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Plugging Into a Community That Clicks

By Ann Cameron Siegal
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The days of exchanging neighborhood news solely over the back fence or at the local post office are long gone. And often, by the time community newsletters are written, printed and distributed, the information is stale.

Instead, many homeowner and civic associations are turning to Web sites as their key communication tool. Some draw you in by touting a community's setting, architecture or neighborliness. Others bark, "We have rules and we're sticking to them!" Many are helpful; many others are out of date.

So how do you pull together a Web site that serves your community? Whether your association is starting from scratch or wants to upgrade an existing site, there's a lot to learn from effective sites. There's also a lot to learn from sites that miss the mark.

"Part of the challenge is how do you want to present yourself?" said Paul Heller of Heller Information Services in Rockville.

At the top of its main page, one Springfield
townhouse community recently heralded, "Latest Headline News: Pet waste has now become a problem . . . " That is probably not the first mental image you want readers to have.

Yes, it may be a neighborhood concern, but remember that your audience includes more than current residents. Prospective residents, real estate agents and nosy reporters are also reading.

Whether they read further depends upon first impressions. The key is to strike a balance between the broad picture and the minutiae. Define your priorities and consider your audience.

Narrowing It Down

Obviously, an association of mega-single-family homes will have different needs than a cozy townhouse community. The Web sites of associations with fundraisers, swim teams and frequent holiday celebrations will probably look different from those where the main interest is beautifying the entrance. A neighborhood with a lot of children will have different links on its site than one made up of older adults.

Kathy Chamberlain said there were only about five community Web sites in the District when she started one eight years ago for the Hillcrest civic association in Southeast.

"Hillcrest has always been an involved community," she said, so pulling residents together wasn't her goal. "The idea was to put a positive face on a neighborhood in Southeast," because that quadrant of the city often receives negative attention.

Farm It Out?

That depends. What kind of time and expertise do residents have? A site that could take volunteers weeks to pull together can often be completed in a few days by professional Web designers.

"Starting from scratch is the real killer," said Doug Boulter, webmaster for Virginia Hills in Fairfax County.

For those who prefer to do things in-house, Boulter said, "Now there are automated ways to design Web pages if you don't know hand coding." Programs such as Dreamweaver or RapidWeaver walk you through the process.

At Hallcrest Heights in McLean, Clark Tyler, the civic association president, hired a high school student to design the initial Web site. Tyler and other volunteers maintain the site within the community. Boulter is retired but has a background in Web design and has handled Virginia Hills' site since 1999.

Retaining the option to update the site in-house is important so information can be kept timely.

Once a site is designed, it needs somewhere to live. To put it in housing terms, Heller said, a professional Web designer is like the home decorator. "I'm like the landlord," he said of his Web-hosting business.

Web hosting can cost as little as $10 a month. Chamberlain said Hillcrest uses Earthlink for about $250 a year.

Plan ahead and consider what happens if your trusted Web designer/host/volunteer moves, travels extensively or becomes too busy to follow through. Heller suggested that you always have several folks involved in the process, so that all that information isn't residing in just one brain. Tyler advised that you get all instructions written down so when the original person moves on, others can take over.

Keeping It Current

Nothing says "this community doesn't care" like an outdated site where the last meeting notice is from 2004.

Don't put more on your site that you are willing to update. That requires checking all sections on a regular basis. For example, are your links to public officials accurate? Several community sites in Virginia still list George Allen as a U.S. senator, even though he lost his 2006 reelection bid.

"If you are going to commit to a community Web site, you have to keep it up-to-date," Chamberlain said. She spends about two hours a week on the Hillcrest site. "You don't have to make this complicated. There are other people in the community who do the documents, minutes and newsletters. I just put the information up on the site."

What About the Newsletter?

Not necessarily. Many associations see the online posting of their news as a big cost saver, especially if newsletter postage is a factor. However, Boulter said that hand-delivering his community's newsletter, the Echo, to its 840 homes is a break-even proposition.

"As long as we have delivery people," he said, "we will continue with the hard-copy version." It takes 20 volunteers about an hour each to cover Virginia Hills' 17 routes.

Many residents like to have their newsletters in hand and to save them for reference. And many older residents don't use computers.

Only the current newsletter issue and one previous one are posted on the Virginia Hills Web site. "We don't archive all of our issues," Boulter said.

