



## Communicating to a Diverse Group of Homeowners

History remembers the leaders who knew how to communicate their message and inspire a following. They stood in town squares, on tree stumps, and appeared on our living room TVs, rallying people to the cause of the day. What made those messages come through so clearly? Was it a unique way with words or simply the importance of the message itself? Perhaps the leaders of yesterday had an advantage in capturing attention because there were fewer outlets for receiving information. Would the message still come through as well today when our communication options are as plentiful and diverse as the intended recipients?



Community leaders don't have to be great orators to successfully communicate with their residents, especially when the message is more informational than aspirational. To be successful in reaching community members, we need to know what, when, why and how to communicate. Who do we need to reach? What is the message? When does the community need to receive it? Why are we communicating—is it purely informational, or are we soliciting action or a response? How should the message be communicated?

**Communication through social media:** The days where neighbors talk over fences may be fading away, but residents still want to create a sense of community and share resources, recommendations or alert each other to issues impacting the neighborhoods. Homeowners will get information about your community online whether your Board participates in the social media forums or not. Be proactive and strive to become the source of news and events for your community. Consider having an “official” Facebook or other media page and actively monitor the content. Official pages are particularly effective in countering unofficial or rogue homeowner pages or undesirable Nextdoor forums. Always urge residents to check for information on official sites.

When communities choose to use any method of social media to communicate to owners, it's wise to adopt a social media policy, reviewed by the association attorney, to ensure there are rules and remedies for posts that go astray. Some platforms allow for stricter administrative controls, such as disabling comments or adjusting privacy settings to limit who can see the content. Boards should review these controls to make informed decisions about the platform that works best. Boards (or their designated administrator) must also be vigilant in monitoring content to guard against harassment, discrimination and cyberbullying. With this in mind, however, posts critical of Board decisions don't generally rise to that level so removing dissenting opinions posted by residents may not be appropriate. The adopted social media

policy should guide those decisions. Boards should be aware that social media won't reach everyone, so it should not be the only means to communicate critical information.

**Tip:** The association's official social media account should be clearly identified and should be the only one used by association volunteers and managers. While it's tempting to correct misstatements on unofficial pages, any post by community leaders can tie them to that page and open the door of responsibility for monitoring all the posts.

**Official communication with the community:** The U.S. Post Office is alive and well, and in some instances, the best (and only) means to communicate some messages. Governing Documents may require that certain items like annual meeting notices and budgets be mailed to all owners of record. In communities that have not embraced new technology, or when there is a need to communicate with both an owner and tenant, the mail may still be the way to go.

Email blasts and SMS messages are good tools when there's a need for immediate messaging. If an elevator is down or trash collection is cancelled, these forms of "push" notifications are quick and effective in reaching a large number of residents. However, these methods require residents to provide contact information and to "opt in" to receiving these methods of communication. Like social media, we can't expect the message to reach everyone, so it should not be the only means to communicate critical information.

**Old fashioned methods:** Sometimes, the message warrants a meeting. Complex or sensitive topics may need to be addressed in person and allow for the inclusion of expert resources, such as law enforcement or the association attorney. Some communities may choose to combine the traditional meeting with a live stream, so residents who can't attend in person are still able to hear important information. Flyers and community signage may be appropriate for reaching all owners in an area, for example, a project that requires vehicle relocation. Communities with non-English speaking residents may want to consider bilingual flyers.

**When not to communicate:** In this age of constant news, there's a misconception that transparency means all-access, all the time. In community associations, Boards have a duty of confidentiality and an obligation to mitigate exposure to lawsuits. Legal issues, personnel or individual unit matters, and matters where the facts are unclear, are typically not appropriate for distribution. In addition, community leaders should steer away from giving an individual opinion on a topic under consideration by the Board, or getting drawn into an online argument. Finally, outside media inquiries should be handled in accordance with an adopted media policy by the designated association spokesperson, ensuring that the association leaders speak with one voice.

**Communication Tips:** Any type of communication should be informative, timely, and worth reading. Keep the following tips in mind when writing for your community.

**Keep articles short.** Get to the point, and use headings and bullet points to grab readers' eyes

**Remember to proofread.** Use a second set of eyes to review

**Share the good news.** Communicate accomplishments of the Association

**Highlight and recognize volunteers.** Volunteers are the lifeblood of the Association—promote them

**Use compelling pictures and graphics.**

We are fortunate to have so many options available to communicate with community members. A thoughtful approach to deciding which platform is most appropriate for the message and the target audience will improve the efficacy of our outreach—no tree stump required.

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