet John Keats inspire you. He told us, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Make your communication a thing of beauty.

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Your distribution list is also vitally important. I recommend that in addition to all residents – owners, tenants and landlords – other select folks should also be kept current on what's happening in your community. This list may include vendors, all members of the management team, local government officials and others.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

The long-term results are happier homeowners, less work for the board and a more efficient use of the manager. Better communities create higher property values and more desirable neighborhoods. Of course, along the way you will encounter both fans and critics.

Your fans will be excited that a professional effort is being put forth. A quality newsletter creates its own sense of commu-

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WHO WILL TELL YOUR STORY?

There is a great debate about who is in the best position to tell your story and who should be responsible for getting out the word. Control of the process is critical if good communications are to be achieved. Community managers, board members and even homeowners themselves will each have a different agenda for getting their message out. While I think all parties need to participate in the process, it is my firm belief that the manager should be the driving force behind the communications process and for good reason.

Community managers are hired to conduct the business of the association. While their duties are varied and many, managers are the ultimate business authority within the association. The board is entirely a group of volunteers. Homeowners with specific agendas are dangerous people to let control communication. It just doesn't make sense to leave such a vital element up to volunteers with personal agendas.

nity pride. They will be glad to have their need for curiosity satisfied by a regularly scheduled publication. They will have ideas to improve the newsletter and information that they would like included.

Your critics will argue that it is too expensive. Understand that their true concern is value. The long-term value of good communications becomes self-evident as time goes by. You will win them over with time so be patient and true to your course. Asking them to contribute may be a good short-term strategy to get their active participation.

In the 1989 movie “Field of Dreams,” actor Kevin Costner's character hears a voice that proclaims, “If you build it, he will come.” So it is with communications for homeowners in better communities. If you build a solid base of communication, the community will come together and grow. If you keep your association members in the dark, the community will not thrive. So start spreading the news and keep the darkness for growing mushrooms.

Bob Gourley is one of the founders of MyEZCondo. He also serves as board president of Captain's Walk.