



## **Community Intranets Building neighborhoods with this high-tech amenity.**

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Design Build 2002

For years, sophisticated builders and new community developers have invested resources in building community spirit and a sense of place for new homebuyers. Recently, a number of builders and redevelopers have pioneered a new high-tech tool to help with this community building process - the community intranet.



A community intranet is an online community network, a specialized website that is designed for use by the residents of a local area. Like the large Internet, a community intranet is a tool for communication, but unlike the Internet's global reach, the focus of a community intranet is strictly local.

The first community intranet grew out of the community networking efforts of citizens in places like Blacksburg, Va., a college town that is the home of Virginia Tech. The Blacksburg Electronic Village ([www.bev.net/indez.php](http://www.bev.net/indez.php)) was started in 1993, well before most people had even heard of the Internet. Sponsored by Virginia Tech and built through the work of local business persons, educators and other volunteers, the Electronic Village is an excellent example of an online town hall, a forum where residents can find local resources and keep up with community news and activities.

Connecting citizens with local resources was important for the success of the "Front Porch" community intranet at Celebration, the innovative Disney-sponsored town near Orlando, Florida. The Celebration network ([www.celebrationfl.com/press\\_room/faq09.html](http://www.celebrationfl.com/press_room/faq09.html)) was one of the first developer-sponsored community intranets. An important decision made by Disney was to emphasize building online communication between residents and key local stakeholders, especially local schools and health care providers. By encouraging these organizations to post useful information online, the community intranet engaged the interest of homebuyers from the key demographic groups targeted in Celebration's marketing.

From these early beginnings, community intranets have evolved to become neighborhood portals to the Internet that offer rich local contents and services. Typical capabilities include directories of residents and local merchants, information on clubs and civic organizations, community events and local sports. Bulletin boards, chat rooms, classified ads and community newsletters support online communications among residents. More advanced features of some intranets include traffic and ride sharing information, residents' reviews of local restaurants and interactive e-commerce with local shops and services.

Some intranets offer special capabilities to serve specific types of communities. For example, the

intranet developed by ElectricStreets offers property management features for apartment communities, such as online rent payments, reservations of common area facilities, and requests for property maintenance. The "ePaseo" intranet offered by Activequest ([www.activequest.com](http://www.activequest.com)) is focused on serving master-planned communities, providing features such as an "opt-in" calendar that allows residents to automatically add events from schools, clubs and organizations to their individual online calendars. Other leading vendors of intranets for master planned communities include Resident Interactive ([www.residentinteractive.com](http://www.residentinteractive.com)), Neighborware ([www.neighborware.com](http://www.neighborware.com)), and La Jolla Group ([www.ljg.com](http://www.ljg.com)).

Here are some thoughts to consider when evaluating an intranet for your new community: Build upon a more viable business model, some of the early vendors of intranets offered their products at no cost to the developer, planning instead to capture revenues from advertisers on their portals. These companies failed because residents did not want to look at ads, nor did local merchants want to buy them. Today's intranet business models generally involve a combination of upfront licensing fees paid by the developer and monthly charges for ongoing hosting, maintenance and upgrades. Revenues from e-commerce with local merchants may flow in the future, but you should not justify an intranet investment based on potential revenues. Instead, look at the intranet as an amenity and a marketing investment.

Invest resources to keep the content current and interesting. An intranet delivers value only if people find it useful and worthwhile to revisit, so keeping content current is a must. Plan on assigning this job to someone from your marketing or homeowners association staff. Encourage residents to take responsibility for maintaining parts of the intranet to reduce your staff's workload and to help the community take ownership of the intranet.

Engage with community stakeholders. The true power of an intranet as a community-building tool comes from the synergy that can be created by linking your residents with local institutions such as schools, clubs and merchants. The most effective intranets make it easy for these outside organizations to put up websites and communicate with the public by providing good administrative tools that encourage self-publishing by the stakeholders and the residents.

Focus on the local. A community intranet should not try to compete with Internet portals like Yahoo and America Online. Your intranet will deliver value to your residents by offering excellent local content that has been brought together and made easily accessible: local news, local clubs and activities, schedules for local sports and entertainment and the online offerings of local shops and services.

**Tom Paradise**, Summer 2002