

## The Right Network

**F**EW BOARD MEMBERS have the time or resources to evaluate every social network as a potential tool for enhancing communication in their associations. There are too many, and not all create value or have the data privacy controls and monitoring that an association expects.

Association boards need to think about social networks and policies now. Accounts often are launched by residents with good intentions. However, sometimes these residents exclude others, including board members. Unfortunately, control of an account resides in the hands of the individual who creates it. In some cases, association boards have hired attorneys to get a resident to remove the community's name from the account or take

### Social policy

Associations that use social media should adopt a policy that prohibits:

- Harassing, discriminatory, threatening and defamatory comments and material
- Pornographic, obscene, hateful or unlawful comments or material
- Copyrighted material
- Personal views as representing those of the association
- Junk messages, advertisements or other solicitations not related to the association

Associations should reserve the right to remove offending posts without notice and terminate access to anyone who doesn't follow the policy. —STAFF

down the account completely.

Social media is “next-gen” communication for communities; it can encourage greater involvement, but it's important that a social network protect the reputation of the association while establishing a neighborly online experience.

**Free choice.** Free always seems like a good choice when you're economizing, but when you're not paying for a product, you often are the product. Free social networks make their money from advertisers. Networks need to mine all the data they collect from users to provide marketing intelligence to advertisers—who then use that data to target ads better. Sometimes those ads, the intelligence gathering process and related data given to marketers land social networking providers in litigation.

There's nothing wrong with using free social networks as long as you're completely aware of how these networks use personal data. If you want a social network specifically for your community—one that promises not to share data—other options exist. There may be a fee for such a neighborhood network, but with that fee comes control.

**Liability risks.** Many associations believe that social networks allow them to deliver information and foster neighborhood involvement more effectively than websites, e-newsletters and e-mails. Effective, instant, multidirectional communication is why social networks continue to expand, but associations need to consider the liability risks.



The most obvious risk is that someone will sue an association for libel based on incivilities posted on an association's account. Through social media, associations—like any organization that distributes information—invite emotional distress, invasion of privacy, copyright infringement, and inaccurate or fraudulent posts.

An association must consider that a court may hold it responsible for content on a social network regardless of the source. This content can include private data people inappropriately provide about themselves, abusive language, unsuitable images, exploitative or bullying subject matter, spam and malware.

Associations can use a social network to improve communication, but they must protect themselves by strictly controlling access to and use of their accounts. Open framework networks provide group and privacy controls, but some networks frequently change their data use and privacy policies. The policies also can be hard to understand.

A board should look for a social network that:

- Limits access only to residents of the community
- Provides features for prohibiting abusive language and inappropriate content
- Allows removing content that violates the social media policy
- Allows users to easily report abuse on the network
- Does not keep a digital trail of users' activity
- Limits the amount of content that can be posted at one time
- Limits content to specific channels of information
- Monitors any third-party postings and allows the expression that the third-party's views do not represent the official position of the association
- Can be managed and monitored by a board volunteer or by the social networking provider
- Provides features that prevent hacking, spam and malware

**Rich resource.** Regardless of the medium, most association communications today are one directional. Social media provides the opportunity for associations to develop a content delivery strategy that will proactively engage the community and make content creators out of residents.

Some networks allow associations to create specific channels like "lost and found" and "crime and safety." They also may allow you to post the association logo, a community description, documents, links, news and events.

With the right network, an association can reach more residents than it could on a website. Once there is an interested audience, the power of the network can take over, and residents can engage and talk about what's important to the association, their homes and their families. A social network can cultivate a remarkable community experience, boost association board visibility and reputation, and cultivate more enthusiastic residents, but only if the social network limits access to residents and includes strict, data privacy controls and content monitoring. **CG**

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