

Developing good community relations

Penny Norton considers the benefits of online communication with local residents when constructing or refurbishing commercial premises.

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Communication with local residents usually starts during the planning process, but it doesn't end there. Whether you're refurbishing a building or creating a new scheme, the immediate community, local groups and potential users want to understand what's being done and the timescales involved. They may also be interested in receiving regular updates.

It may be useful for the FM team to have the contact details of those in the immediate area so that it can inform them of road closures, over-runs and major work on site. Very importantly, facilities managers and the occupying organisation will benefit from gaining the goodwill and support of local residents and possibly the local media too. This can only be achieved through good communication.

POWER OF THE WEB

Traditionally, community relations during construction or major refurbishment have largely been managed through newsletters, a phone line and sometimes viewing windows or platforms, site visits or exhibitions.

The internet and social media are changing the way we communicate, however. Today, over 60 million individuals in the UK use the internet regularly at home and this is increasing by 1.5 million each year. Online is the preferred method of communication for many people and for a variety of tasks. Over 60% of UK residents own a smartphone or tablet. In public consultations on planning applications run by ConsultOnline, engagement via mobile devices is proving increasingly popular, with an average of 78% of those taking part choosing to do so using tablets and smartphones. As our use of the internet increases, the old, often expensive and time consuming methods of communication can be partially replaced or supplemented by something much simpler, cheaper and more effective: a community relations website.

A typical community relations website may include a timeline, a masterplan, interactive Google maps, Q&As (to which users may contribute), the construction management plan, regular updates on building work and images. CGI flythroughs of the future scheme are very popular, as is time-lapse photography; if this is considered too expensive, though, photographs taken at regular intervals are just as effective in showing progress on site.

Other useful information might include an introduction to the team, with hyperlinks to each organisation's website.

This is a great opportunity to inform local residents of sustainability initiatives, commitment to using local workers and suppliers and corporate social responsibility initiatives, such as apprenticeship schemes. Links, such as the Considerate Constructors Scheme, are also beneficial.

Finally – but perhaps most importantly – a website offers users the opportunity to register their interest in a specific subject, be it construction updates, property sales, lettings or employment opportunities. Comprehensive databases can also be used to inform people of progress and to communicate with neighbours in an emergency.

INCREASING YOUR REACH

ConsultOnline's research shows that online community relations are particularly popular among younger age groups, working parents and commuters, who cannot easily attend events but are likely users of mobile technology. It is easier for many traditionally hard to reach groups to find what they are looking for through a website, thanks to the accessibility of the internet and the opportunity to provide information using translations, large text and text-to-speech. The content itself can be readily accessible too, using clear, simple and jargon-free language, with any complex concepts explained and information presented in a variety of forms, such as text, images, videos and audio files.

Online communication has the advantage of being available 24/7. Residents most frequently view ConsultOnline's websites late at night, while construction companies benefit from being able to communicate immediately with residents when required.

THE RIGHT IMPRESSION

As communication increasingly moves online, so too will community relations. This will not entirely replace offline relations – in some circumstances and for some people, a screen will never compensate for a human face. But online communication offers many advantages: it provides the means to convey a large volume of positive and important information, is extremely cost efficient and fast, and it provides easy access to a wide range of information in wide ranging formats.

When the diggers arrive on a local site, most people head straight to Google to try to secure the information that they feel entitled to know. Residents who become frustrated at that crucial point are likely to resort to social media to speculate about events. Savvy FM and real estate professionals will prefer to use this opportunity to provide a first – and lasting – impression that is welcoming, informative and constructive and establishes the new development in the very heart of the community. **FM**