

Communicating with Your Community of Homeowners

In a condo or homeowners association (HOA) community, relationship building between the HOA board and members is important. Since homeowners have a high personal stake in their investments, it is important to communicate problems, issues and board decisions that impact them in a timely manner.

Poor communication may lead to the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of information, which could cost your HOA money in the long term if a member decides to file a claim.

But effective communication is more than just publishing a quarterly newsletter or distributing copies of board meeting minutes. A proactive communication program—one which uses appropriate communication channels and promotes an environment where everyone is well-informed—is a useful way to create harmony in the HOA community.

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Keys to Effective HOA Communication

Whether it's oral or written communication, the following questions and answers will help you reach HOA members effectively.

What are the characteristics of the audience?

Consider the personal characteristics of your members and what may be the most appropriate ways to communicate with them. For example, are the majority of your HOA members comfortable communicating through email or social networking tools, or are printed communications always preferred?

Do you have community members' contact information?

Always keep contact information for all HOA members on file and current, and make sure new members to the association are aware of how information will be communicated. This ensures they will know where and when to expect important information that impacts them.

How frequently is communication needed?

Some HOA members desire to communicate frequently; others prefer to be left alone. But it's crucial that all members receive important HOA information in a timely manner.

Keeping members up to date—especially regarding significant decisions and changes that affect them—is the foremost purpose of a communications program. For distributing other, less important yet relevant information, determine a schedule (e.g. a monthly newsletter) so members know when to expect information.

What is the HOA's budget for communications?

Publishing a printed, color newsletter may not be the best way to use association dollars for HOAs with limited budgets. For other HOAs, it may be adequate, or even expected. Once you've determined your association's budget for communications, you can choose the best mediums for disseminating information.

Do communications support a two-way conversation?

Whether communicating orally or through written mediums, listening is an integral part of communication. Encourage members to join the conversation, whether it's submitting ideas for a newsletter article, posting in an online forum or attending a board meeting. Homeowners who feel like their voice is being heard are more likely to feel like a part of the community.

HOA Communication Tools

Here are some examples of tools you can use to communicate:

Newsletters

One valuable tool for communicating timely information to HOA members throughout the year is a newsletter. Publishing relevant news about members, the HOA and the community is a good way to cultivate relationships between all parties involved. Some HOAs print their newsletters; others distribute them electronically. Avoid broadcasting information, such as a list of those delinquent in paying dues, which would humiliate members.

Email

Email is a quick and inexpensive way to send out information, including newsletters and board meeting minutes. However, consider that communicating solely through an electronic medium may not be the best for all circumstances. If the board has to confront an issue with a homeowner, or if board members need to discuss a problem, communicating in person or holding a board meeting may be best option.

Social Networking and Online Forums:

Depending on the characteristics of your HOA audience, social networking tools can be an effective and inexpensive way to share information and encourage members to connect with one another. Similarly, online forums can be a useful channel for members to informally discuss issues. However, it may be a good idea to have a board member monitor the forum. Forums shouldn't be used solely for airing grievances and bickering.

Posters, Signs and Bulletin Boards:

Physically posting information in relevant locations, such as posting rules near the swimming pool or clubhouse, is necessary. Hanging bulletin boards in common areas is also a medium for posting board meeting minutes, rules and other information—such as flyers for HOA events and notices. You can also allow members to post information, such as flyers, but make sure the board or property manager approves notices before they are posted.

Board Meeting Communications

When homeowners join the association or prior to joining, copies of the HOA's bylaws, governing documents and other rules should be provided to them. As homeowners have the responsibility to comply with the rules outlined in the documents, the board should ensure these documents are readable, easy to understand and always accessible.

Since the most important information to communicate is board decisions and issues that impact members, official documents and board meeting minutes should be distributed to members promptly. Some HOAs choose to print copies or email meeting minutes after every board meeting. Other HOAs make the minutes available in a minutes book, and post them in common areas or online for members to view. Whatever method you choose, make sure that all decisions made during board meetings are communicated to members as soon as possible.

Legal Considerations

To avoid lawsuits, private information should never be posted on social media sites or published in emails or newsletters. Confidential information discussed in board meetings should be recorded in separate meeting minutes, and should not be available to other members.

Also, keep in mind that communications could be used as evidence in lawsuits against the HOA. So whether you're writing a newsletter, meeting minutes or an email, it should be reflective of your association's professionalism and in line with the HOA's bylaws.

Contact Valent Group today for more resources on best practices for managing your HOA.

For more information about Valent Group's condominium association (COA) specialization, please visit www.valentgroup.com/condoassociations

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