**At Your Service**  
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**Molly Brennan**  
  
**Five tips for building—and maintaining—successful relationships with your professional providers.**

The honeymoon is over. The giddy excitement has subsided. Your relationship is comfortable, but growing routine. Now, you and your service provider are left to figure out how to keep the flame burning.

A soured relationship with any of the assorted landscapers, accountants, community managers, bankers, roofers, insurance specialists and others who serve your community could spell more than heartbreak. It could incite a resident rebellion and lead to financial ruin. So, these bonds need to be nurtured and taken seriously. Take your contractors for granted and pretty soon they'll be taking you for granted.

Through interviews with homeowners, managers (who have the unique perspective of being both the one hired and the one doing the hiring) and a wide variety of contractors and professional service providers, we've identified five keys for building and maintaining strong relationships. It's not rocket science, but it does involve the effort of both parties. Read on to learn how to be lucky in love, or at least keep the relationship intact.

**1. Make your expectations clear.**

First impressions matter. The first impression—good or bad—is usually a lasting one. For many vendors, the first impression of a community association comes via the "request for proposal," or RFP. RFPs that are informal, sloppy or incomplete are a red flag for many contractors and professional service providers. In their eyes, it indicates the association either doesn't know what it wants, and so the contractor is destined to fail, or the association is not organized enough to prepare a formal RFP, which could indicate a lack of professionalism and poor management.

"From 19 years of experience, I've learned that if I see a less-than-acceptable RFP, it's best to steer clear," says James Rademacher, CEO of Rezkom Enterprises, Inc., an Ocean, N.J.-based maintenance services company.

But losing a quality vendor over something as basic as an RFP is both irresponsible and totally avoidable, Rademacher says, adding that many busy managers and volunteer board members simply underestimate the importance of a clear bid request. "Most managers I talk to say, 'I didn't know this bothered the vendors,'" he notes.

So Rademacher, who also serves as vice president of the CAI New Jersey chapter and a national CAI trustee, organized a series of educational seminars on the bid process for managers across New Jersey. Preparing a detailed RFP isn't difficult, but it does take time.

First, RFPs should always be in writing. "We've gotten requests for proposals that come via phone, and I won't even entertain that," he says. "There are simply too many variables to consider."

Then, at the very least, an RFP should contain:

* Detailed scope of work
* Contract period—starting and ending dates
* Payment terms
* Insurance requirements
* Site map or plan
* Contact information

And though it may seem cumbersome to put together an RFP—especially when you're seeking a bid from a vendor who is already familiar with the community, manager and board—it pays to put in the effort on the front end, says Christi Wells, cmca, a vice president at Community Association Banc & CondoCerts in Allen, Texas, and a former community manager. "Expectations must be clear and comprehended by all parties," she says. "Don't assume anything when it comes to what services are to be provided for the price of the contract. As a contractor will tell you, if it wasn't on the plans or in the scope of work, don't expect it to happen."

A good bid is detailed, customized and time consuming to prepare, which is why associations should be respectful of the effort vendors put into them, says David Caplan, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, CEO of Community Association Management, which manages about 40 communities in the Stevenson, Md. area. "Sometimes a community will just be looking for a budget number. You must tell the vendor this and not waste their time," advises Caplan, who sits on CAI's Association of Professional Community Managers Board. "The next time, the price you get may be higher than it should be since the vendor might not think you're asking for real."

There's nothing wrong with doing a little comparison shopping, since most associations require three bids per project; but you need to be truthful, says Diana Stiller, PCAM, a board member of the CAI Greater Los Angeles chapter and general manager of the Century Hill Association, a luxury, single-family home community in Los Angeles. If your board members are asking for bids just because they are fishing, let the vendor know that you are researching rather than hard bidding, she advises. "The contractor may decline to bid under those circumstances. But having been honest, you will be able to go back to the contractor in the future," she says. "Vendors and contractors who feel 'used' will decline to bid in the future."

Even if you give a bid fair consideration, but go with a different contractor or service provider, show the vendor professional courtesy, says Joanne Pena, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, a manager with Horizon Management Company in Los Angeles. "I will thank the vendors for taking the time to submit a bid and let them know why theirs was not accepted, whether it be their price, presentation, lack of references, whatever," she says. "I have found that most vendors appreciate this kind of feedback."

**2. Monitor, but don't micromanage.**

For the most part, board members are dedicated and hard-working advocates for their communities. They have a fiduciary responsibility to act in the best interest of their communities and most take that responsibility very seriously. After all, it's their investment on the line, too.

That fine-tooth-comb approach usually serves the community well, but it can lead to trouble with contractors and professional service providers. While board members know what's in the best interest of their community, they usually don't know the ins and outs of lien foreclosure, pool maintenance or reserve analysis and may question the pricing, timeline or nature of a project. Understanding the limitations and scope of their own knowledge and abilities, and knowing when to step back and let contractors and professional service providers take the lead is key to both successful relationships, say seasoned board members.

