FirstService
RESIDENTIAL

How to Improve Communication in Your Community:

A Recipe for Association Success

Effective communication is at the heart of every successful community association

Effective communication is at the heart of every successful community association. It helps create better relationships among board members, residents and your property management company. It lets everyone know what is expected of them. It contributes to the association's sense of community. And it ensures that residents know what to do in an emergency.

This guide looks at what it takes for your board to communicate effectively with residents. It also examines the role of technology and offers guidelines for developing an emergency communication plan.

What does great communication look like?

Having your community association function smoothly depends a great deal on keeping the lines of communication open. That means your board must do more than just send out legally mandated meeting notices. Here are 9 principles you can apply to improve the way you communicate with your community.

1. **Plan each communication.** Planning out your message up front will ultimately save you time and prevent potential issues. Determine what your communication needs to accomplish and how far in advance to send it out. Stick to a single topic, and keep it as brief as possible based on residents' current understanding of the issue. Bill Worrall, vice president at FirstService Residential, also recommends keeping a positive tone. "Tone matters more than we think," he explains. "Communications should stay positive and rooted in the values of the community."

2. **Prioritize your communications.** Ideally, you want to inform residents about everything that affects them. However, if you have limited time or resources, focus on high-priority items first, such as meeting notices, financial information and policy changes.

3. **Be transparent.** Open communication establishes trust, encourages participation and helps facilitate compliance, but some boards are guarded about sharing information because they fear potential litigation. However, this approach can create suspicion. According to Jaime Sikorski, general manager at FirstService Residential, there's a better way to protect the association. "Depending on what you send out, have your attorneys review it," she says. Even if you need to communicate bad news, residents will accept it better if you are honest with them and explain the process that led the board to its decision.

4. **Communicate regularly.** Residents appreciate a regular flow of information. Without it, they may fill voids with misinformation and rumors. If the task is too much for board members to do on their own, engage the help of a committee or your property manager. "You may want to establish a newsletter or social committee that you can rely on to get information out," says Worrall.

5. **Be factual.** Haste can result in distributing inaccurate information. "Never speculate," warns Timothy Snowden, executive director at FirstService Residential. "Just lay out the facts." Sikorski agrees. "Anything you put in writing is out there permanently, so make sure it's factual and unbiased." She also recommends avoiding absolutes like "always" or "never."

6. **Use multiple channels.** "People have different preferences in how they receive communications, so if the goal is to get information into the hands of residents, you should use every available method," says FirstService Residential Vice

President of Strategy and Operations Stephanie Parker. This includes email, your community website and newsletter, text messages, phone calls, flyers, bulletin board announcements and board meetings. Sikorski adds one caveat: "It's best to start out with a written communication so you have some sort of documentation."

Snowden notes that sometimes taking a more grassroots approach to communication works best, as was the case at one association he was involved with. Residents responded negatively when they were informed of a special assessment. "When we tried to hold a town hall, we had people screaming," he says. "So instead, we set up meetings with small groups of owners to discuss the assessment, which was much more effective."

7. **Make communication a two-way street.** Residents need the opportunity to voice their concerns and share their opinions. Reserve time for open discussions at board meetings, and send out surveys to find out what's important to them. You may even want to set up get-togethers where residents can express their views to board members in a casual setting. However, make it clear that the board can only take action during board meetings and only on items that are on the agenda.

8. **Communicate equally with renters.** Any communication you send to homeowners should go out to renters as well. Establish a process for getting their contact information when they first move in, and give them access to your governing documents. Don't assume that their landlords are informing them of your policies or emergency procedures. Above all, remember that today's renter could become tomorrow's homeowner.

9. **Seek out a property management company that values communication.** Your management company should be able to relieve you of the task of developing and sending out resident communications – but only with your consent. "You never want to be surprised that a community manager communicated with your residents without your knowledge," says Parker.

   Look for a company that will develop a welcome packet for new residents that includes your association's rules and regulations, contact information and other important details specific to your property. To make it easy for all residents to conduct community business and obtain information at their convenience, the company should also provide 24/7 customer care support and an online self-service platform. Information on using the online platform should be readily available and be part of the welcome packet as well. In addition, the company should proactively communicate new laws and other changes that could impact your community, seek your feedback so it can improve its service and offer board training to help you become a better board member.

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The Role of Technology in Communication

These days, you have a variety of technology tools at your disposal to communicate more easily: your community website, mass communication capabilities, email and social media. Here are some tips for using these tools.

Community website. A community website can be a great way to keep residents informed about community events and activities, policy changes and emergency instructions. It should also enable members of your association to stay connected with the community anytime and from any device. Residents should have access to forms and documents, including meeting minutes and financial statements. In addition, the website should give residents the option of sharing contact information for a community directory and making payments. Keep your website updated, and make sure it addresses the unique requirements of your community.