In contrast, Chamberlain said Hillcrest archives all of its past newsletters.

Getting the paper newsletter out is easy in Hallcrest Heights, with only 150 townhouses. Teen volunteers who deliver the Herald and other fliers to each door not only earn community service hours but also get to know their neighbors, Tyler said.

Tyler, Boulter and Chamberlain all see their respective Web sites as the public face of their communities. This is where the first impression of the community's personality, traditions and setting are showcased.

The sites are also popular with absentee landlords and former residents. Chamberlain said she gets e-mails from people across the country who write, "I used to live in Hillcrest, over on . . . . . . Street."

What to Include

A variety of features can be part of your community's Web site. The trick is prioritizing them so that the site is easily navigable, uncluttered, informative and relevant to your readership.

"The hardest part is making sure that what is clear to me will also be clear to the Web user," said Ed Lehmann, webmaster for Waterford in Loudoun County.

First, when purchasing space through your Web hosting service, don't skimp. Allow room for future archived documents or photos.

Use clear menu options, so you can easily have both public and private spaces on your site. Sometimes they overlap. Don't make folks wade through reams of information. Instead, design your site so they can easily find what they need.

Know your audience. Prospective residents may want to see what activities are available for young children. Current residents may need to apply for architectural changes, or may wish to see minutes of the latest board meeting.

Recognizing the changing demographics in Virginia Hills, resident Dena Gollop, a teacher in Arlington, has translated that whole site into Spanish with its own corresponding menu below the main English menu.

Here are some common elements of community sites:

Overview:
This is the part of your site that draws readers in, encouraging them to explore further. What sets your community apart from others? Architectural styles, amenities, social activities? Highlight those, maybe with a photo or two.

Hallcrest Heights posts a "summary" page. Virginia Hills has an efficient site map. For large communities with a lot of data, a "search this site" bar may be useful. They're easily obtained from Google or Yahoo. Make sure your links work.

History:
If you wanted to know about the small cemetery within Springfield's Greentree Village community, you would have a bit of hunting to do online. The history is there, under the enticing title of "Murder at the Mill," but that well-researched piece is buried way down under the legalese-sounding heading of "Homeowners Manual" -- buried so deep that even longtime residents admit to being unfamiliar with the history behind the faded 19th-century headstones on the property.

While a community's history can be useful to outsiders looking in, the accurate presentation of the community's past is also important to current residents. It can also get younger residents interested in learning about the past. When was the community developed? What historical ties does it have to the area or to local families? Did something of historical interest take place there?

There are other options: Middleridge in Fairfax posts a history of the community's street names.

No matter what's included, research it carefully so that the information is accurate.

Calendar: Posting meeting notices, special events and dates for dues payments or newsletter articles will increase participation and cut down on phone inquiries. Lakevale Estates in Vienna posts schedules for its three sports fields. The same should be done for clubhouse reservations.

Discussion forums and e-mail notification:
A password-protected area "for residents only" is useful. Decide whether you want an e-mail list or a message board. The former is a quick way to get notices to residents. The latter allows neighbors to exchange ideas, contractor recommendations and babysitting or dog-walking services. Financial information and neighborhood rosters are also candidates for password-protected pages.

Notification of suspicious activities and lost pets can reach the most people in the shortest time via an e-mail list. Just don't bombard residents with postings.

Heller cautioned that bulk e-mail messages can trigger some spam filters, so your "very important message" may not get delivered. A password-protected message board within your Web site can be an option.

Hallcrest Heights is developing a program to combine an e-mail list with battery-operated strobe lights, like those used by campers. Intended only for emergencies, the lights will be installed at the entrance to the community. "When those are flashing, residents will know to check their e-mail immediately," Tyler said.

Chantilly Highlands in Herndon has a variety of e-mail lists for its various committees such as architectural review and the garden club. The Web site offers a check-off box so residents receive only those updates that are important to them.

Because e-mail lists are often one-way communication vehicles, Chamberlain found them time-consuming. "I put notices out, but the responses all came to me," she said.

She switched Hallcrest to a Yahoo groups e-mail message board where residents can freely correspond with one another, but under a password-protected umbrella. It's easy for residents to get quick responses to such postings as "My dog got out! Have you seen her?" or "Does anyone know a good plumber?"

