

Transportation Public Affairs Essentials

Why Your Transportation Project Needs a Public Affairs Campaign

When it comes to a successful transportation project, sound engineering and improved traffic flow are only one side of the story. Roads and highways, bridges and tolls — changes to these key infrastructures have a far-reaching impact on motorists, the economy and even regional politics.

That's why it's crucial to manage public opinion — or else risk public opinion derailing your project. You need a well-thought-out and well-executed, ongoing communications plan to keep all stakeholders informed. You need buy-in from legislators, support from businesses, municipalities and the media and, most important, enthusiasm from the drivers who will be impacted by your project, day after day.

Big or small, every transportation project will benefit from a public affairs campaign that includes careful evaluation of public sentiment, intensive research into marketing opportunities, and anticipation of possible PR concerns and proactively addressing them through intelligent and timely strategy.

To help you make the case for the public affairs support you need, we've put together this brief. Use this tool to help educate your team and make the case for incorporating a well-crafted public affairs campaign into your next project.

Transportation Public Affairs Essential Steps

No matter how large or small the transportation project, you need to manage public opinion and reassure key stakeholders. Here are the essential steps to guarantee positive public reception for your project:

- ✓ **Manage impact on and build relationships with motorists, residents and businesses.**
This is the core of a successful public affairs campaign. Before you can develop a Communications Plan, you need to think about who will be impacted by your transportation project, and how it will change their day-to-day routines. What will the long-term benefit be?
- ✓ **Engage with community and civic groups, municipalities and local organizations.**
Once you have identified how your project will change the dynamic in a community, your next step is to reach out and establish a rapport with key constituents. These are the

groups who will disseminate the details of your project and set the tone for how well it will be received. The value of this word-of-mouth marketing cannot be overstated.

✓ **Get buy-in from local and state legislators and key stakeholders.**

In contrast to the grassroots network above, these are the real “movers and shakers,” the thought leaders who have the power to shape the outcome of your project. This is where politics — in the truest sense of the word — enters in. You need to, in effect, influence the influencers, helping them understand and promote the benefits of your project.

✓ **Develop a Communications Plan, including risk management and crisis response.**

Once you have a handle on the target audiences for your public affairs campaign and a clear understanding of the impact of your project, your next step will be to map out a long-term Communications Plan. Ideally, this plan should include three subsections: pre-construction, construction and post-construction. Each of these periods plays a significant role, serving to create, sustain and acknowledge positive public support for your project. Anticipate what crisis can occur, prepare a response and rehearse it.

✓ **Generate positive public relations through a solid brand.**

To make sure your project resonates with your target audiences, you will need to make it memorable — i.e., you will need a “brand.” We’re not suggesting something to rival the Nike swoosh — just a concise, easy-to-remember name and a clean, attractive visual style to accompany it. Ideally, you will employ that brand through a website and a dynamic marketing campaign (both online and offline) to build familiarity with the public and keep key stakeholders informed. Above all, you will need to be consistent — making sure every mention of your project stays faithful to your visual brand, to avoid confusion.

✓ **Be proactive with media relations and media training.**

When the press comes calling, you want to be ready. That’s why it is important to identify strong spokespersons and prepare them with on-camera training, as well as develop your go-to talking points. You’ll want to put out press releases at key points in the project — approval, groundbreaking, major milestones, etc. — and develop a good relationship with the local media, who can spotlight your project through feature stories and regular coverage in the news. Leverage these connections every chance you get to build interest and enthusiasm in the community and demonstrate the steady progress of your project.

✓ **Put a priority on marketing communications and media planning.**

Earning media coverage through effective media relations is critical, but a paid marketing communications plan allows you to control both the content and the placement of the message. Utilize online and offline, print and broadcast, social media and traditional media. You will need to sort through your options and determine which mediums work best for your audience and your project. Traditional print advertising and local news coverage are still very powerful influences, as are billboards, radio and TV ads. But you’ll want to pair them with an informative website and online marketing strategy. Banner ads — which you can sync to your website/Facebook/Twitter — are a fast and focused way of keeping constituents up to date. E-blasts offer another opportunity to engage and inform, as well.

What to Look for in a Public Affairs Partner

In addition to following the public affairs essentials steps above, your ideal public affairs partner should have a strong, proven background in executing transportation project PR campaigns. Take the time to look through examples of previous work and consider how the needs of your project might differ. Create a punch list of items to discuss, and be sure to bring up any special areas of concern (local politics, protected land, key businesses, environmental considerations, maritime impact, military presence) for your region.

How Your Public Affairs Partner Can Add Value to Your Project

Your Silver Bullet

An experienced transportation PR firm can help you win the pitch. Clients are looking for prime contractors that have covered their bases and understand that reputation management, communication and positive outcomes are vitally important. Choose a firm that has experience adding value to the proposal and to the project.

Relationship with DOT

In the eyes of the average motorist, every transportation project is a DOT project — regardless of who is actually responsible for the project (your firm, for instance). Beyond that, your team will almost certainly be required to work together with the DOT in some capacity. For both of those reasons, it is in your best interest to team up with a public affairs partner who at least understands this dynamic — or even better, has an established relationship with the DOT's public affairs department. By keeping the DOT informed and aware of your project, you'll reduce holdups and conflict, keeping concerns to a minimum and ensuring that your engineers stay focused on construction — not politics.

Voucher Preparation and Invoicing

Ideally, your public affairs partner should be well versed in DOT billing and invoicing requirements. This is an area where you literally can't afford errors. Your public affairs partner should understand the process for DOT submission and associated requirements.

DBE and SWaM

You should also consider the value of working with an agency that adheres to DMBE (Department of Minority Business Enterprise) guidelines. In Virginia, the certifications to look for are SWaM (Small, Women-owned, and Minority-owned Business) or DBE (Disadvantaged Business Enterprise).

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