

Concepts for the Association

When someone joins an Association, like any consumer decision, it's with the expectation to get "value" for their "investment" of dues. In many manufactured home associations, the perceived value is very low. As a result, many community owners decline to invest their dues and get little back in terms of productive content. To have a robust membership, you have to deliver what community owners need. Here is my opinion of what you would need to provide to give an "insanely great" value, to quote Steve Jobs.

- I. Grandfathering. This is an issue that many owners face frequently: the city or town that refuses to allow a community owner to put a new home in a vacant lot. We face around five of these cases per year. These are very troubling for those who have not encountered this before. The good news is that most states have case law that protects the community owner from any ordinances passed since the park was built. However, you often have to enlist the aid of a lawyer to press your rights, and it's hard to find a lawyer who even understands our industry. If the Association had a lawyer already trained and ready to respond to any grandfathering issue statewide, then that would be a huge asset for the Association member – even though the member pays the legal bill. They simply want someone to hold their hand and walk them through the steps to completion.
- II. Safe Act. Most community owners – perhaps everyone in the U.S. – is confused on how to stay in compliance. The issue is not that they don't want to comply, they just don't know *how* to comply. If the Association could provide a "Guide to the SAFE Act in Iowa" product, that explains everything from A to Z in an easy to read format, then that would be a great asset. To have someone on the staff who can talk the member through the process from A to Z, that's even better.
- III. Fair Housing. Although everyone is fairly aware of the basics of HUD's guidelines, there is always confusion on such issues as Registered Sex Offenders and companion animals. The community owners want to obey the law, but they don't understand what they're supposed to do. If the Association could provide an expert on the "grey" areas of Fair Housing, that would be a huge asset.
- IV. Problems with City Hall. Community owners are often the subject of city "witch hunts" in which they attempt to drown the owner in citations to either blackmail them into making unnecessary improvements such as the addition of fire hydrants, or to try to drive them from the city. In these situations, the community owner needs a "big scary friend" to defend them from the bully. If the Association could step in to flex its muscle against the offending city, that would be a huge asset. As an example, if a Hispanic business is unfairly treated, they call in LULAC and LULAC's inclusion changes the playing field and terrifies the bully into submission. The Association needs to be willing and able to help those community owners who are being unfairly treated.

If the Association could offer these four services and products – namely legal resources and concierge-style hand holding – then that would be a huge asset to community owners that they would happily pay for through dues. It would also be easy to attract new members under this structure, just the same as the explosion in “pre-paid legal” companies. And the good news is that most owners will never need to even utilize these services. They are simply paying in their dues as an “insurance policy” against the potential risk of one of these four issues transpiring. The concept is similar to a Roadside Assistance group – you are paying dues for peace of mind.

These are my initial thoughts on how to grow the Association membership among community owners, and how to make them feel that they have received a great service for their dues. And for our part, through our websites, we can aggressively promote this “insanely great” product and significantly grow the Association membership.

Sincerely,

Frank Rolfe