



## Creating Clickable Communities

### By Bill Roberts

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Technology savvy developers and builders are implementing community intranets as a way of quickly establishing a sense of community among their residents. Since new homebuyers are likely to be recent transfers to an unfamiliar city, they often seek advice from neighbors regarding schools, pediatricians, interior designers and other service providers. To address this need, community intranets are positioned as a secure, user-friendly resource where helpful information, ranging from the cell phone number of a reputable tree surgeon to the monthly schedule for the neighborhood babysitting co-op, is available online anytime.



In 2001, many of the Top 20 best-selling master-planned communities nationwide featured a community intranet as the centerpiece of their technology master-plan. Broadband Internet access and structured wiring solutions formulate a complete, three-pronged technology offering in these communities.

### Time is an Amenity

"The biggest single lifestyle element that we can provide to our residents is time," says Garrett Solomon, Managing Director of HomeBand, the technology affiliate of Terrabrook. As the nation's largest developer of master-planned communities, Terrabrook deploys community intranets within their projects to enhance the quality of life for the residents. "It is just so logical to aggregate everything onto a single platform," says Solomon. "We put the community intranet out there and encourage our builders and technology partners to consolidate their information online for the convenience of the homeowner."

Vista Lakes, in Orlando, was one of the first Terrabrook communities to launch a community intranet site. Within 6 months, Terrabrook had registered over 400 guest visitors to the intranet and regular usage among existing Vista Lakes homeowners approaches 70%.

### Home Network Explosion

Motivated by an always-on Internet connection, homeowners will increasingly turn their home network into a communications nerve center, both for household management and community involvement.

According to Jeff Roberts, President of HomeLink Technologies, an Atlanta-based Low Voltage Integrator, “we put touch panels not only in the kitchen but also in the master bath. While someone is shaving in the morning, they can respond to an email invitation to a barbecue or they can read the morning news.”

As for what’s next, Roberts feels that the Ethernet will begin to come alive in the house. “Manufacturers are enabling all of their new products for RJ-45 jacks; at the same time, the industry is moving towards a non-proprietary architecture and unified operating system. These same characteristics helped fuel the personal computer revolution.”

In addition to the adoption of open standards, the price-point of home technology is getting down to a level where it is becoming affordable by the masses. “We are seeing a wave of interest,” Roberts added. “Value-priced technology products are beginning to provide much of what high-end components will do.”

### **Traditional Neighborhood Design**

The most technology-friendly communities being built today may ironically be TND developments. Attracted to pre-automobile design elements like front porches, wide sidewalks and village greens that encourage resident interaction, TND homeowners also seem to embrace community intranets. “Implementing an Intranet in a Traditional Neighborhood Design community creates both a virtual and physical crossroads where residents can establish interpersonal relationships”, said Joel Embry, developer of Amelia Park in Fernandina Beach, FL and an expert on New Urbanism. “The existence of intranet technology and TND qualities together create a stronger bond among residents than either can accomplish alone.”

Embry also established wiring specifications for homes in Amelia Park and brought fiber to the curb to position the community for the future. Immediate applicability of technology in the daily lives of Amelia Park residents is driving their utilization of their home network. “Half of our residents are wild about the community intranet and were immediate early adopters,” explained Embry, “while the other half are forming a second wave of interest. This second group are not frequent users of the Internet itself, but they are hearing about the community intranet from their friends and it has become a stepping stone for them to access the Internet more frequently.”

### **Interactivity Drives Interest**

Intranets that are designed to encourage interactivity between residents typically generate a much higher degree of repeat visitation, and by extension more value for the homeowner, than Intranets that serves mainly as a one-way communication tool. Message Boards and Groups are usually very active forums within a community. These features allow a resident to quickly find other individuals who share common interests, such as a wine enthusiast or a fellow private pilot. The slow process of meeting new neighbors one-at-a-time over several months pales by comparison.

It is important to have an online Newsletter, which can also be broadcast via email to the residents or printed for hard-copy distribution to the non-technical members of the community. Authoring a monthly newsletter is the most thankless task a volunteer will ever undertake, so the intranet should allow for content to be contributed by any registered user as opposed to a single web site administrator. Appropriate administrative access can be granted in conjunction with an integrated approval procedure

so that committee chairpersons can collaborate online and produce compelling newsletters. If there is one thing that stifles interest in a community intranet, it is the lack of fresh content.

Multiple Calendars and Directories, organized around the community-at-large as well as special interest groups within the neighborhood, are among the most utilized features on an advanced community intranet. For a newcomer to a community, having the ability to RSVP online for an interesting event and receive confirmation right away from a friendly event coordinator is a comforting icebreaker.

### **Documents and Forms**

Populating an online Document Library with warranty information, instruction manuals, and serial numbers for home technology components, indeed every appliance in the home, is a tremendous convenience for the homeowner and an appropriate integration point where the home network and the community intranet should share a single online platform. Community-related documents such as HOA Bylaws and Architectural Design Guidelines are usually available on community intranets and it makes sense to provide the homeowner with a unified document library where infrequently needed information is easy to locate.

### **Security Cameras**

The community intranet can serve as a staging area for multiple security camera views with the added advantage that residents don't need to remember cryptic web-camera IP addresses when they want to monitor activity while traveling. Integrating the guard-gate camera view and the front-door camera view on a single web interface is more intuitive for most homeowners.

### **Convenience is the Key**

Mainstream consumers become interested in new technology when a growing sense of necessity converges with diminishing product complexity. When these two factors are met by falling prices, suddenly the old way of doing things is rendered completely inefficient.

Technophiles sometimes use the "Popcorn Button" analogy to draw a parallel between user convenience and technology acceptance. When any new technology becomes as easy to use as the "Popcorn" button on a microwave oven, then we won't remember how we ever got along without it!

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