

# PLANNING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM

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**com·mu·ni·ca·tion** (k&-"myü-n&-'kA-sh&n)  
1) an act or instance of transmitting;  
2) information communicated by a verbal or written message; 3) a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior; 4) a system (as of telephones) for communicating; 5) technique for expressing ideas effectively (as in speech)

There are two ways to communicate: oral and written contact. Either way, there is a sender, a receiver and a message involved. The structure of your message, and the manner in which you impart information to the residents in your community, should be based on the following considerations:

1. **Intent** – How critical is it that your residents are made aware of the information? If the water must be turned off in a building for a repair, you might try to reach everyone by phone to let them know. You might also leave a flyer in their door. If the pool is going to close after Labor Day Weekend, you can probably communicate this information through your monthly newsletter in August.
2. **Audience** – Who do you need to reach with the message? If one owner has built a deck without the proper approval from the board, you should communicate directly with that person rather than chastise the behavior in the newsletter.
3. **Cost vs. Outcome** – Any critical message that will have significant consequences on the residents or the community should be communicated at any cost. Mail information on an upcoming assessment increase via first class mail rather than trust this information to flyers left in the doors.
4. **Complexity** – Complex messages require more complex communications. A more detailed communication effort will be necessary to explain proposed changes in the Bylaws. Notice that the bridge club has changed the day for their games will require a simpler method.
5. **Effectiveness** – What means of communication will be most effective? A notice in the newsletter stating that there is no parking in front of the clubhouse will be less effective than installing a “No Parking” sign.
6. **Formality vs. Informality** – A letter levying a fine for a rule violation requires specific and formal language. A letter welcoming a new resident to the community should be simple and friendly.

## ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Talking is often the quickest way to provide or gather information, and to receive instant feedback.

### Techniques

1. **Evaluate** what needs to be communicated.
2. Encourage the audience to **listen**, and be sure that you listen in return.
3. Use **effective body language** – a smile or a friendly attitude creates a positive response and the impression that your audience is important and interesting.
4. Present the message in a **positive manner** – use cooperative words and pleasant voice inflections.

## Situations that require good oral communications

1. **One-to-one meetings**.
2. **Telephone conversations** – Misunderstandings are more likely to occur over the phone than in person. Ask for direct feedback to be sure that you have conveyed your message.
3. **Annual meetings** – Very important setting for discussion and reports from the board and the homeowners. Board reports should be positive and should recount accomplishments from prior year and outline goals for next year. The annual meeting is an excellent opportunity to recognize residents who have volunteered their time and effort for the good of the community.
4. **Social gatherings** – Community picnics and parties generate neighborly camaraderie and spirit of community. Avoid getting into too much “business talk” about the association at a social gathering. Rather, spend this time getting to know your neighbors.
5. **Informal meetings** – Some Associations have informational meetings to bring people up to date on what’s going on, or to provide education in safety, nutrition, or other timely issues.

## CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### Verbal

1. **Pace** – Do you speak so rapidly or slowly that people have trouble understanding you?
2. **Tone** – What emotions is your voice communicating? Is there enough variation in my tone to hold people’s attention?
3. **Volume** – Do you speak so loudly or softly that people are not comfortable listening to you?
4. **Pitch** – Do you speak on such a high or low note that people have difficulty listening to you?
5. **Choice of Words** – Is your choice of words appropriate for the situation and the listener?

### Nonverbal

1. **Facial Expressions** – Do your facial expressions reinforce or contradict what you are saying?
2. **Eye Contact** – What messages do you communicate with your use or nonuse of eye contact?
3. **Hand Movements and Gestures** – Do your hand movements and gestures re-enforce or distract from you are saying?
4. **Postures** – What messages do you communicate with the way you sit and stand and move?

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**PLANNING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS...from page 8.****WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS**

Any complex or important information should be communicated in writing.

**Techniques**

1. **Convey ideas in a friendly and professional manner** – Your underlying message should be:

“This is your association and you are an important part of its success. We want you to be informed and we invite your input.”

2. **Use good writing techniques** – be brief, clear and accurate.

3. **Select the best method of delivery** – All letters should be sent first class mail. E-mail is fast becoming a viable method to get information out quickly. Some notices and bulletins can be hand delivered by committee members or volunteers. (Be sure to check with your association’s attorney or insurance agent to confirm that the association is protected if a volunteer is injured.)

