

Newsletters

A recent study indicated that 93 percent of the people who receive a community association newsletter read it all or most of the time. That means your newsletter is a valuable and important way to communicate with residents. Whether you are creating or revamping your association's newsletter, think about what you want to include and what you want to accomplish.

Audience:

Most newsletters are intended for residents, but bear in mind that not all residents are owners and not all owners are residents. In most instances, your audience will also include tenants, managers, and, in some cases, developers, local officials, and others. Consideration of your audience will determine the tone and style of your newsletter. The size and nature of the community and the ages, backgrounds, and lifestyles of residents will also play a part.

Content:

Message from the board. Ask a different board member to write a message for each issue. Make sure all of their names appear in every issue.

Committee Reports. Keep owners informed and aware of the association's moves.

Status Reports. How's that repair project coming? When will the resurfacing be finished? Will the pool open before Memorial Day?

Financial Reports. Keep to the bottom line. Financial reports can sometimes be dull, so use graphs and charts whenever possible.

Minutes. Meeting minutes or recaps keep the community up-to-date on the business of the association and remove any mystery that might surround the board's actions. If you do keep a recap, be sure to include a full list of motions passed.

Rule Reminders. Rules that are violated repeatedly can be highlighted and – perhaps more importantly – explained in a regular department.

Events. When there's a pool party or seminar on safety, let everyone know by keeping a two – to three month event calendar in the same place on the same page of every issue. Include meeting notices.

Volunteer spotlight. In addition to publishing the work and reports of committees, give some recognition and appreciation to individual committee members.

Contact corner. Print the name, address, and phone number of the management company. If you have an emergency number, with a management company or otherwise, put it in every issue.

Letters. Publishing letters to the editor, board, or manager gives residents a voice. Give due consideration to all letters, and publish a mix of viewpoints.

Local news. Area news that affects residents, such as taxation issues or zoning changes, can make a strong contribution to your newsletter.

Personal notes. Identify new employees, acknowledge promotions, and recognize resident accomplishments.

Welcome newcomers. Just remember to get their permission before printing their names.

Presentation:

Put some zing in your headlines. Draw attention to the information you're supplying by putting a good headline on top. "Annual Meeting Held" won't get as much attention as "Board Announces Plan to Raise Assessments." Puns, rhymes, and wordplay on the titles of songs, books, and movies, and TV shows will also help pull readers into an article. Be creative.

Give all of the facts. Every story should give the basic who, what, when, where, why, and how. Never assume that your readers know what you are talking about.

Make articles easy to scan. Newsletter articles should be short and easy to read. People are flooded with information, and they don't have time to read heavily detailed articles. This may seem at odds with "Give all of the facts," but detailed, contextual information actually will make an article that much easier for busy people to read.

Consider different or creative ways to present information. A question and answer format, for example, might help you explain an assessment hike.

Don't bury information. Important information should come at the beginning of an article, not the end.

Proofread. Typographical errors are unavoidable, but too many will destroy your credibility. Each issue should have at least two proof cycles to catch mistakes in high profile items like headlines or pulled quotes. Always check the spelling of names; people don't like it when you get their name wrong.

Format and Design:

Good content keeps you reading, but good format and design get your eyes on the page in the first place.

Be consistent in your design. Develop a template and stick with it. This blueprint helps set the newsletter apart from other information your residents receive.

Don't be afraid of white space. To avoid a junky, cluttered look, allow a margin of three-quarters of an inch around the edge of the page. Allow a quarter- to half-inch between columns. A clean look organizes the page, frames the text, and gives everything breathing room.

Include photographs and art. A good piece of art draws the reader in and emphasizes your point. But don't feel that every inch of space must be cluttered. Art should never detract from an article. Most art supply dealers and some book stores have clip art that can easily be reproduced. When you've finally picked an illustration, write a caption that complements it.

Cost Considerations:

Writing. It's likely that the actual content will need to come from your association leaders or its manager, but you can also solicit articles from members of the community. A professional writer can be useful in a "reporter" role or for rewriting contributions from members.

Editing. You can use a professional editor to get your raw material into shape, or call on a volunteer with experience who is willing to help out. A good editor will create a cohesive whole out of the varied contributions assembled for the newsletter, ensure that nothing is being printed that is inaccurate or inappropriate, and generally improve the quality of the finished piece.

Design. Desktop publishing has become a common part of word processing, giving everyone some experience with layout or design. That doesn't mean that all designs are acceptable. Be discriminating. Find a newsletter design that you like, and ask your designer to imitate or adapt those elements that appeal to you.

Distribution. Whether you have your newsletter copied or printed will depend will depend on the number of pages you have and the number of copies you need. In general, for low numbers, coping is more economical. The great the number of pages or copies, the more cost-effective printing becomes. If quality is an issue, printing is superior to copying. Printing costs vary widely depending on the type of paper, amount of color used, and numerous other variables. Costs can also vary tremendously depending on the printer you talk to, so shop around.

Advertising:

Develop an advertising policy. Outline your community philosophy and provide guidelines for acceptable products and services. You may decide to allow residents to advertise at reduced or not cost, space permitting, if they are providing services to the community. Include these considerations in your advertising policy.

Develop a rate card. Specify what size ads you accept, how much they cost, when they are due, and whom to contact. Include a short version of your advertising policy. Offer price breaks to advertisers who commit to more than one issue. Provide rate cards to local merchants.

Select the best postal rate. If you include advertising, and mail your newsletter under a status other than first class, check with your post office to be sure that you comply with regulations for bulk-, second-, or third class mail. These classifications will save you money if you mail to a large community, but you will need to obtain a permit if you do so.

Check with your accountant. The revenues you earn may affect your tax-filing status.

Check with your association attorney. Ensure that you aren't incurring unseen liabilities.

Dealing with Bad News:

When news is bad, it's best to deal with it head-on. Announcing it yourself, in your newsletter, gives you the advantage of getting the facts out before rumors and misinformation begin to circulate. Avoiding bad news just gives someone else the opportunity to put you in a defensive position – and makes you look like you have something to hide.

Sometimes bad news is merely the opposing viewpoint, and giving the opposition the chance to be heard may be all that is needed. This is especially true if you're wrestling with a controversial issue; when emotions run high, it's best to give people an outlet to express themselves. You will give your position greater credibility by presenting all sides and dealing with the issue fairly.

Newsletter Policies:

Acceptable content. What constitutes acceptable content? Will controversial political issue be covered, will letters to the editor be printed, and will you publish editorials or opinions?

Control content. Who will decide what gets published in each issue? Will it be an editor, the board, a committee, the manager, or some combination?

Viewpoint. Will the newsletter cover all viewpoints objectively?

Priority. Where will the emphasis be? What types of information will get priority? Will your policy be to focus on information of interest to the greatest numbers of members?

Accuracy. What is the minimum level of verification required before a story will be published?

Legalities. You likely will require your newsletter content to adhere to the association's governing documents and to avoid libel.

Advertising. What types of advertisements are acceptable to the association? How much ad revenue can your newsletter earn according to your tax status?

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