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best practices

Building (and Maintaining) Consensus as a Marketing Strategy, Part 4

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Breaking ground but not relationships

Many developers believe that, when they reach the construction phase of a project, they are “home free” and can loosen—or lose—what they view as the shackles of public involvement. Initiatives and processes put in place to engage stakeholders and build consensus in the early phases of the development project are too often abandoned at the first opportunity. Yet, developers can—and often do—continue to face problems during the construction phase, and just as importantly, they have opportunities to create goodwill that can help them with the marketing of their current project and with future projects.

In the first three articles in our series, we discussed how to create effective project teams, build consensus, and involve stakeholders before and during the permitting process. In this last part, we focus on how to maintain relationships and forge new ones during the construction phase, paving the way to a successful project outcome and an effective organization.

Make new friends, but keep the old

In part two of our series, we recommended that developers form a variety of stakeholder groups prior to the permitting process to strengthen communications and consensus-building activities. Stakeholder groups, such as advisory and working groups that include abutters, community leaders, area business people, environmentalists, and non-profit leaders, can continue to be of assistance during the construction phase because they serve as the developer's link to the community and particular demographic and interest groups. Continuing to meet regularly with stakeholder groups maintains two-way conversation, building upon the mutual respect that has already been established. The developer can both provide regular project updates as well as seek out information regarding everything from nuisances or minor inconveniences to major problems impacting the community.

Informing the public in advance about road or sidewalk closures, traffic lane reconfigurations, removal of parking spaces, traffic signal changes, truck routes, air quality, noise, and other issues related to the construction not only shows your concern and respect for the community but also allows the community to make adjustments to their normal travel routes, schedules, and so on. Similarly, providing forums and avenues for the public to make inquiries, suggestions, and, yes, even complaints enables the development team to address concerns before they become larger

public issues played out in the media and at town meetings. Another advantage of old friends is that, if new or unexpected stakeholders “come to the table later,” your relationships with numerous community members will help build your credibility with newer participants (and provide you allies who can vouch for why decisions were made, what tradeoffs were considered, and that you are trustworthy, upfront, and fair).

In addition to maintaining communication with existing stakeholder groups, developers also can set up focus groups or roundtable meetings to engage new constituents and, in some cases, to obtain input on certain later-stage design elements from the people who will use the building in the future.

For example, a client of ours who was building a new hospital held focus groups with senior citizens and physically challenged and non-English speaking individuals to obtain their thoughts on color scheme, flooring materials, traffic flow, and signage. The focus groups were held prior to the developer signing off on the interior design and signage plans. Samples of interior design and signage concepts were presented to focus group members for their input. Participants provided valuable information that was then used to make minor and, in some instances, significant changes in the color scheme, flooring materials, and signage. The changes resulted in a building environment that was welcoming to a broad range of individuals and sensitive to the users’ needs and the cultural diversity of the area. The focus groups also helped the developer engage a new group of individuals who, as a result, felt connected to and vested in the success of the project.

Connecting in cyberspace

Continuing to use the Internet also will help a developer broaden and strengthen its outreach to and reputation within the community. For example, a project Web site is a great vehicle to show the latest rendering of the building, provide construction updates, post contact information, and answer questions. If traffic, environmental, or other issues arise during the construction phase, the Web site can be used to communicate what is being done to take care of the problems and to post schedules. A media resource area with news releases, fact sheets, photographs, renderings, and other information should be kept updated so reporters can easily obtain project information 24/7.

The Web site also can have a link to a video cam the developer can set up near the project site to chronicle the minute-by-minute construction of the facility. Individuals who click on the link will be able to view live footage of the building being erected. The footage also can be incorporated into a promotional video and

assist with marketing efforts for the project, as well as for the company.

