
COMMUNITY RELATIONS THE GLUE BETWEEN YOU AND THE NEIGHBOURS

"The days of companies working in isolation of communities in which they operate are over. Success of many projects can be dramatically affected by community acceptance"

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In this article Jen shares insights that can help your community relations succeed.

Community Relations Are Critical

The success of many projects can be dramatically affected by community acceptance. In my work as a Community Relations Manager I've noticed a significant swing in public expectations of consultation.

Community relations has potential to alter the success of any given project because if people feel they are informed they are more likely to accept change in their neighbourhood.

If they believe they are not informed, they can use negative media, political avenues and complaints to local authorities to place significant pressure on a project.

Why Communicate?

Most people are resistant to change, mainly because they're not sure of what the outcome will mean for *them*. There may be limited response if people believe it won't affect them personally but most people will have an opinion on any change.

Therefore your community relations program must cover:

- What's going to happen?
- When?
- Why?
- The duration?
- And what the outcome will be?

Community Groups

Local community groups grow from the belief that individuals can make a difference but a group can go a step further and influence change.

Working with community groups means providing information, listening to their concerns and making sure all parties play a role in finding solutions to issues. It doesn't mean doing everything that is demanded, rather finding a series of compromises where possible.

Outlining the parameters of a project yet giving some scope for influence allows groups to have a voice yet at the same time keep the essentials on track. Often this requires personal effort by company staff rather than just merely reaching for the chequebook.

Individuals

Don't neglect the individual. People are busy and many people don't have time to dedicate to community groups. This doesn't mean they're not interested.

One of the most effective ways I have found to tell residents about what is happening in their area is through letterbox drops. I also offer an email alert list that informs people about things that may affect them such as traffic changes. This is cost effective, provides instant information and can be accessed easily. If people have questions or comments, they can respond via reply email. Easy!

Remember, if someone takes the time to contact your company about one of its projects ensure they're not put through a *bureaucratic wringer* as they wait for a response to their query. Respond personally and fast and follow up again within a week to make sure the information they received was adequate.

Keep in touch with individuals who make any form of contact. This is a basic rule of customer service and also helps highlight future areas and issues that may need attention.

Passing Information

A good place to start a community relations plan is think how the changes that flow from a project will affect people. Brainstorm all possible impacts and identify ways that people can receive information on what is about to happen.

There are so many communications channels available:

- Websites
- Telephone hotlines
- Letters to residents
- Notices in local and state newspapers
- Radio alerts (often free if they help people learn about traffic delays etc)
- Public displays in shopping centres and libraries
- Information sheets on hot topics

- Local seminars
- Activities to celebrate project milestones

The Media

Building a media profile for a project ensures people have an initial awareness that something is going to happen.

You can use the media to:

- Highlight your project, the changes it will cause and the reasons behind them
- Tell the human stories behind the project
- Detail project benefits to individuals, groups or neighbourhoods
- Identify local economic impacts like job opportunities

One on One Contact

Visit stakeholders such as residents or local business regularly to keep the lines of communication open. You can catch an issue before it becomes a problem, answer questions and build relationships. If something does concern someone, you want him or her to come to you as the first point of contact. People will do this if they feel they are talking to a person, not a company.

Public Meetings

Public meetings can be helpful in the initial stages of a project in passing information but they sometimes can turn into a forum for people to become aggressive or dominate. One way to avoid this problem is to schedule a *rolling* public meeting over about two hours where people can pop in to a central spot, ask questions and gather information.

Ensure you have movable displays and plenty of fact sheets ready to give away. Provide contact details for more information if people have questions at a later stage. Make sure there are several people on hand who all have information and can answer questions. That way everyone who has a question or comment can be attended to and they will feel that they are being heard. Document questions and respond accordingly.

After such a meeting debrief all staff to gauge perceptions and if necessary alter the community relations plan.

Internal communications

While you are speaking outside your organisation, don't forget to speak to people inside your organisation. Focus on the internal elements of community relations. Remember the core business of the company and work with the staff to ensure that the core business is the priority.

Develop an easy way for other staff in your company to let you know about the possible impacts of the projects they are working on. For example a matrix document can easily show people what information you need and when you need it.

Self Audit

Regularly self audit your community relations plan. Identify who is contacting you, how and when? What type of information are they after and how are people finding out about your project or company? What are the opportunities to increase their knowledge about your works?

Grassroots PR

Community relations are the grassroots of public relations. They are the direct link and two-way conversation between a company and the community in which it works.

If neglected community relations can turn into a costly burden to your company. Done well, you don't even know it's there.