



TOTAL TECH

Lockdown was only the beginning of Florida-based Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS®’ transformation.

BY MEIGHAN A. HARRIS

On March 18, 2020, the Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS® Board of Directors held its monthly meeting just as COVID-19 was starting to spread throughout the United States. Members felt that with the rise in coronavirus cases, it would be prudent to shut down the board office and send the staff home to work remotely.

As a medium-sized board with five full-time staffers, we had been functioning on a networked server and landline phones. How were our members going to get in touch with us if we weren’t in the office? I had to act fast. I consulted my peers on the AEI Year-Round Facebook page and switched our phones to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). It took two weeks, but I was able to get a new phone number that members could use to reach us at home.

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Taking the advice of fellow Florida CEO, I installed the tawk.to chat widget on our home page, which quickly became a member lifeline. A word of advice: When setting up tawk.to, be sure to set the hours in which you can be contacted, or your members will be reaching out for help overnight! Our tech guy then helped me upload all network folders to the cloud so we could function as efficiently at home as we did at the office.

Reducing our Physical Footprint

By the time the initial six-week lockdown ended, I had learned a lot. As I write this, eight months have since passed, and we have opened the office lobby to members wearing face masks, but all of our committee meetings and classes are held virtually. Fall is our peak season, and class attendance is higher than ever! But with just four employees sitting in a 4,000-square-foot commercial building and only the occasional member dropping in to pick up signs, I presented the board with a suggestion: Let's downsize and go fully hybrid.

Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS® owns the building, which has four office suites. One of our tenants was in need of additional space, and following a short meeting with the CEO, the boards agreed to swap spaces, adding \$15,000 per year to our bottom line.

There were other reasons to move, as well. The new space would allow staff members to be closer to each other for team-building and project planning. The board's only wish was to give the office a "wow" factor if we wanted to downsize, and we are now remodeling the space (staff are working from home during the transformation). When members enter the new office, they will be greeted by a colorful 3D art wall with a walls.io display in the main lobby that will highlight major investors, C2EX members, and social media posts about our events and education.

Streamlining Management

Another form of technology we are leaning on heavily during the pandemic is GrowthZone association management software. We switched to it in August 2019 and were happy with its functionality, but we had barely scratched the surface when it came to the features offered. I realized that there were a lot of things we could be doing with GrowthZone to communicate with our members more efficiently.

One of the coolest features is the free mobile app for members. After a member downloads the app, we can send push notifications that go right to the member's cellphone. The staff app can be used to scan QR codes when members register for an event for touchless check-in. Using the system's forms and surveys, I was able to stage the annual board vote, survey members on our performance, and ask for nominations and volunteers to serve.

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Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS® did have to downsize staff by one position, but the automated workflows in my AMS helped pick up the slack. Using a marketing workflow, I was able to "set and forget" our marketing plan for new members; I was also able to send an exit survey to nonrenewing members so we could have a better understanding of the reasons members leave the association, a brokerage, or the business.

The member recruitment module allowed me to create a proposal that was clear and concise; all I had to do was send the prospect a link to view and accept. I was also able to place our REALTOR® store online with ease using the store module, allowing contactless pickup of needed supplies such as signs and lockboxes.

Working virtually, our staff had a Zoom call a few times a week, but the AMS helped me check progress using the projects/tasks module. I was able to assign projects and deadlines, then track a percentage of completion for each assignment. It has been a great way to keep staff accountable, and quarterly bonuses have turned out to be excellent positive reinforcement.

The Hybrid Future

Moving forward, Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS® plans to continue to hold board and committee meetings virtually. If a member prefers to come in person, we will offer a hybrid option. Our AMS cloud storage program allows us to place important documents in the member portal securely.

For education, we have invested in a Mevo Start all-in-one wireless camera, which can follow an instructor around the room. All staff now have webcams, wireless headsets, and Zoom accounts. We incorporated Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Shifts for paperless time tracking. When the new office opens, staff members will have an Amazon Echo on their desks to replace the intercom system on the old landline phones.

As technology continues to produce new tools and make them more efficient, we will continue to embrace them. After all, one of Bonita Springs–Estero REALTORS®' core values is innovation. ■



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