

Surviving Road Construction

By Patrick Nehring*

Road construction is necessary to maintain and repair underground utilities, enhance the safety and flow of traffic, and to eliminate damaging potholes. The results of road construction are increased safety and an improved image of a community. Road construction can also have a negative effect on the community and the local economy, especially in downtown areas.

Nevertheless, examples from various communities show that road construction does not necessarily have to have negative impacts. The key is that construction requires a change in the usual way of doing business. There are a large number of strategies that, local government, organizations (chambers, Main Street or Business Improvement District programs), and business operators can do to deal with the effects of road construction. These strategies are summarized in seven main groups as presented below.

Planning

The disruption from road construction can be lessened if there is coordination between city officials, contractors and business district representatives. Sometimes the construction work can be phased so that the entire district isn't disrupted at the same time. Phases might include improvements to alleys a rear entrances first, followed by one side of the street then the other. Lastly, sidewalks can be replaced by closing one parking or street lane and installing temporary bridges to provide pedestrian access to the stores. Similarly, it might be possible to limit the number of blocks under construction at one time.

Communication

Communication is important to avoid negative rumors, to assure that there is an end in sight, to address issues as they arise, and to avoid major conflicts. It should include friendly coordination with the construction manager to learn about (and negotiate) work schedules, duration, rerouting of traffic, etc.

Community and business leaders can help by keeping local businesses and residents up-to-date about the construction process through a website, newsletter, block captains, or regular meetings with public officials

and representatives from the state department of transportation or the road construction firm. One community sponsored a weekly "construction coffee" at a local restaurant to strengthen communication.

Another idea is to create something similar to a donation thermometer showing the construction progress. Besides a thermometer, a community may want to use an image related to the road construction or driving, like a speedometer. One community created a mural of downtown, which was unveiled according to the percent of road construction completed.

You can keep people up-to-date on construction through advertisements and public service announcements on local radio stations and in the newspaper or local newsletters. These should include an announcement that local businesses are open and give alternative routes to the community or business district. You can also keep local people informed on the construction progress by informing local clubs and associations through presentations and articles in their newsletters.

Directions

If the usual way to drive to a business district is cut off due to construction, customers may not know how to get there. One solution is to install signs directing people to businesses and alternative places to park. Another way of letting people know how to access local businesses and the community is to use the local newspaper, radio station, or a web site to describe alternative ways to your community or business.



Make the ride interesting and exciting, by highlighting some of the sites or the scenic drive that can be experienced by going this alternative route. Finally, hand out or post maps on how to access businesses and parking during construction.

Promotions

Look at the construction period as a time to develop exciting and unique promotions with a construction theme. For example, pioneer days, an event focused around historical activities that took place in the area before the roads were paved, including activities like horse drawn carriage rides; games, like jacks or marbles; poetry readings; and a community dance in a nearby park, parking lot, or the closed off street with waltzes, polkas, or square dancing. Hold events in the evenings and on weekends to avoid entanglement with the construction. Conduct construction tours and point out what improvements will be made.

Sales, coupons, give-aways or special services can be effective promotions during the construction period. To the extent possible, it is important to convey the appearance of "business as usual."

Consider offering retail promotions to the construction crew. For example, a discount could be offered to anyone showing up wearing an orange reflective vest or create a ready-to-go lunch special timed to take place when the road construction crews are on their break.

Initiate the production of joint advertisements between businesses in the community. Develop an image campaign around the construction, like "Constructing a Better Community" or "Paving the Way for the Future of Main Street." Celebrate the opening of the road when it is complete with a party. Invite the news media to a ribbon cutting "officially" opening the road.

Access

If at all possible, avoid doing construction during peak local shopping or tourism periods, like the Christmas Season or Labor Day Weekend. Make sure access is maintained to every business as much as possible (for both customers and deliverers). Spruce up the side and rear entrances to buildings and encourage customers to use them. Make the alley an attractive, clean, friendly way for customers to access businesses. Provide shuttles to local businesses from parking lots or other communities. Keep sidewalks open to the extent possible. For those loyal customers that find access too difficult, consider home deliveries.

Increased Services

You can make construction more bearable by offering to sweep sidewalks or wash windows of businesses

effected by the construction. Cleanliness is also appreciated by customers and business people alike. Most people appreciate a helping hand. Whether you're a business person or a concerned individual or group, you can offer to make deliveries during the construction to local businesses, or to customers.

Positive Attitude

Have a positive attitude, especially when dealing with the public and customers. People want to have a pleasant experience in your community and its business district. Tell the truth about the construction situation in an upbeat way. Don't apologize for the construction situation, unless you really need to. Have fun with the situation. Everyone knows construction is an inconvenience; you don't need to remind them. Negativism and complaining will drive people away. A positive fun atmosphere will bring them back.

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