

# Ten Ways Neighbors Can Manage the Image of Their Neighborhoods and City

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1. **Get Clear About The Image You Want Your Neighborhood And City To Have.** When people think of your neighborhood or your city, what three things do you want to pop into their heads? These can be your core marketing messages, and you can work to repeat them in all of your communications, formal and informal about the neighborhood.
  
2. **Speak Positively About Your Neighborhood and City.** Sometimes people unintentionally undermine their neighborhoods or city by focusing on the problems, talking in the public media about things they are fixing, and telling all of their friends and relatives about the challenges of the place and never about its assets. Words matter. We have more influence over others' perceptions of our community than we realize. Think about your words and actions in this way: ***“Will this program/ project/ strategy /comment/news story inspire confidence in the future of this neighborhood among neighbors and potential homebuyers?”*** By using potential homebuyers as part of your imaginary audience, you will be assured of carrying out revitalization programs and marketing strategies in ways that do not undermine confidence in the future of the neighborhood for all kinds of other investors, **including existing neighbors. Consider developing an “editorial board” to take control of the image of your neighborhood.**
  - Sometimes our best intentions can send unfavorable messages about our neighborhoods. For example, getting media attention for fighting crime sends a message to the general public that our neighborhood is crime ridden. Neighbors must be very careful about what messages they want the public to hear about the neighborhood. An editorial group can keep the neighborhood association and other groups on point about presenting only positive messages about the neighborhood.
  
  - This editorial board can also monitor what the media is saying about the neighborhood and present alternative stories on a regular basis to try to turn the tide. Think of it as a campaign – get clear about the image you want your neighborhood to have, and start a monthly or bi-monthly schedule of positive events and stories you can pitch to reporters.
  
3. **Work With Real Estate Agents To Help Market Homes For Sale To Strong Buyers.**

- Keep track of the homes for sale in your neighborhood and have a plan for helping real estate agents market them. When you see homes for sale in the neighborhood, try to meet the listing agent and tell them what's great about the neighborhood, and offer your ambassador group to talk with prospective buyers.
  - Ask the agents listing homes to do a "Pick Your Neighbor Party" in which an open house is held before the general public sees the home. Neighbors are invited, and they invite their friends and family. Everyone learns about the property and price and brainstorms people they know who might buy the home.
  - Set up a Facebook page for your neighborhood and "friend" all of the real estate agents who list in your community. Send them updates about great things going on in the neighborhood.
  - Make it easy for homebuyers to find out about homes for sale in your neighborhood and how great the neighborhood is: create a neighborhood website with current listings and link it to Realtors' websites.
  - Form a neighborhood ambassador group to work with real estate agents on selling your neighborhood to strong buyers. This means getting together a small group of great neighbors who are prepared to talk to real estate agents and potential homebuyers about how great the neighborhood is. Potential homebuyers will believe what neighbors say more than anyone else.
  - Get information on the home and distribute it at your neighborhood association meeting and ask members to pass it along to anyone they think might be interested. This is especially important when a home might sell to an absentee investor and you really want it to go to an owner occupant.
- 4. Develop a presentation about the neighborhood and its benefits to homebuyers and renters and present to school parents and staff, church congregations, and other institutions with members who could become homeowners or renters in the neighborhood.**
- These neighborhood institutions usually have many families who are renters, who could become strong buyers or renters in your neighborhood.
  - Post your presentation on your neighborhood website and on YouTube.

## 5. **Welcome new neighbors and get them involved in the neighborhood.**

- One of the most powerful positive neighborhood images is one in which neighbors know each other, and are friendly and supportive. By modeling this behavior, you can start a lasting and noticeable image for your neighborhood that makes people want to stay and attracts new people, too.

## 6. **Celebrate all of the Good Things and Work on Having Fun Activities**

A group of neighborhoods in Chicago says it this way:

- Neighborhood identities are created through shared experiences.
- Positive shared experiences result in positive neighborhood identities.
- Programs that foster dialogue and exchange build positive shared experiences and thus positive neighborhood identities.

