

## The Four R's

**M**AGAZINES ARE an important communication vehicle for communities, but they can be difficult for many neighborhood associations to produce consistently. Newsletters take time and effort. When done correctly, however, they can be a wonderful way to keep residents informed and to build a stronger sense of community. Here are some tips on how to create and use newsletters to their fullest potential. To be effective, newsletters must accomplish the four R's—regular, relational, readable and right.

### REGULAR

Many communities begin with an overly ambitious newsletter schedule that requires more resources than originally estimated. Sporadic publication is certain to result when you bite off more than you can chew. You can avoid this by limiting the number of pages at first. A four-page newsletter every month or quarter is more effective than a 10-page newsletter that appears irregularly. Your goal is to inform residents. The shorter your newsletter, the more frequently it can be distributed and the more affinity you will create with residents. Consistency is the key to newsletter success.

An inconsistent layout also can make the association look unprofessional. Templates and repeating styles should be used for consistent formatting that aid the eye of the reader. Create consistent styles for headlines, subheads and body copy. The use of repeating columns and sections such as reports from the various neighborhood committees and letters from the board will help the reader find the information he or she wants. Incorporating this type of regularity into each issue also will speed production as contributors become more like columnists.

Clearly define and communicate your newsletter deadlines to all contributors. Make sure contributors understand how meeting—or missing—their deadlines impacts the entire process. Deadlines are a necessary and beneficial component of newsletters.

### RELATIONAL

Effective newsletters draw in their readers by personalizing their content. Sections for sharing life stories, promoting contests or announcing resident birthdays and anniversaries will create a bond with and in the community. People love seeing their names in print. Creating something that draws readers in will make them read that section first and look forward to receiving your newsletter. For example, one newsletter has used its personal section to chronicle a local Boy Scout's path to Eagle Scout, sharing his experiences along the way. Neighbors love reading these articles because, through them, they come to know the families in their community.

Use your newsletter to report on new policies and programs. Rather than just describing the dry details of a new policy, explain how these changes benefit residents. Keep the tone positive. Newsletters also should be used to remind residents of existing policies. For example, remind residents of your architectural rules each spring before they begin any new projects.

Encourage readers to respond. Providing residents the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback on association policies will help them understand and accept the rules. There are several ways to motivate readers to become involved. Include an "Ask the Expert"



column or a board question-and-answer column. You also might invite residents to respond to opinion surveys and demographic surveys.

Including these types of items in your newsletter will encourage your readers to get engaged in their community. These sections also might help board members, by making them aware of potential issues brewing in the community so they can be resolved sooner.

For variety, ask other professionals in the neighborhood, such as attorneys or accountants, to write guest columns.

### READABLE

To ensure readability, be conservative in your newsletter design. Here are some important design rules to consider:

- Use three or fewer fonts, or typestyles.
- Use no more than one or two photos or images on each page.
- Use frames and boxes sparingly.
- Use contrast between headlines and text and other elements, making them easy to read.
- Make headlines as short as possible.
- Use white space to make headlines stand out. White space is a magnet to readers' eyes.
- Make frequent use of subheadings.

## ON THE BOARD

■ Avoid the temptation to use boldface or italics too often.

Also, invest time upfront creating a newsletter template with a distinctive column arrangement that builds white space into each page. Your reward will be a newsletter that is pleasing to the eye.

Remember, clutter detracts from your message. Choose a single typestyle for all of your headlines and limit headlines to just two sizes. Use one size for headlines of primary importance and another smaller size for headlines of lesser importance. This adds visual variety to your pages and helps readers quickly identify topics most important to them.

### RIGHT

Clear writing and accurate information are obviously key to any good newsletter. Typos are distractions to readers. Incorrect grammar and spelling errors can damage the association's credibility and reduce the impact of your message.

Make sure your newsletter is proofread by appropriate volunteers and staff before it is distributed. If a sentence lacks commas where commas should be, it can lose its meaning. A poorly written sentence can be interpreted in many different ways. Proofreading can help catch these types of errors. Don't trust your desktop publishing application to catch all mistakes.

