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■ Vending Machine

Building an online RFP system

By Mary Castillo

In the old days, technologically-savvy community managers processed requests for proposals (RFPs) with Microsoft Word, e-mail and regular mail. They had access to a limited number of vendors whose business cards were stored in a Rolodex, or whose phone numbers were committed to memory. Taking into account the time to follow up and backtrack, at best, managers needed about a month lead time before they could hope to present bids to their boards.

As Professional Community Management's (PCM) client portfolio grew, it needed an efficient vendor management system—connecting managers with service providers and vice versa—that would cut down on time, waste and costs associated with the bidding process.

Donny Disbro, chief executive officer of PCM, gathered his in-house information technology staff with community managers to build the online RFP system. The goal was to create a program that would be adopted into the day-to-day tasks of both managers and vendors. The team was tasked with three priorities: to design a cost-effective system that was PDA-compatible, to allow managers to request services and submit RFPs electronically and permit vendors to respond to and manage PCM-related jobs through a dedicated online system.

"Our company can work with more than 20 vendors per community and to date, our communities number 288. How efficient we are in serving our communities is vital, and so we wanted this software not only to make our managers' lives easier, but our vendors' as well," says Disbro.

When it was rolled out in July, more than 75 vendors applied through the online, no-cost system within the first five days of business. Application requirements, such as insurance, licenses and references, allowed staff to efficiently vet and approve all applicants before they were accepted into the system.

Now, a community manager can take a scope of work, post it to the online system and all the relevant details are sent instantly to the applicable vendors. In addition, the system also allows managers to customize all the information on specific projects and create packets to send to respective board members. They can also take the system's capabilities into the field with any hand-held PDA device.

By digitizing the entire RFP process, response time, paper waste and information gathering have been reduced. The system also has an optional advertising component that allows service providers to target marketing efforts to PCM's client associations. Service providers can sign up as silver, gold or platinum vendors; platinum vendors are entered automatically into every new, relevant RFP.

"The system has significantly reduced costs and has had a solid return on investment potential through the optional advertising system," says Disbro.

While managers and vendors are adopting the system into their day-to-day work, PCM has actively created updates. A photo application will be available soon that allows managers and vendors to exchange images in RFP and bid packages.

Disbro says this project is a natural extension of PCM's service-based philosophy. "When you get down to it, the board members are the paying client and this is a very powerful tool that empowers the manager and the vendor to serve them as efficiently and effectively as possible," he says.

Mary Castillo is a writer for Desmond McLeish, Inc., a public relations firm that serves clients in California's Orange County and Inland Empire.

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■ Business Resources: Personnel Maintenance

Scheduling one-on-one time with your employees is just like getting your car's oil changed. You're supposed to do it regularly, but often put it off. Neglecting these important tasks impacts the short- and long-term health of your car and the productivity and happiness of employees.

The similarities between these otherwise unrelated activities are many, says *BNET*. Here's [how oil changes and employee check-ups relate](#) and why you don't want to let these responsibilities slip:

1. **It's easy to rationalize not setting aside the time.** You're traveling or working on an important project; it's no big deal if you delay. Your employees will come to you if something is wrong, right?
2. **They accomplish several objectives.** When you get your oil changed, filters are checked, fluids are replaced and the technicians let you know if they have any concerns. When you check in with your employees regularly, you find out what's going on with your team. There might be minor concerns to address, others to keep an eye on and big problems that need attention.
3. **Minor neglect shows over time.** If you care about your car, it shows. People know when you care about them. By giving employees the attention they deserve, you'll know what they need to succeed.
4. **Don't ignore the signs.** Cars have those helpful sensors that tell you when there's a major problem; people problems typically show up with decreased productivity, delayed projects or turnover. Regular check-ups could have prevented those issues and cost a lot less to repair.

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■ Business Trends: Unlimited Vacation? It Exists

Unlimited paid leave sounds like a fantasy, but it isn't. For the first time since 2002, when World at Work, a human resources group, began polling businesses about benefits packages, 1 percent of companies report that they offer unlimited paid leave.

Studies have long shown that the flexibility provided by [unlimited vacation time](#) makes workers more productive and engaged, *NPR* reports. And despite other perks, including pay, health care and retirement, being cut by companies during the recession, vacation time has remained level.

The idea behind unlimited vacation is to allow employees the flexibility to take extra time when a child is born, care for a sick relative, take a course for career or personal growth or

simply refresh and recharge. However, some critics worry that unlimited vacation policies translate to no vacation for workaholics; without a specified amount of time to be “off” employees might feel pressured always to be “on.”

NPR highlighted one small social media company that recently instituted unlimited vacation. The company found that employees are now more likely to take a sick day when they’re not feeling well. Overall, no more vacation time has been taken compared to previous years and everyone must still manage deadlines.

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■ Tech Talk: Up in the Clouds

Cloud computing is the latest, greatest innovation to change how businesses operate, and there’s no need for a boarding pass and identification. It’s just the fancy term for Internet-based computing, and it could offer significant benefits for your company.

Cloud computing simply means that you can access your data and files from wherever you are; all you need is an Internet connection and a web browser. If your employees are working remotely, on site or in the office, they’d have access to the same documents and files. And when you have data in the cloud, many providers supply offsite data redundancy that’s more powerful than the back-ups most businesses use. If your hard drive crashes, your computer disappears or a server fails, there’s no need to worry about losing important files.

