Neighborhood Organizations On The Internet

by Mark Brose

The Lyndale Neighborhood Association, the Stevens Square Community Organization, the Downtown Minneapolis Residents Association, the Lexington-Hamline Community Council . . . there are over one hundred different neighborhood-based organizations in and around the Twin Cities. Staffed by volunteers and not-for-profit, these groups exist only for the purpose of involving residents and business people directly in the improvement of their communities, and many have shown remarkable endurance and success in such areas as leading crime prevention efforts, addressing transportation and housing issues, and informing citizens of public policy matters. The Internet has become one of their most successful tools in these endeavors, and as a result the Twin Cities has developed one of the most extensive communities of neighborhood groups on the Internet in the country.

Throughout their existence, these organizations have always recognized the value of learning from each other by exchanging information about their planning and revitalization experiences, and they have done so by whatever means available to them. But historically their limited budgets prevented any significant investment in technology, and as a result their communication media were often no more sophisticated than telephones, the U.S. mail, and time-consuming face-to-face meetings. As the organizations grew, they increasingly felt the need for an electronic communication network that improves their efficiency but doesn’t overburden their mostly part-time workforce. The Internet, with its ability to link individuals and organizations working independently for a common purpose, seemed to be just what was needed.

NPCR Assistance
In 1995, at the request of several neighborhood organizations interested in communicating electronically, the Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization program provided the support necessary to explore what this would entail. The organizations first conducted a survey which found that a majority of the neighborhood organizations responding were interested in “sharing information electronically.” Initially they considered establishing their own electronic bulletin board, but instead they discovered and joined the Twin Cities Free-Net, an electronic community network that was in its infancy at the time, and this relation-

NPCR has provided technical assistance in getting connected to the Internet as well as individualized training in using it effectively. This includes wiring phone lines for modem connections, obtaining hardware and software, computer troubleshooting, instruction in Internet tools such as e-mail and the World Wide Web, and group training sessions in how to create Web pages. The assistance has been instrumental in bringing a significant number of organizations on-line and has provided the impetus for many others to get connected on their own.

In addition to providing direct assistance to neighborhoods, NPCR publishes information on the Web that is of interest to them. NPCR maintains
its own Web site that includes descriptions of current projects as well as completed research reports. At the start of 1998, the NPCR site contained close to ninety neighborhood research reports covering topics such as bicycle lane planning, crime prevention through environmental design, and housing growth. These reports have been of great interest to neighborhoods. In the month of December 1997 alone, the NPCR reports page was visited 380 times.

NPCR has also worked with neighborhoods to determine what other information is valuable to them and has encouraged others to provide it. The Urban Coalition, for example, was urged to post census data for every Minneapolis neighborhood and St. Paul district, and it did so. NPCR also stimulated the City of Minneapolis to develop a Web site for its Neighborhood Revitalization Program and to provide e-mail to their staff. All of their staff members today have e-mail, and they are preparing a database on neighborhood plans and projects that will be available on their Web site later in 1998.

As a result of local initiative and NPCR assistance, a large number of Twin Cities neighborhood organizations are now using the Internet in their work. In the spring of last year, NPCR estimated that there were fifty-six neighborhood organizations with Internet accounts in Minneapolis and St. Paul. They are using them for a variety of tasks, ranging from e-mail communication between board members and staff all the way to Web-based research into how wireless telecommunications towers affect people’s health.

Electronic Mailing Lists

Because those who work for neighborhood organizations are primarily, if not entirely, unpaid volunteers, their busy work schedules and limited free time make it difficult to communicate as regularly as they would like. Using e-mail in addition to one-on-one communication and committee work is improving the frequency of contact between organizational members without increasing the number of meetings. It also allows members to keep informed without attending all (or any) of the meetings. Minutes, updates, and even emergency calls are distributed quickly without the need or expense of postage, envelopes, or volunteer time. Luther Krueger, from the Lyndale Neighborhood Association, relates one example:

Using my distribution list for crime and drug [issues] in Lyndale, we’ve been able to reach more people with very up-to-date information, and mostly it has led us more swiftly affirm our decisions. We have virtual meetings now, where we ask people who can’t make it to be sure to e-mail their input before the time-and-place meeting so they’ll be heard. I think initially the human contact was beginning to diminish, but now people are used to getting information they can use, and many on my list literally could not participate in meetings—no transportation, work schedule in conflict with our meeting times, etc.—before this. Now they can.

In some organizations members use e-mail to edit and review documents worked on between meetings. A number of organizations even receive submissions for their neighborhood newsletters and newspapers via e-mail. For example, the editor of Lowry Hill East Neighborhood Association’s newspaper, The Wedge, receives monthly updates by e-mail from the neighborhood’s city councilperson as well as meeting minutes from the secretary to the association’s board. The Bancroft Neighborhood Association also receives submissions from writers for its monthly newsletter. This has reduced duplication of effort (retyping), eliminated the problem of converting documents from one system to another (PC to Macintosh, Microsoft Word to WordPerfect, etc.), and freed up more time for activists to do meaningful work in their neighborhoods.

