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Neighorly Network

The intranet, an online community link, lets homeowners make connections and stay in touch with what's going on.

By Chris Cobbs

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Humidity, bugs and traffic are minor nuisances for newcomers to Central Florida. Far more daunting is the prospect of living in a neighborhood where everybody is from somewhere else and for sale signs pop up as a constant reminder of our transient existence.

Master-planned communities sprawl across the region, blueprinted and plotted right down to the last planting in the designated greenbelt, providing residents with all the amenities but one -- a sense of belonging.



Welcome to the Florida of the 21st century.

And good luck getting to know the folks next door, picking the right school, selecting a pediatrician and finding a bridge companion.

You could wait for the neighborhood Welcome Wagon to provide entrée. Or perhaps smile and introduce yourself to strangers as you walk the dog, careful to scoop up litter in a plastic baggie.

But a better choice, and surely the hip choice for the new millennium, is to connect online through a private neighborhood network, or intranet.

With more than half of America's households regularly chatting and shopping over the Web, it's a natural progression to use a PC to promote social interaction among strangers in a strange new ZIP code.

Quick to spot a new sales hook, developers and builders are teaming with providers of intranet software and setting up digital pathways between the two-story contemporary on the big wooded lot and the cute little Colonial tucked away on the cul-de-sac.

Think of an intranet as e-mail with all the trimmings: community news, trash collection days, pool hours, neighborhood phone directory, digital photo album and, everybody's favorite, homeowners association covenants and restrictions.

With its growth boom and mobile population, Orlando is ripe for these sorts of intranet communities.

"After Atlanta, we see Orlando as our second most-desirable market because of all the new home permits, housing starts and the customer base of builders of new communities," says Bill Roberts, co-founder of Resident Interactive, which provides intranet software to 500 communities with 110,000 residents.

A way to settle in

Across Central Florida, a wide range of homeowners is getting in touch and staying in touch using intranets.

From young moms to working couples and retirees, first-generation intranet users are enthusiastic about their experiences. They say intranets are easy to learn, useful and free of Web nuisances such as pop-up ads and unwanted e-mail.

Still, early adopters would also like to see more -- that is, more people online and more features. It's nice to see still photos, but video snippets would be even better. Neighbors offer feedback on baby sitters and schools, but why not a compendium of ratings on yard services and pool cleaners?

Before moving to Orlando last year from Texas, Cynthia and Calvin Parker browsed the Web for information on subdivisions in Central Florida. After selecting a new development in south Orange County's Lake Nona called North Lake Park, the Parkers signed up for the community intranet.

"It really helped me get acclimated," says Cynthia Parker, who had become familiar with intranets while living in Dallas and Houston.

After settling into the new neighborhood, she found an intranet link to the school where her 11-year-old son, Jason, was enrolled. The online tie proved useful, allowing Parker to e-mail 25 neighbors about a PTA Carnival fund-raiser, set up a meeting with Jason's teacher and coordinate an end-of-school-year banquet.

Sold on the value of the intranet, Parker would like to see the whole neighborhood online. She estimates that about 80 percent of the 90 families at North Lake Park actively use the intranet.

"We need everyone to get involved," she says. "I know that for some people just moving in, it's not a priority to be on the intranet and they just forget about it. But it can be a great tool, so we'd like to see everyone trying it."

Neighbor Diana Mason stays in touch with a dozen other young moms with toddlers. Using the intranet, they compare notes on the best places to shop for diapers and stay current on recalls of baby products.

"We still use the phone to set up play dates, and that would be a lot easier with the intranet," says Mason, who moved from a Chicago suburb. "On the phone, it can take an hour to get the dates arranged. I'd rather do away with the phone and just do it online, but some moms still have a hard time with getting online, or just can't find the time."

One of North Lake Park's most active intranet users is Rob Thompson, 33, who serves as the neighborhood representative on the homeowners association.

For him, the intranet is an efficient way to inform residents about issues such as garbage pickup, street parking and construction of new homes, he says. At the family level, his wife, Wendy, was online when she came across an aerobics and pilates program at the local Y, which she joined.

"I'd like to see even more information about our neighborhood," he says. "We could have listings of different kinds of service providers, like fences, landscapers, pools and pest control. Having people share their comments and experiences with these services would be valuable."

