



Community Intranets *Interactive Lifestyles*

By Steven Castle

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Bill Roberts saw the future of communities while sitting in his kitchen. Four years ago, the upscale Atlanta-area community where Roberts and his wife Gretchen reside received broadband DSL and cable service, so he hooked up a laptop computer and placed it on the kitchen counter. This was convenient for Gretchen, because she was the president of the community homeowner's association and had to communicate with other board members and residents.



"My wife would constantly go to the laptop and respond to e-mail messages. It was all day", Robert says. "I got to sit there and view it as a test lab for a couple year and see how it was used." What Gretchen really needed was a community intranet where all the information about the homeowner's association and its meetings could be posted and other residents could provide her with feedback. This intranet would reside on the Internet, but only the association's members and residents would access some or all of it.

Gretchen's experience inspired Roberts to quit his job with Oracle Corp. and co-found his own company, now called Resident Interactive, which builds and hosts Intranets for more than two hundred residential communities in the United States, including his own. "I saw a lot of interest in community intranets", says Roberts. "If you're running a neighborhood association, it saves yourself from spending a day going door-to-door handing out pamphlets or calling people every time you want to communicate with them."

A community intranet can provide residents with a variety of information about a community, from recreational opportunities to important contacts, area maps, clubs to join, and homeowner orientations. It can be used interactively by residents to make new friends, obtain golf tee times and tennis court times, organize play groups for kids, find babysitting services, put community contracts out for bid comparison shop for local services, and stay updated while at another residence elsewhere. Community intranets don't just benefit the residents. "It's a value-added differentiator for the developer and the builder," says Mark Flagg, Vice President of Business Development for First Mile Technologies, an Indiana based provide of intranets and telephone, cable, high-speed Internet, and security services for residential communities.

"We view community intranets as a distinguishing factor between our package and others," notes Garrett Solomon, Director of Strategic Development for Terrabrook, a developer of more than forty-five large master planned communities throughout the country. Terrabrook plans to install intranets in all its developing communities and is encouraging builders it works with to install higher-grade "structuring wiring" packages in all their homes to accommodate high speed internet services and a host of in-home entertainment and information technologies. Roberts certainly was not the first to realize the power of community intranets. They have been around since the mid-1990s, but have more recently gained momentum as broadband services have made Internet access more convenient and as community developers and builders seek competitive advantages. The community intranet movement is so new, in fact, that virtually no concrete data exists about it.

INTRANET DEMOGRAPHICS

What is known is that about 231,000 community associations exist, representing about 18.6 million households, says the Community Association Institute (CAI). The institute estimates that nearly two thirds of these households are located in planned residential communities, while many of the rest are members of condominium owner and apartment co-op associations, which hold regular meetings and also could use intranets to facilitate communication.

According to a study on online communities conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project last year, 26 percent of all Internet users have contacted local community groups online. That equates to about 28 million people. Though that number includes many involved in local interest and hobby groups outside of residential community intranets. Surprisingly, one of the most active user groups for intranet services are senior citizens, aged 65 and older – known in residential community parlance as "active adults." "I think you would be amazed at their level of proficiency with computers," says builder Robb Pigg. "They have the time to utilize the stuff, and they have discovered 3-mail to communicate with family and friends."

Piff is Vice President of Operations for J.F. Shea Company, Inc., parent company to Shea Homes, and a builder of planned communities in California, Arizona, Colorado, and North Carolina. Shea Homes intends to build intranets in each of its new Trilogy communities for active adults. Another Pew study on "Wired Senior" found that while only 15 percent of people aged 65 and older have access to the internet, they are among its most loyal users. Moreover, of the four million seniors online, 69 percent go online on a typical day, compared with 56 percent of all Internet users. They also play more online games – mostly card games and crossword puzzlers – than any other age group other than 18 to 29 year olds.

Senior are interactive adults, contributing prominently to message boards and e-mail lists to keep abreast of what is going on in their communities. "They may not be as tech savvy as other users, but seniors want to get online and use e-mail, and they like to read about themselves and their friends," says Rebecca Rolwing, a consultant who built intranets for several of Phoenix based builder Del Webb's active adult communities. Susannah Fox, director of research for the Pew Internet & American Life Project, says seniors want to be engaged – and if they can use the intranet to get a better tee time on the golf course, all the better."

BABY BOOMERS

Some 51 percent of Americans aged 50 to 54 are already online and expect to stay online, according to

the Pew study on seniors- an age group that now includes the demographic through known as baby boomers. The effect of this group on Internet usage upon their retirement will be what some have termed a "silver tsunami." "Intranet use is going to be expected in residential communities," says Jeff Sanders, President of Atlanta based AtHomeNet, which has developed more than three hundred intranets in thirty-six states. "It is starting to permeate society." For architects and designers, this growing value of community intranets among all age groups poses some challenges, as well as opportunities. Sanders advises designers not to expect that intranet use will be confined to a home office or spare bedroom. Telephone and cable jacks for cable modem hookups should be placed throughout the home – even for seniors – and designers must consider space needs for computers or web appliances in multiple locations.

"These appliances need to be more centrally located in the home – in the kitchen area or the den or in the family room," argues Sanders. A logical place is the kitchen, which is destined to become more than the family gathering place – the electronic gathering place for the community. "It is very convenient to have all that going on right in your kitchen," says Roberts, who witnessed his wife's efficient communication with fellow residents via a laptop.

Flagg takes the concept a step further, "Community intranets will really take off when default screens for those communities are on all the time, for instance on a web phone or other appliance in the kitchen. Or, put something on the wall where people will see it and interact with it."

WEB INTERFACE

Web appliances that hang down from kitchen cabinets or sit on countertops have been introduced by several electronic manufacturers, but so far they have not enjoyed widespread appeal and are often too expensive for designers and builders to include in homes. A drawback of some devices is their lack of a keyboard, which is almost essential for e-mail today (in lieu of handwriting recognition technology, which has yet to be perfected). "Having a laptop on the counter with a keyboard built into it is still better," says Roberts. "I think it would be best for designers to carve out a place for the laptop or desktop computer in a kitchen work nook, even if it is behind a cabinet."

Dr. Kenneth Wacks, home systems consultant to the MIT Home of the Future project, call House_n, believes the problem with today's so-called web appliances is they were introduced without much forethought about how they are used. "Web access is going to move from the PC to a concept very much like the traveling appliance," he predicts, such as web tablet being developed by Sony and Microsoft.

Wacks says the MIT model home will be built with protrusion materials of fiberglass and resins that can be easily removed and reconfigured so home owners can adapt spaces for items such as computers or web appliances. The wiring and cabling, too, will exist to accommodate these spaces. Future homes such as the one defined at MIT may also use technology to track groceries and other items via bar codes, so the refrigerator can alert the home owner when the milk is running low, for example, Community interests could facilitate the ordering of more groceries, prescription drugs and other goods – especially if the intranet has relationships with local businesses. Other e-commerce avenues include selling intranet advertising to local vendors to help drive down the cost of managing a community's intranet site.

Large master-planned communities with thousands of homes can be influential consumer blocs in local

markets, especially if their residents are communicating among one another and, in some cases, rating the local services. The end result is that intranets are fostering community relations and generating new business opportunities – as well as empowering a generation of “active adults.”

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