

**So You've Survived
Road Construction – Now What?**

by Mary Kohrell*

Road construction is necessary to maintain and repair roadways and utilities, enhance the safety and flow of traffic, and eliminate damage. The results of road construction are generally increased safety and community image. While there are numerous benefits to downtown road construction projects, they can also have a negative effect on the community, and especially on its local businesses.

There have been numerous documents and resource materials developed to help communities and businesses minimize the negative impacts of downtown road construction leading up to and during road construction. (See *Surviving Road Construction* in the April 2003 issue of "Let's Talk Business.") However, surviving the construction phase of a road project is often only the first step. As some communities and businesses have discovered, recapturing market share and winning back customers may not be as easy as cutting the ribbon and letting the vehicles back on the road. Sometimes, prior customers begin patronizing other businesses during road construction, and may not return to earlier habits, even with road improvements.



Photo courtesy Nathan Schneider, Chilton Times-Journal.

Dealing with the after-effects of road construction frequently requires careful planning and implementation to help restore a community's vitality and perhaps help it expand beyond previous levels. A good dose of creativity and perseverance are also useful elements. Several strategies that can be considered, based on the experiences of several Wisconsin communities that have successfully dealt with the after-effects of road construction, are summarized below.

Promotion

According to national studies and Wisconsin experiences, individual and collective business promotion may be one of the most useful means to draw back consumers and win new ones. Promotion can be both individual and cooperative.

A cooperative event or theme that highlights the local businesses is one of the most popular ways to focus attention on the area. Many communities develop special theme events to highlight businesses that were impacted by construction as a way to encourage vehicle and foot traffic in the affected area. The sooner this happens, the better. Practical suggestions include taking advantage of established holidays, targeting discreet audiences, utilizing seasonal themes, and promoting merchandize grouping or niches.

In Sharon, WI, a Victorian Christmas event was coordinated to renew interest in shopping and to attract shoppers to sidewalks and streets. A spring soup/salad luncheon also prompted pedestrians to utilize the sidewalks and streets. Coupon books containing nearly two dozen coupons were sold for \$1.00. Finally, a Centennial history book was produced to promote Sharon.

Individual promotions are undertaken by individual businesses, and can include the development of events to introduce new or little-known features of the business, and rotating in-store promotions according to targeted customer segments.

Advertising

In the absence of an organized effort to bring back consumers and attract new ones, advertising can

sometimes be the only mechanism utilized to promote the area. If this is the case, advertising must be well-conceived, designed, and placed.

Joint advertising that promotes the area as a unique and desirable place to shop is important, and doing so effectively is enhanced if there is an understanding of the community's market trade area. Individual business advertising is also extremely important, and nontraditional forms of advertising such as direct mail should not be overlooked.

In Chilton, WI, the Chamber of Commerce Retail Committee undertook a research project to develop its primary market trade area based on pre-construction customer zip code data. Continuing an existing and successful "Think Chilton" marketing campaign, the Chamber utilized a highly targeted joint advertising and direct mail program to remind customers to shop in Chilton and to recruit new customers.

Image

In most road construction projects, significant funds are spent to enhance the roadway, parking spaces, sidewalks, or other physical structures related to the roadway. When the image of the roadway is enhanced, store fronts that previously blended in to the surrounding environment might now stick out as the proverbial sore thumb. This is an ideal time for individual businesses to evaluate their exterior appearance and make appropriate improvements.

After a downtown construction project in Crandon, WI was completed, the community held a street party to celebrate which drew a large, local crowd. Improvements to the general community appearance were added, including street lights, planters, and rails for pedestrian safety. The exteriors of nearly all local businesses were refurbished. The project stimulated a new sense of pride in the appearance of the city by its residents.

Business Practices

Business practices that accommodate the customer's wants and needs are always important, but are even more critical when trying to gain back customers and earn new ones. These practices include:

- **Exceptional customer service:** in every customer category, at every price point, consumers are seeking service as part of their shopping experience. Service should be the number one product sold in every store. Training programs for staff and owners can be offered to enhance existing efforts.

- **Convenience:** a subset of convenience, it deserves mention on its own. To today's consumer, convenience means being open when people have time to shop, and offering time-saving services like pick-up and delivery.
- **Store layout and displays:** for window displays, interior displays, and store layout, businesses can please consumers by paying attention to trends in retail display and store design. Today's consumers are creatures of habit and environment, and will seek out the familiar.

In St. Croix Falls, WI, businesses participated in a series of four Mayoral luncheons held during the first year following construction. These meetings encouraged new and old businesses to work together on issues including business practices. In addition, four new businesses received loans from the City's revolving loan fund, and a special low-interest loan program was created by a local bank aimed specifically at façade improvements.

Evaluation

Periodically take time to evaluate efforts to see what's worked and what hasn't. Evaluation can be quantitative, such as comparing monthly or annual sales figures or analyzing customer data (customer zip code data can help determine if the target audience was reached). Qualitative evaluation data, such as asking customers what they think and capturing those reactions, along with seeking input from local businesses, are also critical.

Conclusion

Many communities that experience significant road construction projects need to spend time reaching out to win back former customers – hopefully gaining new customers in the process. Not every community has the need or capability to implement all of the strategies suggested in this newsletter. However, based on the experiences of several Wisconsin communities, businesses will rebound much more successfully if attention is paid to promotions, advertising, image, and business practices, followed by an evaluation of efforts to see what's worked best.

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