Time-Saving Possibilities

If done right, a community Web site avoids having residents play phone tag with community leaders for basic information, Boulter said.

Consider:

Increasing participation in polls or surveys with online voting.
Last year when Chantilly Highlands residents were facing school boundary changes, Jeff Parnes, the community's webmaster, posted a survey online so they could indicate preferences.

Making association forms available for downloading.

Guiding residents to assistance outside of the community.
Virginia Hills has a "problem help" section that zeros in on which concerns are handled by local, county, state and federal offices, with links to key officials.

Providing a street map on your site and links to public transportation options -- particularly useful if you have a sprawling community.

Posting seasonal info, whether it's pool hours, gypsy moth information, pollen counts or school emergency announcements.

Posting links to schools. Are you near a college? Park West's community association, near George Mason University, has a college page for students living off campus.

Linking to the surrounding community. Jefferson Manor, south of Alexandria, has a "Where's the nearest . . . ." link to various retail businesses, farmers markets, recreation areas, veterinarians, places of worship and 24-hour emergency care.

Children and pets. Landsdowne near Springfield has a page where residents can post photos of their pets. Greentree Village has a nice rainy-day page with crafts and games for children.

Other Concerns

Several Web site minders pointed out that you want a domain name that is useful and easy to remember. Places such as http://www.registry.com let you search to see whether your choice is available.

A site must load quickly. Whether you handle your site in-house or farm it out, be mindful of the computer capabilities of your readers. Not everyone has high-speed broadband. In places such as Montgomery Village where DSL isn't available, many residents still use dial-up services. Heller advises not to go crazy on graphics. PDF files can also slow a system down.

Should you accept ads or not? That's often a financial decision, but remember, a cluttered page is an unread page. Greentree Village has a separate sponsors page for ads. Viewers can click on ads if they wish but aren't bombarded with things that don't interest them.

The Bottom Line

An attractive Web site doesn't guarantee good community interaction. One Germantown association site that serves more than 300 residences had only one message in its e-mail archives. In the past 12 years, the same handful of names appeared on the minutes of board meetings, with the latest annual meeting having notations that "Tim called the annual meeting to order at 7:42 P.M." followed by, "The annual meeting adjourned at 7:43."

The Web site's attractive Williamsburg blue and peach colors didn't seem to translate into community participation.

There has to be something else that binds a community together. "The magic isn't all in the Web site," Heller said.

Freelance writer Ann Cameron Siegal has profiled more than 100 local neighborhoods for the Where We Live section of The Washington Post.

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A Sampling of Community Sites

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Evaluating your community's Web site? Here are some places to look for ideas:

- Blooms Crossing Homeowners Association (Manassas), http://www.bloomscrossing.org: Clean, straightforward and almost up to date.

- Great Oaks (City of Fairfax), http://www.goha.us: Good "for residents" link.

- Chantilly Highlands (Herndon), http://www.chha.org: Cheerful, small graphics and a touch of humor.

- Cleveland Park (Washington), http://www.clevelandparkdc.org: Clean, with a clever drop-down menu.

- Dupont Circle (Washington), http://www.dupont-circle.com: Well-designed, easy to navigate and almost up-to-date, even though newsletter page is a year old.

- Hallcrest Heights (McLean), http://www.hallcrestheights.org: Geared to real estate agents rather than residents.

- Hillcrest (Washington), http://www.hillcrestdc.com: Plenty of information for newcomers who want to learn about location, houses and history.

- Middleridge Civic Association (Fairfax), http://www.pawpo.com/middleridge: Menu on left keeps readers from having to scroll through info that is not of interest; teaser at top for Neighborhood Watch.

- Montgomery Village (Montgomery County), http://www.montgomeryvillage.com: Mega-community with lots of information. Uncluttered page easy to navigate.

- Norbeck Grove (Olney), http://www.norbeckgrove.com: Nice drop-down menu, search button and links to local traffic cameras.

- Rosecroft Village Homeowners Association (Oxon Hill), http://www.rosecroftvillage.com: Basic but nice.

- Virginia Hills (south of Alexandria), http://www.virginiahills.org: Offers Spanish translation; basic but useful site map at http://www.virginiahills.org/sitemap.html.

- Waterford (Loudoun County), http://www.waterfordva-wca.org: One of the most comprehensive sites, with information for tourists and residents.

-- **Ann Cameron Siegal**

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