Share your hardhat

Tours of the construction site for the media and various stakeholder groups during the construction phase will not only help ensure the accurate and timely flow of information but also will promote an inclusive relationship with the community that respects their interest in the project and the future of their community. Regular hardhat tours with government officials, community and business leaders, and other key stakeholders are important for your current project, as well as for your future projects in the community or elsewhere. To this latter point, inviting stakeholders from communities where you have other projects in earlier stages of the development process also can be a highly effective strategy because it provides opportunities to demonstrate the quality of your work, the positive relationships that have been built, and the mutual respect that exists between you and the leadership and members of the community.

Events also are a great way to keep the public involved. Many developers wait until the building is completed to hold a public event, however there are many milestones along the way that can be celebrated and used to keep the public informed, updated, and feeling they have access to the project team. Groundbreakings and topping-off ceremonies are just two of the many milestones that can be celebrated with stakeholders, the media, and the general public.

You also can have fun with events such as a black-tie party in a partially completed building complete with hardhats and construction lights. Events also can be held to herald a new community program, service, or project being implemented by the developer as a goodwill gesture to the community. Dedicating the new park that was promised or hosting a party for the new children’s service that the developer is supporting will help to strengthen relationships and demonstrate a commitment to the community beyond the development project.

Acknowledge the project team

In our first article, we discussed the importance of building a strong and effective project team, one that will be able to work together to solve problems and meet deadlines and budgets. During construction, it is obviously important that the project team continue to work well together and that problem areas are dealt with quickly. During this phase the team continues to include the developer, client, project manager, design engineer or project architect, as well as a construction manager, carpenters, and other skilled tradesmen.

As the pressures of construction, unanticipated problems, and deadlines and dollars loom, now—more than ever—is the time to adhere to the partnering principles you developed together at the outset of the project and to take an occasional step back to see if adjustments to process or relationships need to be made to improve implementation.

Have an inclusive celebration

When the building is completed, make sure its grand opening is used to both celebrate your accomplishments and to acknowledge the individuals who helped make the project a reality. Several events can be held to ensure all of the stakeholders involved in the process are included in the grand opening celebration. For example, a private event for staff and those closest to the project can be held prior to a larger, more public event that would include the media. A separate media tour and an event for the construction team also may be in order.

When holding the public event, be sure local dignitaries, government officials, and local business and community leaders are on the invitation list, as well as the abutters/neighbors and members of the various stakeholder groups. Tours of the building also can be conducted during the event, and if you are dedicating a part of the facility to an individual or organization, the public event is a great opportunity to showcase this initiative.

The development team should not only invite the project proponents but also opponents and those who raised concerns and issues along the way. These individuals care deeply about where they live and want to have reasons to be proud of their community. Just because, at times, you sat on opposite sides of an issue doesn't mean you exclude them from celebrations. There's no guarantee they will attend, but there's no harm in asking and extending an olive branch.

When the partying is over, there are still a number of things developers can do to continue to engender goodwill. Thank you notes should be sent to individuals who were involved—both pro and con—in the process, photographs from the events with captions can be posted to the project web site, commemorative photographs sent to recognize the efforts of key players. Plaques in building cornerstones or in lobbies often celebrate one individual, but imagine a plaque celebrating the good work of the project team, the community advisory team, the town staff, and others.

Finally, developers can prepare and send post-construction surveys to all the project stakeholders—both internal and external. By doing this developers signal that, despite any

missteps which may have occurred along the way, they are committed to learning and to continuous improvement.

As we conclude our series, we want to emphasize the critical role marketing and communications professionals play in helping developers understand development projects are just as much about building effective working partnerships as they are about erecting buildings. With an ever-more sophisticated and informed public, developers can no longer expect to have a successful outcome without embracing consensus building from start to finish—with both the internal and external stakeholders.

From building a well-functioning project team, to early public involvement, to maintaining and building new relationships during the construction phase, marketing and communications professionals can help developers develop an effective process to meet stakeholders' interests that not only doesn't sacrifice but also facilitates the success of the project.



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