ANNUAL CENSUS OF MUNI FIBER NETWORKS

BroadbandCommunities

BUILDING A FIBER-CONNECTED WORLD

October 2017 · Vol. 38 · No. 6

How Communities Succeed With Fiber

Engaging the Community

Generating community support for a broadband project is critical for its success.

By Bob Knight / *Harrison Edwards*

Americans love their internet. They want to be connected at home, at work, in stores, in their cars, on farms and even in the subway. They want to connect the things they use – cars, appliances, roadways and pacemakers – to the internet, too. The future depends on it. Continuous connectivity breeds innovative technologies that can make life better, safer and more fruitful.

Why, then, is there public resistance to broadband deployment?

Communities tend to object to broadband projects because they don't want their tax dollars to fund them; they are fearful of seeing more wires, boxes and cells in their towns and neighborhoods; and they feel like pawns with no say in what will happen.

Simply put, communities need to be educated about broadband projects to achieve buy-in and political will. But educating a community is not so simple. Engineering consent requires perseverance and a strategic communications plan, but the payoff is big. Public support puts wind in the sails of broadband projects, as officials and regulators are influenced by the people they answer to – the public.

Though each strategic communications plan needs to be tailored to its specific community and circumstances, certain basics should be followed, no matter whether the deployer is a private company, a government entity or a public-private partnership.

1. **Identify your stakeholders.** The "public" is a broad term that includes multiple subgroups. Stakeholders may be public officials, business leaders, educators, parents, community activists, veterans and senior groups. Identify the groups that make your community tick. Remember, stakeholders can become your champions!
2. **Identify stakeholders' concerns and issues.** Doing this helps you know how broadband deployment will specifically benefit each group. How will you know what they're thinking? Just listen. Are you speaking at people or are you listening? Find out each stakeholder group's pain points and hopes. A strategic communications plan is based on that information.
3. **Create a message map.** This is where the rubber meets the road. Now that you've heard what your stakeholder groups have to say, create messages and marketing tactics that will resonate. The success or failure of the project can hinge on communicating the right messages.
4. **Choose your tools.** There are many marketing tools – meetings, press releases, ads, social media, digital marketing, events – and they all work. Which tools you should use depends on your overall strategy. Remember to lead with your strategy, not with your tactics (tools). Too many communities take tactical approaches, such as producing a one-off event or issuing a press release, and ignore the bigger picture. Then they wonder why they have trouble driving broadband projects forward.
5. **Promote continual, two-way conversations.** Do you have a project website? A Facebook page? Do you have key details and FAQs that are easily accessible?

Do you measure social sentiment? Do you provide enough information about the project in a timely fashion? The key is to keep people engaged.

6. **Counter opposition messaging.** This is a biggie. Every project has naysayers. Whenever public funding is considered, public rights of way are in play, or there are obvious winners and losers, there will be opposition. And the opposition can have some sharp, effective messaging, so be prepared. Tell your story positively, and arm yourself with facts. In times of trouble, ask these questions: Is your message clear? Is your message timely, especially in the social media era? If you are gun-shy about speaking to the media to tell your story, are you prepared to allow others to tell it for you? You can be sure that if the opposition is well funded, it will work with sophisticated communications teams to sabotage your chances of success.

7. **Continually measure, evaluate and adjust.** Set a timeline and project benchmarks. Ask yourself whether your messages are landing. How's your social media sentiment? Is your project receiving positive media coverage? Is your project moving forward? Communications firms have sophisticated analytics to measure these things. If your tactics are not working, then it may be time to sharpen the message or update it altogether. Build on what's working well, and revise what isn't.

8. **Share Your Success!** Once you've sold the project internally and things are moving forward, let the world know. By upgrading your digital infrastructure, you are positioning your community for tremendous economic, social and civic success. When you share the news, you will reach those who may want to collaborate with your community or, better yet, invest in your community. Chattanooga, Tennessee, is an example. Since launching its citywide gigabit-speed network, the city has attracted $11 billion worth of economic development to its downtown. That could be you! With a fiber network, your community is now attractive to companies such as Amazon, which is seeking to site offices in communities with high-speed broadband. Don't keep your success a secret!

Essentially, deployment of high-speed broadband depends on two things: funding and regulatory approval. Because many projects these days involve some form of public financing and all require some form of public approval, how public officials look upon your project will be influenced, in large part, by the people they answer to – the public. How you engage the public can make or break a project.

Remember, most community members don't focus on digital infrastructure or the need to compete in the new economy. They focus on what's important to them. By engaging the community, you help bridge the community's interest with the very digital infrastructure you seek to grow or create. The right strategic communications plan and its execution will provide education and awareness to help move your project forward. Community stakeholder engagement will build demand and generate strong political will and support. Deployment will improve one aspect of communication, but before that happens, another kind of communication has to take place. ❖

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