



COMMUNITY BUILDER

Virtual Meetings: What We've Learned This Past Year

Community associations have had to make many adjustments to operations during the past year, perhaps the most revolutionary being the switch from in-person to virtual meetings. It is true that community leaders, and the industry as a whole, were forced to make an almost overnight change to holding all virtual meetings.

Despite the sudden change and challenges faced, there is a consensus that the shift to virtual meetings has been positive and has proven beneficial for many associations. Board Members praise having more efficient and productive meetings while managers report feeling a better work/life balance. Even homeowners have relayed satisfaction with the convenience and ease of access to association meetings. So, it is safe to say that virtual meetings will continue to play a vital role in community operations and may even become the new normal.



Over the past year, Sentry Management has produced several educational articles around this change. Topics included using the various platforms available, tips for running successful meetings, and strategies for holding annual meetings and elections electronically (if permitted by governing documents and State Laws.) These articles are still an excellent resource, and Board Members can access them through the Board Room in the CommunityPro® Portal.

During the year, our team members have had to navigate the many challenges of running effective virtual meetings. We had a chance to hear feedback from several about the lesser-known tips and tricks that genuinely help run an effective meeting. So, in addition to the standard advice such as continuing to follow Robert's Rules and sticking to an agenda, here are some of the best tips Board Members can use for their virtual meetings:

Practice, practice, practice!

Time and again, we have seen that Boards that hold a short practice run ahead of the actual event are more successful in ensuring a smooth and efficient meeting. This effort allows individuals who will speak or appear on camera to test their settings and understand the platform's controls.

Making use of a webcam? Check the positioning/framing in advance.

Board Members intending to share their cameras should have a practice of their own. Use your system to see a preview of the camera position or record yourself and play it back. Make sure your lighting is good – remembering that a lighted background will cause a shadow effect on the individual. The position of the camera is best from a straight-on point of view. If you're utilizing multiple screens, make sure you're reading from the screen near your camera. Otherwise, it may appear that you are speaking into thin air.

Make use of the screen sharing features.

The best tip for ensuring a more engaged audience? Put something on the screen! A simple presentation is generally well-received by attendees. At a minimum, share the agenda so that everyone can follow along.

Always appoint a moderator/facilitator.

The most crucial step to running a smooth virtual meeting? Identifying an individual to help run the meeting who is familiar with the platform to be used. Whether it be GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or any other service, ensure that an individual is appointed to help troubleshoot issues, share a screen, moderate questions, and possibly mute audience members if noise or feedback is an issue. The individual could be a board member or a team member from Sentry Management, and even a community volunteer.

Require group-wide mute.

Whether it be a board meeting or a membership meeting, the best practice is to require attendees to stay muted while the board or presenters are speaking. This action helps to control background noise and feedback, which ensures a clearer transmission for all. Most importantly, it allows the board and presenters to run an organized and controlled meeting.

They've got questions, and you've got answers!

Consider in advance how the board and presenters will field the questions of attendees. We encourage attendees to either submit their questions in advance of the meeting or use the platform's chat/question interface to communicate. This way, the board can systematically answer questions and ensure everyone's concerns are addressed. Another preference is to hold questions until the end of the presentation and designate a planned amount of time for answering and addressing any questions, concerns, or comments of the audience.

Membership vote required? Plan ahead.

If an agenda item for an annual or special membership meeting will require a vote of the owners, extra care and caution will need to be taken. First and foremost, be sure to consult with the association's legal counsel regarding the association's options for voting. Can ballots be collected before or after the meeting? Can an electronic voting system be used? Is a vote of 'raised hands' in the virtual meeting adequate? The answers to these questions will depend heavily upon the parameters found within the governing documents and state laws.

While the desire is often to return to "normal", we can say with a level of certainty that the switch to virtual meetings as a regular course of business is here to stay. We encourage Board Members to continually evaluate their meeting practices and make an effort to implement the tips in this article and other resources provided by Sentry Management.

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