

Creating a Community Outreach Plan

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Winning political and community support for your new resort or resort expansion starts with a community outreach plan. Your outreach plan identifies who you are trying to influence, what to say, how you will get your message across and when to reach out to different audiences.

Defining the Target Audiences

When it comes to drafting a community outreach plan, it helps to consider three different categories of participants. Tier 1 decision-makers are the ultimate targets of your lobbying activities, including mayors, council members, zoning commissioners, and city managers. You need Tier 1 decision-makers to both adopt pro-resort attitudes and to take pro-resort action, but you usually need help from Tier 2 influencers and Tier 3 constituents to lock down the support of these top-tier decision-makers.

Tier 2 influencers are respected community leaders who shape the opinions of Tier 1 superiors, community peers, and subordinate constituents. Once you have the chair of the homeowners association or the president of the Chamber of Commerce on board, you can benefit from the individually-powerful support of these Tier 2 leaders and ask them to tap into their broader base of members, constituents and colleagues.

Tier 3 constituents are more focused on their personal interests than on broader group interests. Individual voters, property owners, and members of organizations led by Tier 2 influencers form the fundamental “roots” in any grassroots campaign. Tier 3 constituents are the people who leave phone messages for their elected officials, sign letters to the editor, attend and testify at public hearings, and reassure Tier 1 decision-makers that they won’t be punished on Election Day for approving a controversial resort project.

Defining Your Key Message

Your “key messages” are the pro-resort facts, arguments and beliefs that you want people to accept.

Most outreach messages focuses on how your proposal complies with the standards for what constitutes a “good project.” You therefore need to understand which standards citizens and politicians will be using to decide whether your resort will be a good neighbor. The first place to look is at the legal criteria spelled out in the planning code. In addition to black-and-white legislative standards, however, communities often have policies or political goals that really control whether your project gets approved. A city’s unofficial policy to avoid competition with Main Street merchants, for example, may be even more important than mere technical statutory standards for approval of your resort’s expansion. In that case, your outreach would need to emphasize how current merchants will actually benefit from the resort plan.

Key messages must include a description of the project’s benefits. These include fundamental “quantity of life” benefits such as jobs, tax revenues, and public services funded by tax revenues. But resort projects also create “quality of life” benefits, such as offering a better civic image or new community or recreational amenities. In general, people who support development projects do so because of the new benefits that responsible growth can offer.

By comparison, most opponents want to avoid change, so key messages must also explain how the resort proposal will preserve important aspects of the status quo. Messages such as, “The new lodge will be reflect the existing small-town character of the community” and “The golf course will be using recycled water to ensure that local wells aren’t impacted” describe how your project will be compatible with neighbors’ existing lifestyles.

One of the most important messages to be communicated to citizens is the fact that many people support the project. The misperception that “everyone” hates a proposal is one of the most damaging anti-project arguments you can face, and it must be rebutted immediately, effectively and continuously.

Picking Your Persuasive Strategy

There are three different types of persuasion, and your outreach plan must consider how each type of persuasive strategy will be used to win community support for your project.

Businesspeople tend to emphasize rational persuasion, offering technical data and logical arguments about why the project will be a good neighbor. In a perfect world, every citizen would have the time, interest and intellectual ability to weigh the facts, evaluate the substantive arguments, and reach a logical (and favorable) conclusion. However, many people are not motivated to look at the facts, or they are simply overwhelmed by the amount of data related to a complex resort plan. Even where citizens engage in rational evaluation of the facts, that doesn’t mean they will agree with you. That’s because people’s opinions aren’t formed exclusively by the facts; they’re also influenced by values and emotions. Savvy resort sponsors also engage in emotional persuasion that

responds to the fears and feelings of citizens. Photographs of families and children can convey a promised community lifestyle much more effectively than technical reports, for instance. On the flip side: opponents' emotional appeals to peer pressure such as, "Everybody hates this project" or threats of voter reprisal can be extremely damaging.