Take the manager-board relationship, for instance. In most mid- and large-scale communities, the day-to-day oversight of contractors and professional service providers falls on the manager. Many managers have some professional education, and most have experience dealing with a wide variety of professional service providers. A strong board knows how to tap that knowledge and experience, without relinquishing decision-making authority.

Such is the case at The Grande at Colts Neck Association in Colts Neck, N.J., says Jack McGrath, a member of CAI's Board of Trustees and chair of CAI's Community Association Volunteers Committee. There, the board frequently solicits the manager's advice on preferred vendors, RFPs and contractor relations. What makes her advice so valuable and trusted, says McGrath, is that she offers it as an opinion—not a final say on the matter.

"She'll say, 'based on my experience, this is what I think,'" McGrath says. "Nine times out of 10, we're going to follow her advice. Otherwise, why do you have her?"

Offering advice on vendors and RFPs is one thing. Isolating the board from vendors completely is another, and it's something managers and board members need to avoid. That's because too little board involvement raises concerns for many vendors, Rademacher says. As part of all large RFPs, Rademacher requests a meeting with the association's board. "If I'm going to sign an $80,000-a-year contract, I want to make sure the board is on the same page as the manager," he says.

Similarly, Michael Nagle, a Columbia, Md.-based community association attorney, requests a meeting with the board president whenever he senses the manager is operating too independently. "When push comes to shove, [the manager] is not the client to whom we owe a duty," he says.

**3. Establish clear lines of communication.**

Staying in touch with professional service providers and contractors is sometimes unavoidable—if a painter is in your hall every day for a week, it's easy to keep an eye on the project. But many times, contractors work independently, without direct supervision, and communication must be sought. Making the extra effort to communicate with service providers, however, will likely pay off since communication is the most important component of any relationship.

Most managers and board presidents now give—and request—cell phone numbers and after-hours contact information. But even with 24-hour accessibility, nothing beats a face-to-face meeting. Caplan schedules regular lunch meetings with vendors "to see how our overall relationship is going." Ed Coogan, an account executive with Engle-Hambright & Davies, a broker and risk management firm in Lancaster, Pa., visits clients on a quarterly basis.

At Charleston Place Association, a condominium community in Aurora, Colo., the contract for maintenance services stipulates that the contractor provide a monthly report to the board—either in writing or in person at board meetings, says former board president Rita Guthrie. And at the Windsong Condominiums in Denver, association President Michael Rouse, cmca, routinely invites vendors to attend homeowner meetings. "Residents with project-related technical questions can ask the vendors directly," says Rouse, who is also a board member of CAI's Rocky Mountain chapter. "This reduces the amount of time our manager needs to spend addressing and researching questions for our homeowners."

This is a good example of open, but controlled communication. Too many lines of communication can be overwhelming and counterproductive. Whether the contractor answers to a manager or the board president, it's imperative a single point of contact be established, says Denise Bower, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, vice president of Community Management, Inc., in Portland, Ore. This is especially true of on-site service providers, such as landscapers and security and maintenance providers, who are often approached by homeowners with personal requests.

"You basically have as many bosses as there are owners—plus their children and spouses, too! [Contractors] have to know who to listen to, and when to go to the community manager and say, 'Hey, Peter Smith is asking us to research this bylaw or take out this bush. What do you want us to do?'" Bower says. "We try to have most communications go through the management company, or at least let the contractor know who his one contact person is."

**4. Build and maintain trust.**

"Establish trust" sounds like one of those platitudes we're hoping to avoid in this article. But, just as with any relationship, mutual trust and respect are key components. Without them, the relationship will deteriorate and eventually end. For associations, broken trust means either the loss of a quality service provider or, worse, poor service from a contractor.

In many communities, the manager is the public face of the association, and so it falls to him or her to build and maintain trust. There are the obvious good-business practices that convey professionalism and help gain trust: be where you say you're going to be; do what you say you're going to do.

But that alone won't gain a contractor's trust; you have to convey professional respect, says Jolene Macrae, cmca, director of operations for Colonial Property Management in Mesquite, Nev. And you do that, she explains, by treating the contractor as a partner, not a hired hand. "It is extremely important to remember that you are all a team in this endeavor. If you make the vendor feel like a team member instead of an outsider, you will have a better working relationship."

"A dream client would be the business that looks at us as a business partner, not a line item on their balance sheet," Coogan agrees.

Respect also means deferring to the contractor's know-how. "Remember that your vendor was hired because of his expertise," Macrae says. "When you ask him something, tell him you trust his opinion—'he's the expert, what does he think?' Then, you have cemented the bonds of trust and respect."

At the same time, don't be completely hands-off, and show some interest in the service or project, Stiller recommends. "Learn as much as you can about the basics of each trade and profession you are using," she says. "The more interest and understanding you can show, the more dedicated that person will become to assisting you."