4. **Decide when to send out information** – For instance, members should be informed of the meetings at least 10 days before the meeting. Date sensitive material or information should be received in plenty of time for owners to respond.

5. **Determine the extent of coverage that is necessary to achieve the purpose of the message** – Association communication does not necessarily affect every member in the community, every time. Transmit your message to the right people.

**NEWSLETTERS**

*Your newsletter is your opportunity to build your community’s spirit and morale.*

Your newsletter is the best way to relay a variety of information. It should be easy to read, full of important information about people and events, and timely. Most importantly, the newsletter must contain information the community needs to know.

**Style**

Consider your audience when choosing your articles. A family-orientated community will appreciate a special section for children. A retirement community may be interested in activities for senior citizens.

**Contents**

Articles may include social events, meeting notices, welcome to newcomers, status of contracted repair work, updates from board meetings, summary of financial report, reports from committees, calendar, important emergency numbers, local news that affects the association. An article in the newsletter is an excellent way to recognize and thank volunteers.

**Cost**

The association’s budget should include funds to produce at least a minimal newsletter. Consider your owners needs and expectations when determining how often to produce the newsletter. For some communities it is a stretch to gather enough information to produce a newsletter on a quarterly basis. For others, there is a wealth of news each month. Only you can tell how often is often enough.

The least expensive way to produce your newsletter is by using volunteers to prepare the newsletter, have it copied at a local copy store, use white paper and have it hand delivered by volunteered. Professional printsetting, colored paper or ink, and postage all add cost. You must consider if the benefit of any (or all) of things will outweigh the cost.

**Advertising**

Some newsletters accept advertising as a way to offset costs. Local merchants are usually pleased to advertise to your market. If you choose to do

this, be sure that you include a disclaimer that indicates the association does not assume responsibility for the goods or services offered. Check with your attorney on how this disclaimer should be worded to protect the association. If you do place ads in the newsletter, the ratio for advertising should be no more than 30%.

**TIPS TO IMPROVE THE READABILITY OF YOUR NEWSLETTER**

- **Headings.** Your heading should accurately describe the content of the article or section that follows.
- **Use the active voice.**  
YES: Swim team wins city championship.  
NO: City championship is won by swim team.
- **Use action verbs.**  
YES: The contact states the work will begin May 1st.  
NO: It is stated in the contract that the work will begin May 1st.
- **Use short sentences.** This makes it easier for the reader to grasp the idea.
- **Size.** Using 8 ½ x 11 inch paper will make your newsletter easier to copy, mail, hold and store.
- **Paper.** A neutral or soft color paper is easiest on the eyes. Avoid flimsy paper, or fancy paper that may distract from the contract or be considered extravagant.
- **Ink.** Black ink is easiest to read. It is also much more expensive to copy in color.
- **Masthead.** Your masthead, or newsletter title, should be recognizable and consistent. The use of your association’s logo in the masthead is a good idea to reinforce the sense of identity and feel of the community.
- **White space.** Don’t be afraid to have white space around your articles. This separates them and makes the newsletter easier to read. It sets off the information, and tells your reader when different parts begin and end.
- **Type.** Use about 12 characters per inch. Don’t vary your fonts greatly on a page. Use no more than three font styles on each page.
- **Length of line.** Use no more than 50-70 characters per line. This makes it easy for your reader to scan the information.
- **Spacing.** Be consistent in your spacing within a paragraph, between paragraphs and between articles.
- **Boxes.** A box around an article emphasizes the information. Be careful not to overuse or you will lose the impact.
- **Layout.** Keep it simple. A busy or cluttered look to a page makes it harder to read or locate information.
- **Graphics.** A graphic can signal the type of article or information presented. Use standard graphics for standard articles. Your reader’s eye will begin to recognize the graphic and associate it with the information that follows.
- **Pictures.** People love to see pictures of their community, their homes and their neighbors. Be cautious with your choice of pictures, as they may not copy as well as you would have hoped.

In whatever manner you chose to communicate with the residents of your community, the most important thing is that you do communicate. One of the common complaints from residents is that they feel uninformed. Tell them what is going on, and keep them part of the process. In return, you will receive their support and cooperation! ■

*Kathleen LaBrosse holds the designations of CMCA (Certified Manager of Community Associations) from the National Board of Certification and AMS (Association Management Specialist) and PCAM (Professional Community Association Manager). She is President and CEO of The Highlander Group, Inc., a community management company in Sylvan Lake, Michigan.*