When resort projects are particularly complex, most neighbors will rely on simplistic rules of thumb to decide whether or not they agree with you. Your communications plan therefore needs to consider the four elements of peripheral persuasion:

- **Source Characteristics:** The persuasiveness of a statement may depend less on what is said than who is saying it. A listener applying a source-based rule of thumb might simply decide that, "Likable speakers are always believable" or, "All lawyers lie." Your outreach plan should therefore take into account not just what you're going to say, but who is going to say it, under different circumstances.
- **Message Characteristics:** When the validity of an argument is determined by message characteristics, it is the context of the message, not the content, that dictates its persuasiveness. For example, 86 percent of Americans believe that reference to statistics increases a speaker's credibility. Messages that contain numbers, appropriate jargon, or seem contrary to self-interest are often deemed to be valid without more careful analysis of the contents.
- **Audience Characteristics:** Citizens who do not have the interest or ability to independently review the merits of your arguments often assume that "everyone else" has done so and that it is therefore sensible to rely on other people's opinions. The popularity of a proposal is conclusive proof that it's a good idea, and vice versa. Again, this reinforces why it is important to correct the misperception that "everyone" is opposed to your real estate proposal.
- **Channel Characteristics:** Many people will evaluate the soundness of an argument by looking at the communications tool used to convey the message. An expensive brochure might seem to guarantee a high quality project, or you'll hear, "Whatever shows up in the newspaper must be true." Pick your communication vehicles carefully!

Getting Your Message Across

There are several ways you can communicate with neighbors, and no single communication vehicle will meet all your outreach needs.

Developers often rely on unilateral communication tools such as direct mail, advertising, press releases or web pages to get their messages across. These communication tools allow the project sponsor to send information in a one-way stream to neighbors without providing a mechanism for citizens to directly communicate back.

Multiparty outreach events such as huge community workshops or massive neighborhood association meetings are a common form of outreach. These events are typically non-invitational: every member of the public is welcome to attend (including opponents), and all who attend are equally empowered to participate. Unless carefully managed, these monster events can turn into outreach nightmares. With so many people, so many issues, and so little time, it is rarely possible to answer everyone's questions or to let everyone speak their minds. And when people come to a meeting expecting to express themselves and find that they cannot, they get frustrated, and frustrated people often get very angry. Large groups can also enable hostile mob behavior or promote "groupthink," with opponents enjoying group reinforcement for anti-social attacks on you or your resort. At its worst, a huge community meeting may be merely a forum for opponents to meet each other and hear and adopt each other's agenda, a place where activists can impress their constituent with the extremity of their anti-project positions.

There are several alternatives to multiparty meetings. With bilateral communications such as one-on-one meetings or telephone calls, you create an intimate setting that allows you to receive information from the audience at the same time you are conveying your messages. Invitational group meets are small events such as coffee-and-donut get-togethers in neighbors' living rooms, or small lunches with a group of local merchants. Hard-core opponents aren't part of the invitation list, and invited participants get an opportunity to learn about the resort concept in a personalized, interactive forum. Where you need to reach out to hundreds of citizens, consider more controlled events such as open houses stretching out over several hours or even several days, or breaking a large audience into facilitated roundtables.

Time to Think About Timing

So who you gonna call first? Do you file your application first and then talk with immediate neighbors? Do you sit down with potential opponents first and then meet with the district council member? Do you need to line up the newspaper endorsement early, or is the support of the Sierra Club more important?

Not surprisingly, there are no cold, hard rules that apply in every situation. Here are some factors to take into account when timing your outreach efforts:

- In general, you need to line up some strong supporters early on, before the project becomes too controversial. Having visible endorsers on your side right from the start will help prevent the misperception that “everyone” hates the resort idea, and the support of impressive community leaders can make it easier to recruit additional endorsers later.
- People who live or work close to the proposed resort will often try to define their own enclave as the only “community” affected by the project. In fact, the entire town, county or region will benefit from a new or expanded resort. You need to set the stage with an expansive definition of “the community” before proximate neighbors narrow the political arena to just a small area, which is why it helps to mobilize regional organizations early in your outreach efforts.
- Public officials are often reluctant to commit their support for a project until they see evidence that there is constituent enthusiasm for the proposal. Rather than commencing your outreach efforts with a cold call on a key council member, consider scheduling the meeting after you have some support lined up. In fact, you might even consider bringing a couple of those important Tier 2 influencers with you to the meeting to help you pitch the project.

Putting It All Together

When it comes to resort development, the purpose of community outreach is not to be popular: it is to win approval for your project. Rather than waiting for NIMBY nightmares to rear their ugly heads and then dealing with them in a reactive, defensive manner, you can anticipate and respond to political challenges with a proactive community outreach plan.

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