And remember: trust is a two-way street. Break trust with your vendors, either by not adhering to contract terms or not showing professional respect, and you could be the jilted partner. "I believe in firing your customers. Some situations are not worth the trouble," says Debbie Yeats, owner of Color Innovations Painting in Forth Worth, Texas, and a past president of CAI's Dallas-Fort Worth chapter. "If a customer is not responding to your needs, is difficult to work with, or has unreasonable expectations, sometimes it's best to move on."

Over the years, Pena has fired three associations. The relationships were doomed, she says, because the board members failed to take her advice or that of legal counsel. They "micromanaged their service providers, held them to unreasonable standards, beat them down in price, or refused to pay them in a timely manner."

In fact, failing to pay on time is one of the fastest ways to lose trust. The Grande at Colts Neck lost a good vendor due to problems with slow payment. It was the result of a mix-up between the manager and the accounting department of the management company, McGrath says. The association approached the vendor recently about a new RFP and offered assurances that the payment delays had been addressed. "Hopefully he'll come back," McGrath says.

You can sometimes combat problems like that and build a reservoir of good faith by giving credit where credit is due, says Rouse, the association president from Denver. If a contractor does a great job, let him know. "We recognize our vendors for the work they do by giving them awards or certificates and having vendor luncheons," he says. "Everyone likes to be recognized and appreciated," Stiller seconds.

**5. Keep things in perspective.**

No relationship is perfect, and even healthy relationships occasionally encounter bumps in the road. Distinguishing between minor problems and relationship-ending issues is key to long-term success, says Lee Thompson, cmca, ams, president of T.M.C. Realty & Management, Inc., in Las Vegas.

For example, when complaints or problems arise, first try to address them in a pro-active manner, Thompson suggests. It may be that the vendor doesn't understand what is expected, or he or she may be unaware that performance has slipped. "Advise your vendor what the issues are and work together to resolve them," he says. "We have an in-person review or conference and some clearly defined benchmarks for performance when things are going badly. If we have to move on to another vendor, at least we will have tried to do our part in making the relationship work."

And remember to cut your vendors some slack, advises Marilyn Brainard, a member of the CAI Community Association Volunteers Committee and past president of the master community association of Wingfield Springs in Sparks, Nev. "Don't shop around if one little thing goes wrong," she says. "You have to give people a chance to get used to a job."

Even if the service provider has been on the job for years, mistakes happen and you need to keep things in perspective, says Macrae. The longtime reserve specialist for one of her communities once submitted a reserve study—on the wrong association. Rather than take him to task for this time-consuming and time-wasting mistake, Macrae decided this trusted and usually reliable vendor had made an honest mistake. "I jokingly called him and teased him," she recalls. "We laughed about it and he corrected the situation in a matter of days."

Because the reserve specialist quickly accepted culpability and rectified the situation, he put Macrae's worries to rest. When a contractor is defensive or evasive about a mistake, however, that's a more serious problem, Caplan says. "All vendors make mistakes, just like all managers make mistakes," he says. "Those contractors that acknowledge their mistakes and correct them without delaying or griping are the contractors we work best with."

There are times, of course, when the error is too grievous or the damage too extensive and the relationship must be ended. When that's the case, be polite but pointed, Macrae advises. "If you must terminate, be polite in your letter of termination, and tell him—personally—why," Macrae recommends. If you explain why the contract was terminated and offer a clear explanation of the shortcomings or problems, the contractor will have an opportunity to address and correct them. Down the road, the new and improved vendor might be someone you'll want to do business with, Macrae says.

Long term doesn't always mean healthy. Change can be disruptive, costly and distracting to community associations. That is why long-term relationships are so valued, and why we've dedicated this space to tips for building lasting relationships.

But just because a relationship has endured doesn't mean it's healthy, cautions Jerry Boswell, past treasurer and president of a subassociation in the Highlands Ranch master association in Highlands Ranch, Colo. "It's not always a positive thing to have a long relationship with a provider because that can indicate that the association is too lax and has ceded too much authority to the provider," he says. Boswell, who also serves on CAI's Community Association Volunteers Committee, recommends seeking RFPs every three years. It keeps service providers on their toes, he says, and ensures their rates are in line with the current marketplace. "Even if it's a good provider, it's smart to do them [RFPs] every few years."

A vendor you work with today may bear little resemblance to the company you hired five years ago. Staff, ownership and business philosophy can change, which is why long-term relationships don't necessarily translate to long-term partnerships, Pena says. "I have ended relationships with vendors after using them for years because of changes in personnel, quality of workmanship or pricing," she notes. "We must represent the best interests of our associations, and sometimes that means going out for a competitive bid even though everything is status quo."

*Molly Brennan is a freelance writer in Highland Park, Ill.*