

# Quality Service

A commitment to exceptional customer service is essential to the long-term success of any organization, including community associations. Homeowners and residents are the association's customers, and one of the board's goals should be to stay responsive to the needs of the community and all its stakeholders. Seems simple enough, right?

Not so fast. Board members juggle a lot of responsibilities, and customer service is seldom at the top of the agenda. Thankfully, there are some straightforward and effective ways to integrate a customer service mentality into your community association.

**Educate, inform.** Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, once said, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Educating homeowners is important on so many levels. Homeowners who understand their own defined roles and responsibilities and those of the board and the management company are more likely to be in compliance with rules and current on assessments. Education also helps homeowners understand what it takes to be committee or board members. And once an owner knows who to seek out with an issue, problem solving is easier and streamlined.

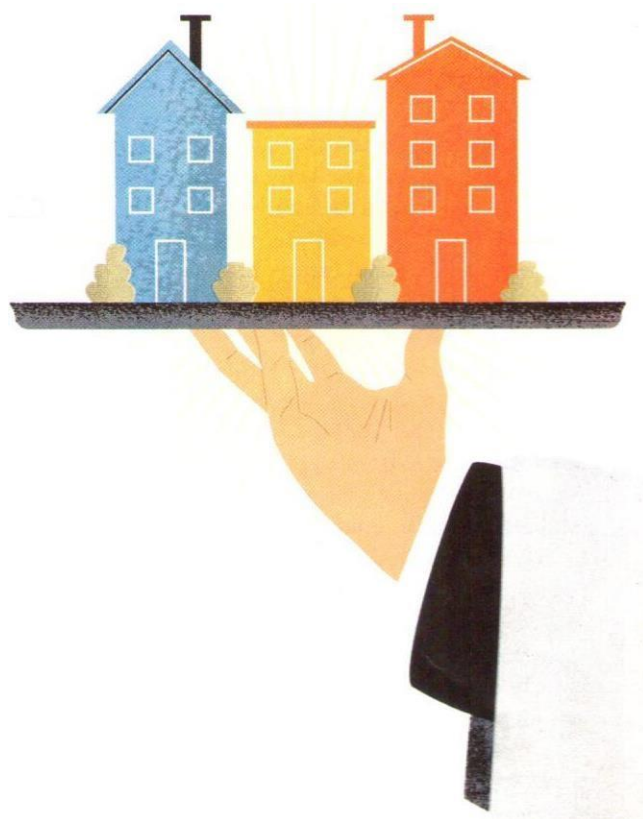
Communities should create a chart that shows who is responsible for maintaining and insuring various components, common and private, in the community and individual homes.

Many residents are intimidated by the legalese in governing documents and, unfortunately, are complacent about reading those materials. Board members can provide clarity on any gray areas by adopting clear and concise rules, policies and resolutions. Boards also can help residents understand what the governing documents specify via friendly reminders that summarize important information.

**Communicate, engage.** Associations should be transparent with their communications. Residents are more likely to speculate when they don't have facts. Don't wait until asked to provide information. Be open and make sure homeowners know how they can view important association documents, such as current financial statements, the budget and various governing documents.

Just like staying in shape requires frequent and ongoing effort, your communications plan needs the same commitment. The board should use different methods of communication, including a website, newsletters, e-mail campaigns and informational meetings. The more the homeowners understand about how their assessments are being spent, the less likely they are to question or complain.

Communication is an act of both giving and receiving, so it's important to engage residents, actively listen and respond too. For example, if the association is considering an expensive project, great customer service means sending out a survey for community input. An alternative approach would be to schedule an informal meeting to publicize project specifications, allow time for feedback and prepare a summary of the pros and cons for the



community newsletter. The board should complete the communications circle after a decision is made and inform the community of the selected course of action and the reasons behind it.

**Build community, use committees.** The health and vitality of any community depends on the level of engagement among neighbors. Take a proactive approach by encouraging residents to get to know one another. Hold barbecues, pool parties or neighborhood garage sales to bring the community together. Residents who know each other are more likely to function as a cohesive unit, especially in troubled times or emergency situations. They also are more likely to resolve problems among themselves, without relying on the board or the community manager.

Encourage residents to be part of the solution. Get them involved and take advantage of the passion they have for the community. Ad-hoc committees, for example, are a great way to engage and empower homeowners to contribute.

One of our clients recently managed a group of homeowners who approached the board regarding a speed limit being abused in the neighborhood, and the board asked those members to help research the problem. In doing so, the board listened to their concerns and actively developed a resolution. That approach and type of cooperation is more likely to result in a sustainable solution.

**Positive attitude.** The style and methods you use to share information need to have more emphasis on the positive than the negative. Instead of using newsletters exclusively to remind residents of the rules and regulations, include important achievements, completed projects, information on future goals, and community and local events. The newsletter should be useful, graphically appealing and organized in a way that makes it easy to read. Think about what gets your attention in a magazine or newsletter and make sure your communications are ones that you'd want to read.

Finally, boards and management companies alike should adopt an attitude of, "I can help you" instead of, "Can I help you?" This simple sentence demonstrates that you are knowledgeable about the community, care about individual concerns and are interested in helping.

In a community association, everyone needs to be engaged in providing customer service: board members, management and vendors. Boards can integrate customer service by partnering with and educating their homeowners, by engaging in two-way communication, by building community and by keeping it positive. By embracing these simple principles, you establish a foundation for service that will benefit the entire community and result in a much stronger neighborhood.