## 7. **Define, Expect, Cultivate And Reward A Set Of “Neighborhood Values”.** One of the greatest influences on a neighborhood’s image comes from the degree to which neighbors embrace a set of basic “neighborhood values”. The values that support a neighborhood’s quality of life and a positive image are simple and obvious, and don’t require money to perform:

- Porches and yards are kept clean and tidy. No trash, no junk. Mown lawns.
- People do not litter streets and other public areas, and they immediately pick up any litter they find.
- People put their trash out on trash day in an appropriate receptacle, and they bring the receptacle in within a day of pickup. They do not place trash out days and weeks in advance of pickup because it flies away, is disturbed by animals, and is an eyesore for the street.
- People respect their neighbors and conduct their lives in ways that do not negatively impact their neighbors – no loud music, etc.
- People observe speed limits and other traffic regulations. They do not speed through the neighborhood endangering the lives of children, pets and others. They don’t park in the middle of a street blocking traffic while they chat with friends. They don’t park their cars in their front yards.
- People take responsibility for their children’s actions and teach them to be good neighbors.
- People shovel snow from walks and porches, rake leaves, etc. in a timely manner.
- People do not deal drugs or allow drugs to be sold in their homes. Ditto for other criminal activities.

Do whatever you can to encourage, facilitate, and cajole people into embracing these values. Be creative – I've known organizations that pay for junk cars, old appliances and indoor furniture placed outdoors because for some people these items have value. Set up a tool lending library if people lack lawnmowers and other home maintenance tools. Get help for elderly or disabled neighbors.

And don't be afraid to act against those who refuse to embrace these values. Frankly, if they won't do these very basic things, they do not deserve to be in the neighborhood. Use building code enforcement, environmental code enforcement, and even direct action such as picketing a bad landlord at his home or church.

#### **8. Help Make The Neighborhood Look Its Best.**

- You can't control everything about the way your neighborhood looks to passersby, but neighbors can make a big difference by having high expectations for street and sidewalk cleanliness, yard maintenance, bringing in garbage cans, etc. Work with your neighborhood association and other groups of neighbors to make sure everyone understands how important this is to the neighborhood's image and to get each person's commitment to doing the best they can with their property and helping neighbors with theirs.
- Reward and draw attention to good property maintenance and neighborly behavior by establishing a Good Neighbor awards program, and/or a Best House on the Block awards program. Do stories about the winners in your neighborhood newsletter, or announce them at the neighborhood association meeting.
- Have high expectations for city services around street and other public areas maintenance, code enforcement, and the public appearance of business and landlord properties. Your neighborhood deserves the best from city government and you must hold them accountable to deliver the best. In most places, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and you can demand excellent city services by consistently expressing your expectations through regular meetings with city council reps, code enforcement, the Mayor, etc. Demand responsible building maintenance from businesses and landlords the same way. This may take time, but keep at it. Too many neighborhoods accept the low expectations that others have for them, which become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### **9. Find Buyers Who Will, By Their Choice Of The Neighborhood, Signify To Others That The Neighborhood Is Improving – And Then Market Their Choice Like Crazy.** In Battle Creek, Michigan, Neighborhoods Inc.

was able to recruit a past president of the local Urban League to buy a home in the target neighborhood. This was a person everyone knew could have chosen many other neighborhoods, and who caused neighbors to believe the neighborhood must be getting better. By making sure everyone knows when someone like this buys, you can change the perceptions of your neighborhood faster.

10. **Change the Subject.** One problem most declining neighborhoods face is a reputation with the media and the general public characterized by problems like crime and drugs. There are two ways to deal with this. The one that doesn't work is to attempt to change public opinion by talking about what the organization is doing to fight those problems. This usually reinforces the image of crime and drugs by reminding people all the time of the problems you are trying to solve.

The other approach, which works better, is to actively change the subject. Give the media and the public lots and lots of stories about things that are wonderful in the neighborhood. And don't act surprised that something good is happening in the neighborhood. For example, don't do a story that says "although this neighborhood is oppressed and downtrodden, a few dedicated neighbors are planting a garden anyway!" Do stories on the private gardens in your neighborhood, on the ethnic restaurants and groceries if you have them, on the winners of your Good Neighbor Awards, on recent home renovations, on recent homebuyers. Think of your job as *replacing* the image people have of your neighborhood rather than changing it.

- BONUS: Make Things Special.** As you consider options in neighborhood strategies and marketing, try to always figure out how to make a building, a park, a street, a neighborhood entry – whatever it is you are working on – look *special*. For an overall neighborhood, this may mean identifying the sub-neighborhoods, naming them, developing logos for them, and then putting up banners and gateway signs that define them. For a home improvement or rehab, figure out what it would take to make that house look like the best house on the block. What's special in one place will be different from what it is in another, but it is always easy to figure out. The accumulation of making individual things special produces a special neighborhood. Special inspires confidence and special sells.

What else can you think of?

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