Still, one of the constant battles neighborhood organizations face is keeping up with what other organizations across the city are doing. They need an exchange of information and ideas as they try to answer a wide variety of questions, from the administrative (What’s a good accounting firm? Has anyone written a good employment agreement? What does the law say about using public funds to lobby?) to the programmatic (How have you dealt with abandoned houses in your neighborhood? What’s your experience with the new traffic circles? What’s the best way to operate neighborhood crime patrols?). With nearly every Minneapolis organization now participating in neighborhood-based planning with the city’s Neighborhood Revitalization Program, this type of information exchange is especially relevant.

All of the above issues and more have been explored on the electronic Twin Cities neighborhood mailing list, also known as a “listserv.” This was created specifically to provide a forum where neighborhood organizations could share their experiences and draw from those of others. Twin Cities Free-Net is the host for the listserv and its archive, and currently has over 200 participants.

Excerpts from a recent discussion on the listserv give some idea of its usefulness. Neighborhood and personal names have been removed and comments have been edited for spelling and clarity.

Neighborhood organizer #1: One of the most common questions neighborhood groups ask is how to get renters involved. An additional and even more difficult question many people wrestle with is how to get renters involved in the neighborhood organization at least in proportion to their percentage of the overall neighborhood population.

Organizer #2: Many renters live in multi-unit buildings, making it harder to reach them, since these buildings often have security systems, and you cannot get in. CCP/SAFE does very little to organize apartment clubs in comparison to block clubs. If there were more apartment clubs, you might see more turnout. Renters, on average, make less money and have less available time for neighborhood activities. This does not mean they are uninterested, simply that they have a tougher schedule to deal with, and fewer resources for it. Frankly, most neighborhood literature is written for homeowners, and is not sensitive to renters’ needs. Some of it can actually turn renters away from participation. A long time ago, [a St. Paul district] did a study about this issue; their results were illuminating at the time, and probably bear re-reading today.

Organizer #3: I know through experience that the only way to effectively reach the community is through door knocking. In [my neighborhood], the staff as well as volunteers assisted with the door knocking because people would invite only who they wanted at the meetings, and often those that needed to be there were not invited.
So keep up the good work.

**Neighborhood resident:** Just a comment about previous door knocking comments: I probably won’t come to the door. (I live in a house, so this probably isn’t relevant to the renter involvement issue.) I don’t like to be “door knocked.” I used to get people coming to the door either selling something, or they were flat broke and just needed fifteen dollars for diapers, and here is their driver’s license and they will pay you back next week, etc. After a while you disconnect the door buzzer. I really, really, really hate to bug someone I don’t know by knocking on their door because they are usually just as suspicious of door knockers as I am. If I get to meet my neighbors through helping push their car out of a snow bank, or chatting while doing yard work, then I feel more comfortable about door knocking.

Otherwise they just get the flyer in the mail slot. When I lived in [housing co-op] we allowed door knocking only when the door knockers were accompanied by a co-op member. That helped with the “stranger in my building” issues. I didn’t find it as offensive as having non-residents wandering the halls of my building.

**Organizer #4:** I agree with you regarding the unknown variables of unannounced callers at your door. When conditions are such that most who knock on your door aren’t very nice, it’s not a bad policy to use the peephole or to not answer the door except to those who call ahead. But I can tell you from 5-plus years of door knocking, flyering, delivering my neighborhood paper, and phone calling, that each method’s effectiveness is from high to low, in that order. In 1992, when we needed to organize block clubs in [neighborhood], flyering got us a pair, the paper got us one, and phoning got us zero. Door knocking has gotten us thirty. And from years of door knocking, I can say that the vast majority, if they’re home, will answer the door during daylight hours. I can only remember a couple instances, out of five hundred-plus doors knocked, where it was clear someone was home and they didn’t answer the door. We left a flyer after one light knock in that case. And only one has slammed the door in my face . . . I found out later that he had had previous unsatisfactory dealings with the association. The courtesy factor is exactly the reason for us developing the pre-knocking flyer with [neighborhood]. A phone call to me, or a note on the door, or a call to the apartment manager, is all the resident has to do to tell us not to stop by. And again, we’ve found resistance to be almost nil when we pre-flyer. If it’s done right,
door knocking will generate more involvement than any other method when contacting new or previously uncontacted residents.

As a result of exchanges like these, the members of the listserv have created an on-line community of sorts. Members exchange ideas and information from a common basis of understanding, and although they don’t always agree, their discussions generally result in constructive outcomes. Some have even formed a real community as a result of the electronic one. After several months of discussion, one list participant held a pot-luck barbecue at his home so that participants could meet face-to-face, and the outing has become an annual summer event.

The World Wide Web
Another communications forum has taken its discussion from e-mail to the Web. Safetynet, a communications forum established by Nolan Venkatraman of the Stevens Square Community Organization, was initially a mailing list for block clubs in the Stevens Square–Loring Heights neighborhood. They used it to notify the police and each other of crimes and suspicious activity in their area, and to coordinate their approaches to crime. Safetynet also was used to encourage the city’s Community Crime Prevention/SAFE Program to participate in the discussion. As a result, that program is now on-line and providing periodic neighborhood crime information on request via e-mail.

