

BROKEN WINDOWS

By Sophie Hanson, newsLINK Group



The broken windows theory can also be applied to organizations. Several years ago I was in a law office for a deposition. The firm's office had an expensive exterior that projected an appropriately aggressive professional image.

In 1982, George Kelling and James Wilson wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* called “Broken Windows,” which generated a great deal of interest in many communities.

Applied to police work, the article points out that when a community tolerates petty crime and minor problems, the community watches with interest, sees that criminal behavior is allowed to continue without anyone doing anything about it, and then begins to move toward bigger crimes and bigger problems. Stopping small crimes, on the other hand, tells people that bad behavior won't be tolerated and prevents the escalation toward more serious crimes. This “broken windows” theory has been applied, with some controversy, as an approach toward law enforcement in places like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

According to an article written by Bernard Harcourt and Jens Ludwig that appeared in a 2006 issue of the *University of Chicago Law Review*, the evidence after a couple of decades of implementation does not necessarily support the theory, but the idea behind that theory certainly caught the attention of other people who saw applications other than law enforcement.

Does **fixing a broken window** really matter? After all, in the **context** of a reasonably **successful** organization, maybe an out-of-date **blog** or a neglected **website** isn't a big deal as long as **good work** is being done. The truth is, if the **small details** are **professional** and up-to-date, we can all tell. Those details **communicate** the **idea** that the organization is in **control** and has **mastered** more than just the **small stuff**. They **communicate** top-notch **professionalism**.



Popular blogger and writer Gretchen Rubin picked up the idea and applied it to home management. If she has unmade beds, cluttered counters, unsorted mail, piles of newspapers, shoes that are out of place throughout her home, and a generous scattering of dirty dishes, she feels out of control and overwhelmed by the mess. For her, the first step toward reclaiming control and happiness is as simple as cleaning up whatever mess is around her. Most people can probably relate.

Several years ago I was in a law office for a deposition. The firm's office had an expensive exterior that projected an appropriately aggressive professional image. It was located in a high-rent area of our town, was certainly meant to impress, and was probably also meant to intimidate anyone who came there. As I sat in one of their several conference rooms waiting for the deposition to begin, I noticed that the bookshelves were dusty. So were the glasses by the empty water pitcher, which also had water marks on them. One or two of the expensive art pieces on the wall were crooked.

My first thought was that this firm did not pay attention to detail. Later events showed I was right. The fact that the firm was not detail oriented slowed the case down repeatedly as it made its way through the court system. If an organization can't or won't get the little details right, it is likely they won't perform any better on the big issues, either.

This is true for any organization. From what I've observed, though, the broken windows for associations and nonprofit organizations often include the following:

- Old voice-mail notification messages. If it's April 3rd, for example, you don't want to hear a greeting dated December 23rd.**
- Blogs that haven't been updated in two years.**
- One sad and lonely tweet in a Twitter feed.**
- Websites that are not mobile-friendly.**
- Not having a way for the associations to communicate with its members and give substance to an otherwise intangible membership experience. The communication method can be as simple as a magazine or a newsletter, but there ought to be something.**
- Having too many staff members who hide behind email and texts, and are unwilling to engage with people on a personal level.**

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