At nearby Lake Nona Estates, Gary Bertrand uses the intranet to keep up with community happenings when he's traveling. A stock trader whose business often takes him to New York and sometimes to Europe, he's on the lookout for cyber cafes where he can go online and tap into the intranet back home.

An avid golfer, he would like to see the intranet tweaked to allow for setting up a tee time from afar. "Right now, I have to get on the phone and call the pro shop to arrange a time," he says. "We ought to be able to do that online."

Residents at Victoria Park in DeLand have found other fun ways to foster social interaction. Connie Jansen indulged her fondness for photography by snapping candid pictures of friends at a potluck dinner and an ice cream social. The pictures were posted online, along with other community news. "The intranet really helps people get connected," she says.

Neighbors George and Judy Good, retirees from Ohio, bought a computer when they moved so they could take advantage of the intranet. They keep track of upcoming picnics and other happenings via the online bulletin board. They've also found couples with whom they play cards, dominoes and tennis. And Judy Good came up with a knitting partner.

As important as clubhouse

With so many ways for people to use the new technology, it's little wonder that developers are hustling to make the intranet a fixture at new communities.

"This is a feature that people shopping for a 21st century home will expect and demand," says Polly Webb, vice president of marketing for a large Sarasota development that sprang up before the Web took off in the mid-1990s and is looking to retrofit 3,000 homes with an intranet.

In fact, builders now see an intranet as being as important as a community pool and clubhouse for knitting the social fabric, says Webb. Such an amenity typically adds about \$2 a month to homeowners' fees.

Across the state, intranet facilitators such as Lake Nona's Polly Pupura and Robin McAdams help home buyers sign on and navigate their community sites.

"People keep up with activities like the play group for moms with babies, the ethnic food club, prayer group, wine-and-cheese group and the walking club," says Pupura.

A few miles away at the Vista Lakes development, the goal is to make the intranet the main communications tool for residents, says marketing coordinator Diane Diaz.

"People are busy, so we want to help them connect with each other," says Diaz. "Whether you want to look up a neighbor's phone number or locate a baby sitter, it doesn't take much knowledge of the Web to use the intranet."

Party line as a link

Although intranets are a recent development, the concept of using technology to stay in touch with neighbors isn't new at all.

Home intranets are reminiscent of mid-20th century telephone party lines, which allowed neighbors in rural areas to stay abreast of news in their community.

"In the farm area of Missouri where I grew up, everyone had a phone on the wall that was hand-cranked to call another person," says Frances Altman, a Virginia Commonwealth University public relations specialist who's familiar with home intranets.

"The party line was a convenience and served a safety function. For example, in the winter you could check with others on the line and find out road conditions. In the fall, you could learn when others were cutting hay. You came to trust those people, and I think intranets will eventually build that same kind of trust and knowledge among neighbors."

Maybe so, but social connectivity via intranet may not develop swiftly, says Clemson University sociologist Jim Witte, who has studied the impact of information technology on communities. "There are issues of trust and exposure," he says. "Some people are uncomfortable with sharing personal information on the Internet. But even if people don't feel the technology is intrusive, you still have to get them to your site, which can involve a lot of face-to-face communication to acquaint people with what's there. You can't assume they'll find it by themselves."

Older residents often appear to be more cautious than young individuals accustomed to the place of the computer in their lives.

The trend is noticeable at Victoria Park, which has a mix of residents between 23 and 75, including a development for folks 55 and older. "Some in the older group may not be as attuned to the Internet," says Jansen, a single mother with a 19-year-old son. "They are still a little shy about going online. Personally, I have no concerns and feel completely safe when using the intranet."

The ultimate aim of an intranet is building a sense of place, says Mary Lee Kiracofe, art of living director at Southwood, a community in Tallahassee. When a family moves in, she visits with a "survival box" including light bulbs, extension cords and M&M's candy. She learns the children's names - then tells the parents about the community intranet.

Kiracofe discovered the power of the forward-looking technology in the turnout for an astral event last fall. A stargazing fan, she posted a message at 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, inviting people to meet and watch a meteor shower.

When 25 residents turned out to view the big event -- at 4 o'clock the next morning -- she knew the intranet was likely to become a future fixture in a lot of Florida homes.

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