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Neighbor Niceties

Don't silently steam on your side of the fence. Here's how to handle issues that may arise next door

BARBARA BALLINGER

Most everybody knows some of the cardinal rules of being a good neighbor: Keep your yard, garage and sidewalks neat; don't trespass on a neighbor's property; and certainly don't let anyone in your household – two- or four-legged – make too much noise, especially early in the morning or late at night. What constitutes tidiness and acceptable decibel levels remain a matter of debate. And then there are thornier issues that literally sever friendly relationships.

For example, those branches growing over your property line, shading your roof and serving as a trampoline for squirrels? It would be nice if your neighbors pruned them, but don't count on it. Or the party that gets a bit rowdy? Complain, and you may be labeled Scrooge. The dog next door that barks at all hours of the day? You may want prefer to have him stay indoors all day, but remember this could be the equivalent of a family member, so tread gently. And here's yet a more novel peccadillo: Your neighbors think your freshly painted facade is too similar to theirs – and imitation isn't the highest form of flattery.

So, what can you do? Start by building a good relationship.

Pauline Panza, a saleswoman with Keller Williams Realty NJ Metro Group in Montclair, N.J., suggests introducing yourself when new neighbors move in and extending a helping hand to feed a neighbor's cat or pick up mail if you know they're going away, she says.

Cindy Royall Libonati, with Ewing & Associates Sotheby International in Calabasas, Calif., suggests, "If you notice anyone struggling financially or because of health, bring over a meal. Or if someone's elderly and can't move their trash can, do it for them," she says. In her Woodland Hills neighborhood, neighbors developed a tradition of sharing Bloody Mary's on New Year's morning.

Times of trouble require additional care, as Rob and Melinda DeRocker experienced when a lost cat went high up in their maple tree in Tarrytown, N.Y. "All our attempts to coax it down met with it going 60 feet high in the air. Friends came over with a ladder," says Rob. After Day 4, the DeRockers sent out a picture by email to neighbors and posted it on Facebook, and someone else alerted a local newspaper. Finally, the DeRockers received an email from the owners who lived a half-mile away in an adjacent town that the cat was their missing Fluffy. Fluffy soon came down but ran off, though the owners' dog located him. "We were happy to see the cat reunited with its distressed owners, and we ended up making new acquaintances" Rob says.

But when disputes arise, the best

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But when disputes arise, the best strategy is to try to resolve them face to face, since people generally are friendlier and less confrontational than in letters or emails, says Los Angeles real-estate attorney Zachary D. Schorr.

Etiquette guru Jacqueline Whitmore agrees. "Hostility only breeds hostility," she says. Approach your neighbors when they're most likely to listen, which means not at dinner or late at night, and engaging in a pleasant conversation that starts with a compliment, says Whitmore, author of "Business Class: Etiquette Essentials for Success at Work" (St. Martin's Press, 2005).

Sometimes, a simple heads-up is sufficient. With tree limbs or barking dogs, explain you're going to check local and state laws, says Schorr. Or with the paint fiasco, it's a done deal, and Schorr thinks there's nothing to be done since no law probably was broken.

"The annoyed homeowners are unreasonable," he says.

The common denominator is to take the high road, since you may be neighbors for a long time. Doing so will also give you a leg-up if anything you do upsets them, Schorr says.

If being nice fails, leave a paper trail with a letter and cite relevant rules, says Schorr. If you still get nowhere, talk with an official or member of your homeowners' association. "Many communities offer free mediation to avoid costly litigation," says Schorr.

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