The Safetynet forum moved onto the World Wide Web as part of the Twin Cities Free-Net’s “Caucus Conference Center,” described by Free-Net’s executive director this way:

On-line conferencing enables written on-line group discussions. Unlike on-line “chat,” participants need not all be logged on at once. Instead, conversations typically take place over days, weeks, or even months. Unlike mailing lists or Usenet [another electronic network], the discussion is stored in a central place, ensuring that responses are consecutive and that no one adds a new response without having had the opportunity to read all of what’s been said so far. The result is a linear, sequential discourse that has the feel of a real-life conversation.

The Safetynet conference has a broader audience than the initial mailing list and has become a place where any neighborhood safety issues, concerns, and solutions can be discussed.

Neighborhood organizations are now establishing a presence on the Web in an ever-widening variety of ways. Neighborhood Web sites have become important for distributing information to residents, informing residents who are away from home for extended periods about community events, letting potential funders know what projects the neighborhood is working on, and sharing project information with other neighborhoods. In the spring of last year, twenty-seven of the fifty-six neighborhood organizations with Internet accounts had their own Web sites. What did they include on their sites?

▶ Neighborhood Revitalization Program plans. Many of the organizations involved with this program have posted all or parts of their plans, whether completed or in progress, on their Web sites. This has helped organizations to make their plans and updates available both to neighborhood residents who may not be able to come to meetings and to other neighborhood organizations,
thereby allowing them to take advantage of each other's experience.

► Contacts. Every neighborhood Web site contains some form of contact information for the organization, which has been helpful for residents with problems or concerns. In the Lowry Hill East Neighborhood, for example, when two residents were notified of a potential zoning change next door to their house, they used the neighborhood organization’s Web site to express their concern and were encouraged to attend the next meeting of the organization to hear and comment on the zoning request, which they did. In addition to contact information, many sites include complete by-laws and articles of incorporation, and copies of correspondence sent to various city agencies and public officials.

► Projects in progress. Probably the most timely information provided by neighborhood organizations on their Web sites are updates on projects in progress. These include both descriptions of events and opportunities for citizens to participate. One example is a posting about the annual Earth Day event held by the Kenny Neighborhood Association, now in its second year on the Web, which explains how Kenny residents can participate in the Minneapolis Earth Day Watershed Clean-up. Another is the Seward Neighborhood Transportation Plan, provided by the Seward Neighborhood Group, which addresses problems and solutions in critical traffic areas.

► Events Calendars. A few organizations publish a monthly events calendar to inform residents of community activities. Although calendars are distributed in these neighborhoods in hard copy as well, residents have commented that having the calendar on the Web site is a helpful supplement. Several organizations also make regular meeting minutes available on their Web sites to keep committee members and residents up-to-date.

► Newsletters. A growing number of neighborhoods are publishing electronic copies of their newsletters which include articles about neighborhood events, neighborhood history and other items of interest. The Lexington-Hamline Community Council, with one of the more impressive implementations, publishes “The Eavesdropper” in the portable document file (pdf) format, allowing them to maintain the newsletter style and still reach a wide audience. Past issues of newsletters are also archived on Web sites.

► Calls for volunteers. A number of neighborhoods have used their Web sites as a way to attract new volunteers. For some, this has brought in people they have been unable to reach by any other means. The Stevens Square–Loring Heights Neighborhood, for example, with its high concentration of university students, has effectively used its Web site to attract many students to participate in neighborhood activities. Others, such as the Kenny and Bancroft Neighborhood Associations, have attracted new volunteers to maintain their Web sites. As Web publishers, these volunteers have become more involved in their neighborhoods while simultaneously gaining valuable experience in electronic media.

The experiences of the Twin Cities indicate that the Internet has become an essential tool for a thriving community of neighborhood organizations, and their pioneering presence on the Web has distinguished our neighborhoods as some of the country’s most efficient. The Internet’s relative ease of use and widespread availability make it an ideal platform to bring together a wide range of participants with different time schedules, physical locations, and mobility. These on-line communities are increasing the influence of their organizations in ways never before possible, and as their experience grows, our neighborhoods will continue to improve their use of the Web and continue to lead the nation in community involvement.

Many of the organizations mentioned in this article can be found at the Twin Cities Free-Net Web site at http://freenet.msp.mn.us.

The Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) Web site can be found at http://freenet.msp.mn.us/org/npcr.

Mark Brose was a graduate student in the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota at the time he worked for NPCR, assisting neighborhoods in using the Internet. Having completed his master’s degree in planning, he is currently a Web and database developer for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. He is also the treasurer for the Lowry Hill East Neighborhood Association and “Cities and Neighborhoods” editor for Twin Cities Free-Net. He can be contacted through his Web site, located at http://freenet.msp.mn.us/~brose.