In Florida, any condo association with at least 150 units is required to create a community website that provides residents with access to governing documents, bids for materials and services over $500 and other community documents. Those documents must be maintained on the website for one year.

Mass communication tools. An advanced mass communication system will enable you or your management company to easily provide instructions during an emergency and to inform residents of meetings and other important information via SMS text message, email or recorded voice message. If you are using voice messages, be sure to keep them to no more than 30 seconds each.

Email. When communicating by email, you should never use a personal or work email address. Instead, board members should establish email addresses that are used exclusively for association business. Always maintain a professional tone and never discuss legal matters in an email. Keep in mind that if it's something you wouldn't be willing to say face to face, you shouldn't write it in an email either.

Social media. Although social media can be tricky to manage, that doesn't necessarily mean you should avoid it. If you choose to use social media, be sure to monitor it closely. To handle social media sensibly, first determine your purpose. Is it to expand awareness of your community's brand, to build community spirit, to keep members informed or all of these? Once you know why you want to use this channel to communicate, establish ownership of your social media presence. Who will monitor it, respond to comments and alert others who need to know? You may need to have more than one person (perhaps a board member and someone from your management team).

Next, decide which social media channels you want to use. Generally, Facebook and LinkedIn are best for posting information and events. Create a social media policy that specifies what can be posted and by whom and that gives the board the right to remove posts it deems inappropriate or harmful to the association. Worrall also recommends creating social media accounts even on channels you don't intend to use. "If someone else opens an account with your community name, you can't control it," he says, "so get control of anything close to your community's name first."

Emergency Communication

The most critical time for your association to have a solid communication plan is during an emergency. After all, if you haven't communicated your emergency preparedness strategy to residents, staff and vendors, lives and property could be at risk. "Without a plan, you will fail," warns Worrall. "The question is how badly you will fail. During an emergency, people simply can't think."

To make sure that everyone knows what to do in an emergency, follow these 5 communication tips:

1. **Communicate your emergency preparedness plan all year long.** Residents may overlook an email, forget what they were told or be new to the community, so reiterate your emergency preparedness plan at regular intervals. "Tell residents in advance where to look for information during an emergency," Parker advises, and use a range of communication channels so you're sure to reach everyone. If your area is prone to seasonal storms, remind residents of your emergency procedure a month or so before the season begins.

2. **Implement mass communication tools.** As mentioned earlier, having reliable mass communication tools is crucial in an emergency. You should also manage residents' expectations about the kind of information they can expect to receive from you. "There's a high dependency on phones during emergencies," explains Michael Bodner, director of property solutions at FirstService Residential. "So be sure you're not clogging the phone lines by repeating information that residents can get elsewhere." For example, rather than providing updates on weather or road conditions, stick to community-specific information. Be prepared to go back to non-tech options, like posting flyers or going door to door, if conditions affect phones or electrical power.

3. **Spend time training onsite staff.** Scheduled reminders and drills will help keep your onsite staff prepared. Of course, if you work with a professional property management company, it will be the company's responsibility to keep staff properly trained. Work with local emergency management workers, too, since they will know how to prepare for common weather emergencies in your area.

4. **Maintain a list of people who will need assistance.** Keep this list updated by periodically asking residents to let you know if they will need help during an emergency. "Keep the list at your front desk or other location where first responders can easily get it," says Snowden. "Tell residents who will need help to stay in their units in an emergency because that's where first responders will go to look for them."

5. **Communicate with vendors.** Your trusted vendors need to know what you expect of them before, during and after an emergency. Conversely, your board needs to be aware of what your vendors are capable of and what resources they have available to keep your community safe. Revisit your emergency expectations with your vendors prior to storm seasons.

There's no doubt that communication plays a major role in how well your community association operates, but getting it right can be one of your board's biggest challenges. Follow these recommendations and you'll be well on your way toward making your community better than ever. If you need help putting together an effective communication program, contact **FirstService Residential.**

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About FirstService Residential

FirstService Residential is North America's largest manager of residential communities and the preferred partner of HOAs, community associations and strata corporations in the U.S. and Canada. FirstService Residential's managed communities include low-, mid- and high-rise condominiums and cooperatives; single-family homes; master-planned, lifestyle and active adult communities; and rental and commercial properties.

With an unmatched combination of deep industry experience, local market expertise and personalized attention, FirstService Residential delivers proven solutions and exceptional service that add value, enhance lifestyles and make a difference, every day, for every resident and community it manages. FirstService Residential is a subsidiary of FirstService Corporation, a North American leader in the property services sector. For more information, visit www.fsresidential.com.

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