

## Vendor or a Business Partner?

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Many of us remember when, not that long ago, Managers asked that we refer to them as “Community Managers”, and cease referring to them as “property managers”. “After all”, they said, “ ‘Community Manager’ better reflects their area of specialization in the management world”. Today, it is seen as a matter of respect for us to use the term “Community Managers”. Not only does it acknowledge the years of experience and education necessary to attain that status, but it better reflects their specialized skills in working with a diverse, and often large group of people residing in common interest communities. For those of us in allied industries, it is a good practice to train ourselves, and our employees, on the importance of adhering to this term, and thereby giving Community Managers the respect they have earned.

Similarly, for those of us in those allied industries, there is a parallel. It involves the difference between being viewed as a “vendor”, and being recognized as a “Business Partner”. Maybe it’s just me, but when I hear the term “vendor”, the image come to mind of an apron-wearing man selling hot dogs and soft drinks out of an umbrella cart on the sidewalk outside of my building. Now, do I think that using that term is a deliberate slight? No. But I do think that it is an unfortunate reflection of our perceived role in our relationship with “community managers” and “community volunteer leaders”! Just as “property manager” incorrectly describes the value in what Community Managers do, the term “vendor” fails to accurately express our role in the community association industry as well as the value that we bring to our clients. Please note that I used the term “clients” not “customers”. These are also importance distinctions! You sell to customers, but you serve clients.

I am proud to be a Business Partner! I have worked with Community Managers and Board Members for more than two decades! And if I could change one thing in my industry, it would be that Community Managers and CAVLs realize that my goal is not simply to sell you something! My goal is to help you reach your goal serving your client. I want to establish a business relationship that will help us mutually attain our goals. Unquestionably, part of your goal as a community Manager or Board Member is provide great service to your client. I can help you do that. Maybe your immediate goal is find a better product or service that will make your life easier. Well, if I can’t do that, I probably know someone in the industry who can. The point is that our relationship should go beyond the simple “buy and sell” transaction. As Business Partners, we possess specialized knowledge, experience and industry contacts that can help you reach your goal, whether you are a Community Manager or Community Association Volunteer Leader.

I often hear complaints from Business Partners who say “I only get called when the Community Manager or CAI Chapter want me to sponsor something”! I understand how they feel. Unfortunately, too many times they’re right! But we have to ask ourselves “is the reason that we are perceived as ‘vendors’ because we act like ‘vendors’”? Do we call on Community Managers only when we want to make a sale? Or do we call on them to offer assistance or to see if there is any way in which we can make their life easier? (IMPORTANT NOTE: Forget dropping by their office unannounced with a box of doughnuts! Most Community Managers will tell you that they rarely have time to just drop everything and chat during

their busy day. Call and make an appointment and then bring the doughnuts. Or speak with the office manager about hosting a morning coffee & bagels educational seminar or one of their monthly “Lunch-&Learn” sessions. And do yourself a favor; if you do get such a chance, don’t blow it by wasting their time with a sales pitch! Present something informative about your business or industry that can be helpful to them! And use the time for ask them what they need!)

Listen up now; this is important! Both CAI and its Community Manager members have been striving to raise the level of professionalism in the Community Management industry. Part of that goal is to improve the recognition in the public’s eyes of the real value of what Community Managers do. Likewise, if Business Partners want to be recognized for the value that we bring to this relationship, then we first have to recognize that value ourselves! We have to alter our own perception of our role from a “buy & sell” relationship to “I am here as a resource in a meaningful professional relationship”.

Some of you know that I am not shy about politely (most of the time) correcting someone who refers to Business Partners as “vendors”. I am no longer content to be perceived as someone who just wants to sell something. My 20+ years of experience and effort in this industry mean too much to me to have my services viewed as a commodity! And I know that there are many of you out there who feel the same! We have much to offer both to the clients and to the CAI organization besides sponsorship dollars!

Fortunately for us, CAI has recognized this incongruity. To address this, they have developed a new course called the Business Partners Essentials. It’s easy to find online on the CAI website under “Events and Education”. Many CAI Chapters are also offering “live” courses. It’s a great refresher course for of us “old hands” to remind us of the core ideas of why we’re here. For those of you that are new to the Community Associations industry, it is a great way to get some important tips on how to operate effectively in this business environment. Once you take the class and pass the exam, you will earn the Educated Business Partner Distinction, which highlights your knowledge regarding community associations and how to work effectively with them. Having the EBP Distinction on your business card is a good way to show your clients that you are a serious Business Partner; one who is willing to put in the time and effort to learn how to better serve their needs. Check with your Chapter to see when the Business Partners Essentials class is being held.

And don’t be shy about correcting our industry partners when they refer to us or themselves as “vendors”! Ask them where they parked their umbrella cart! Our next goal is to have the term “vendor” stricken from the Industry nomenclature. Call them out on it if you find it! I will! Good luck!

**Peter B. Miller, RS** is recognized as a leading authority in the field of Reserve Fund Planning. He is past-President of the Washington Metro Chapter as well as the past-President of the Southeast Virginia Chapter of CAI. Peter holds the credential of Reserve Specialist (RS) and the distinction of Educated Business Partner (EBP) . He currently serves as Co-Chair of the CAI Business Partners Council, is a member of CAI's Foundation for Community Association Research and is a Trustee on CAI National's Board of Trustees.