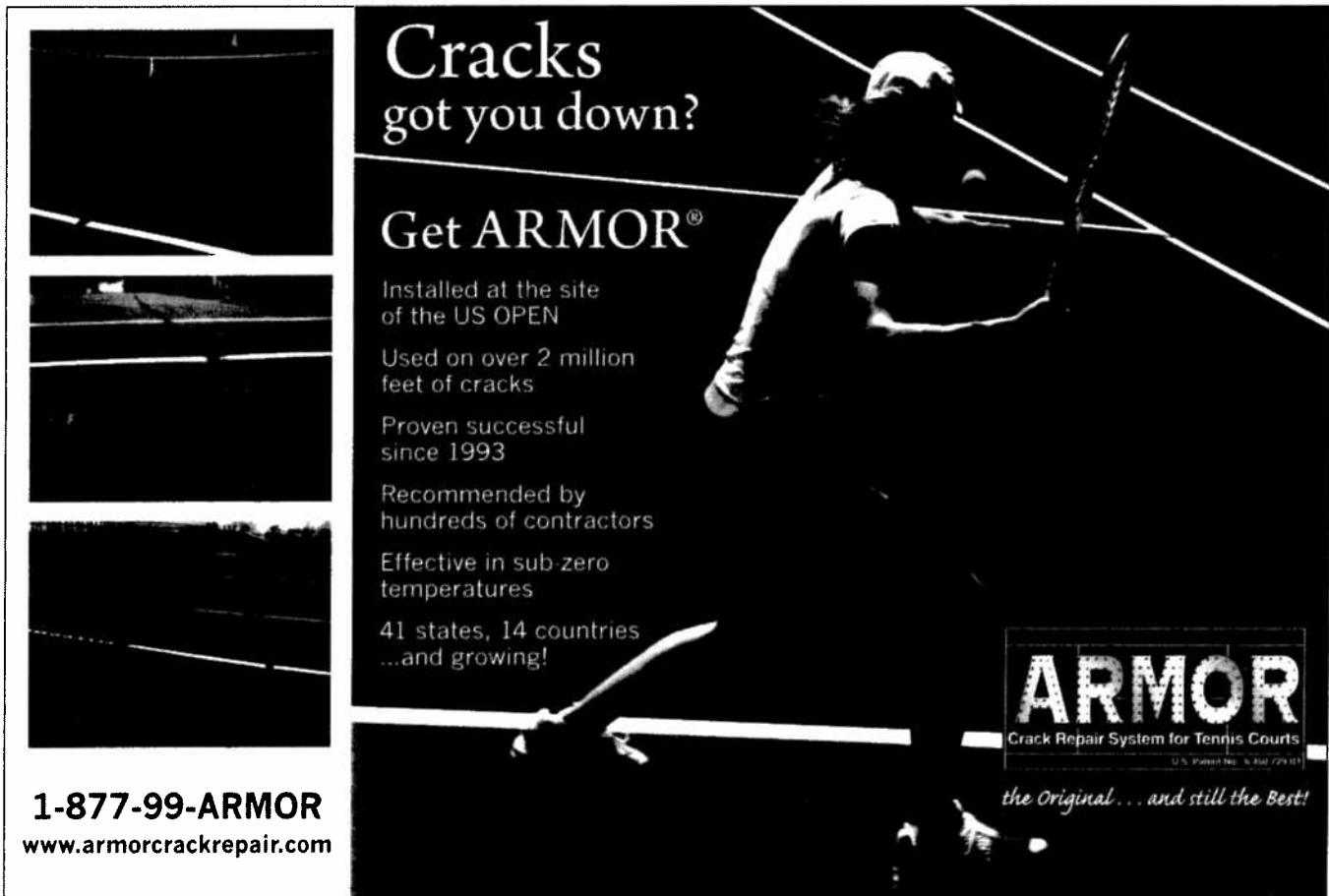
Another benefit of strong proofreading is ensuring that you are sending the right message to residents, not only in content but also in tone.

Mistakes in newsletters can be more ominous than mere typos. To protect the association from libel, don't publish negative statements about others. Libel is a written statement about a person or entity that harms its reputation and that is knowingly false or is made with a reckless disregard for the truth. To be safe, newsletters should reflect the general nature of community issues,

but should never include the names of members who violate the rules or are delinquent in assessments. Nor should they print criticisms of others, such as contractors. One California contractor was awarded more than \$6.6 million after a homeowners association published malicious statements about him. If you aren't sure whether an article in your newsletter is libelous, consult with your association attorney before publishing it. When in doubt, don't!

Good writing and simple style guidelines can turn your community newsletter into a successful communications tool. It's a great way to establish and reinforce your neighborhood's personality. Use it to its fullest potential. **cg**

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