

# Vision

FALL 2015

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COMMUNITY  
MANAGERS

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## Improving



## Your Association's



## Communication



## Image



By Glenn Grabiec, CCAM

Despite our best efforts as community managers to keep homeowners and residents informed, there are still homeowners and, at times, board members, who complain about secrecy and lack of communication from the association.

Just over two years ago, I was hired as the onsite general manager for Spring Valley Lake Association (SVLA), a large scale community in the High Desert of San Bernardino County with over 4,200 properties, a water ski lake, golf course and equestrian center. The community is quite diverse demographically, with a mix of everything from retirees to families with parents who commute out of the area for work.

Shortly after taking the position, I was confronted with many of the same questions that I'm sure many of you have experienced: "What are we doing for the benefit of the homeowners?" "Why are assessments at the level they are?"

Initially, I was surprised by the lack of awareness because I knew SVLA had a newly designed website, a Facebook

page, a monthly newsletter and an email distribution system to provide timely, meaningful and accurate information to homeowners. I thought it was quite possible that these criticisms may be related more to the message than the methods. But, I needed to assess the effectiveness of the methods before I could tackle the message.

I hired Stevens Consulting Services to conduct an inventory and evaluation of our public relations activities, projects and services. The key component of this evaluation was a short online survey that elicited responses from 405 homeowners (395 was necessary to achieve an accuracy of plus or minus 5%). I was told that conducting a survey of this type may be risky because it could elicit information that would require the association to change direction. At the same time, I knew it would send a clear message to the homeowners that the association was doing everything it could to become more responsive and professional in our communications.

The survey was conducted with a single focus: to examine

the association's current communication methods and gauge:

1. Whether homeowners and residents are *aware* of the different communication methods SVLA uses,
2. If they are aware of these different methods, which communication channels do they *access*,
3. And which channels do they *prefer*.

The survey revealed that the majority of respondents were aware of our various communication methods (Website, 96.50%; Facebook, 63.16%; newsletter, 96.98%; e-blasts, 88.22%) and accessing each fairly regularly (68.19% access the website; 31.63% visit Facebook page; 83.04% read newsletter monthly; and 80.25% signed up to receive emails).

The most significant finding in the survey validated our belief that homeowners and residents are satisfied with our efforts: 46.62% rated SVLA's effectiveness in informing homeowners and residents about the association's role,

activities, projects and services as "good," and 29.32% rated it "excellent."

In addition to the survey, I focused on ensuring our effective communication efforts could transcend any transition of managers and board members to maintain consistency. To achieve this, our consultant prepared specific recommendations to draft our first communications plan, which includes four clearly defined goals to guide SVLA in its future public relations, public information and public outreach activities:

- To ensure that homeowners, residents and community-at-large continually receive accurate, timely and relevant information about SVLA.
- To continually improve communication methods used to inform homeowners, residents and community-at-large and to facilitate two-way communications.
- To enhance the image of SVLA as a professional organization.

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## Improving Your Association's Communication Image

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- To demonstrate that SVLA is a professionally managed association providing competent services that meet the needs of its members.

Naomi Patterson, whom I appointed as the new Media Coordinator/Public Information Officer to carry out these important goals, says this new communications plan has helped her identify more meaningful information to communicate to homeowners. "The communications plan has also given me the freedom to get out and gather information as it is happening within the community, instead of hearing it second hand," she says. "This has allowed me to publish things before some of the rumors start forming, which has resolved some of the conflict we were often experiencing."

### Lessons Learned

In my experience at SVLA, the process of reviewing and improving our communication efforts has already had a positive impact: we are keeping everyone informed and improving the professional image of our association at relatively low fiscal impact. By following through with the assessment and being very forthcoming with the results, the board demonstrated their commitment to serving the needs of the homeowners.

Overall, conducting the survey helped improve the association's reputation because it demonstrated that the association was: 1) not afraid to hear the truth from homeowners – good or bad; 2) willing to solicit and take feedback from homeowners to make any necessary improvements; and, 3) open and transparent about the results of the survey.

For me, this process validated that we as community managers exercise due diligence when we use a variety of communications methods to share information with homeowners. Yet, we shouldn't become complacent, assuming that our current communication methods remain effective – especially with an ever-changing demographic in our communities. I would encourage any community manager experiencing some of these same issues to consider undertaking this process. You have nothing to lose and will gain a greater perspective on how you can better serve your communities.

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