Whether you decide to go all in or put only your calendar, contacts, files and folders or e-mail in the cloud, there’s a solution out there for you that can sync, back up and make whatever you want accessible from wherever you want. *Entrepreneur* highlights the [cloud-computing tools](#) you can use from your desktop, laptop or smartphone.

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■ Peer Perspective: Creating a Call Center

By Kelly A Moran, CMCA, AMS, PCAM

Customer service is the name of the game in community association management. In today’s “instant answer” society, homeowners want and expect fast, reliable and consistent resolution to their questions and concerns. This has led to a new trend in the industry: management company call centers.

Historically, when homeowners call their management company—to report a maintenance issue, obtain a form or ask a question—they’re fortunate to get in touch with the manager, assistant or accounting representative the first time. Typically, they leave a voicemail and hope to receive a call back by the end of the day—or week.

With a call center, owners usually can have their questions and concerns answered the first time they call, which leads to more satisfaction and less frustration.

If you decide to implement a call center, it’s essential that the proper amount of research and planning is conducted prior to the go-live date. It takes at least a year to set up and prepare the call center. Here are some things to cover during that time:

- Create an **internal task force** of key personnel to work on this project.
- **Visit other management companies** with call centers. Interview the executives and call center staff and review the phone system, software, computer equipment and procedures.

- Find a **phone system and software** that tracks calls and creates statistics on high call-volume periods, call length, number of agents required to answer calls based on volume and call disposition. This information is invaluable for ongoing evaluation.
- Determine how much **office space** to allocate for the call center.
- Find the right **staff**. Will you promote a current member of your team who excels in customer service? Make sure you look for individuals with prior call center or customer service experience.
- **Be prepared**. At least 30 days prior to the go-live date, your staff should be in place and undergoing training on the equipment, software and community specifics.
- Develop a standard set of about 100 **frequently asked questions** that you know homeowners ask your company on a regular basis. Managers play a critical role answering these questions about each of their properties. The more detailed the responses, the better call center representatives can respond.
- Review the **functions and expectations** of the call center with staff and managers before and after it goes live.

The call volume received by the accounting department, administrative staff and managers will be reduced substantially once the call center is operational, allowing them to focus on much larger issues. But they need to be prepared to answer phone calls that require more information, research or action.

Creating a call center for our company was a huge success. Although there were equipment hiccups, staff turnover and continual tweaking of our procedures, our customer satisfaction soared. Homeowners are very happy to have their calls answered by a live person who can respond to their question or concern on the first call.

Kelly Moran is vice president of Rampart Properties, Inc., in Tampa, Fla.

Share with *CEO Insights*:

Peer Perspective is a place for you to share opinions and ideas with your management company colleagues. It's a place for you to write about the issues and problems impacting the industry, your business or your client associations.

If there's something on your mind, submit a Peer Perspective column to dbrannigan@caionline.org. Submissions may be edited for length and clarity.

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■ Legislative Update: CAI Asks FHFA to Rescind Transfer Fee Proposal

CAI has asked the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) to rescind its proposal to ban deed-based transfer fees, urging the agency to give state and federal legislators time to address the issue and consider the reality of how the fees are used by community associations in any future regulatory proposal.

In comments submitted to the FHFA, CAI said banning the fees would be "catastrophic" because the proposal would impact the ability of property in community associations to qualify for most mortgages. The proposed regulation, originally issued in August, would prevent Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and Federal Home Loan Banks from purchasing mortgages from properties that contained the transfer fee. FHFA wanted to curb the growing use of deed restrictions that require payment to investors outside the community, but traditional associations transfer fees were included in the proposal.

CAI collected data and support from members that prove associations' deed-based transfer fees are essential to communities and their homeowners. Read [more on the fees, the comments submitted and research](#).

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■ **Newslink: Foreclosure Moratorium Prospects Slim**

The Obama administration doesn't support a nationwide moratorium on foreclosures at this time because it worries a moratorium would significantly impact the economic recovery.

Approximately one in four homes sold in the second quarter was in foreclosure, and despite worries that many of those homes were foreclosed upon in error, administration officials fear [a freeze on foreclosures could make matters worse](#), *The Washington Post* reports.

There is growing evidence that lenders have used erroneous and fraudulent means to foreclose on homes. The Obama administration is working with mortgage companies to correct the lax oversight and worrisome practices.

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■ **Newslink: Tax Forms Go Electronic**

Businesses will no longer receive copies of tax forms, schedules and instructions by mail each January.

Thanks to the continuing growth of electronic filing, the availability of free options to taxpayers and the cost of mailing paper forms packages, the [IRS is discontinuing the service](#), *Business Owner's Toolkit* reports. The 2010 tax documents will be available both electronically and in print, but they won't be mailed to taxpayers.

If you filed paper returns in 2009, you should have received a postcard in early October explaining how you can get copies of the forms and instructions. Go to www.irs.gov to download the free forms. Other sites also have free, downloadable forms. Paper copies of most forms will be available at participating libraries and post offices.

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■ **CAI Resources: Insurance Discounts**

Community manager members of CAI can receive up to 25 percent off errors and omissions insurance coverage. The discounts can save individual community managers—and management companies—hundreds and even thousands of dollars depending on the exact amounts of client billings, liability limits and business location.

Ian H. Graham Insurance partners with CAI to provide credits on insurance coverage. Manager members receive at least 5 percent off and those who hold professional designations could receive up to 25 percent off coverage.

Ian H. Graham also provides discounted directors' and officers' insurance coverage. Read more about the insurance discounts and other CAI [member discount programs](#).

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