

Public spaces Private emotions

When it comes to public spaces, everybody wants progress, nobody likes change. So says media manager and engagement strategist Mark Ames. **Kathleen Kinney** reports on the soft skills needed to handle people's emotional attachment to places.

There's no question that undertaking public realm projects – whatever their scale – can provoke a response. Even the most essential upgrades to streets, town centres and other spaces can meet with resistance. And when these debates play out in the media, it can seem that unwanted changes are being foisted onto an unwilling community.

It doesn't have to be like this. There's a way to turn 'change' into 'progress'.

The key is effectively communicating change from the outset of the project, says Mark Ames of Strategic Cities.

Mark specialises in media management and engagement strategy for cities, government agencies and peak bodies. He was a speaker at this year's Universal Design Conference and recently presented a series of workshops hosted by Boffa Miskell in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

"Remember that changing public spaces affects where people live and work – and people have emotional attachments to those places. If your plans challenge those emotional attachments, then the people who hold them will have an emotional response. That's why the so-called soft skills of engaging and communicating are critical to success," he says.

"Secondly, be aware that we live in a world of 24-7 news. Today's media needs a constant stream of updated content – and therein lies both the pitfall and the opportunity."

Rather than viewing media attention as a problem to overcome, Mark says journalists are potential allies who can spread the "who, what, where, when and why" that justifies a project, and help to sell why change is necessary.

"Just as you need to have engagement with the community, you should have engagement with the media; and there's more to it than simply emailing press releases to editors," he says. "There are opportunities for influence – and there's certainly a good and a bad way of dealing with that relationship."

Identifying supportive members of the community and sympathetic journalists is key to reaching as many people as possible. "Every project has naysayers," says Mark. "But on the opposite end of the spectrum are the change-makers and early adopters. Both sides have the potential to pull the silent majority one way or another.

"Too often we invest tremendous effort in combatting negative reactions, instead of enabling the change-makers to bring the wider community along with them and create



Mark Ames, Strategic Cities.

consensus. Just reacting to negativity doesn't create space in the community to allow for progress."

Lisa Mein, an IAP2-certified urban designer in Boffa Miskell's Auckland office, specialises in community engagement on urban design projects. She says Mark's strategies are highly applicable to many of her projects.

"Mark's list of tips for achieving change – in particular, identifying friendly journalists and proactively engaging with the media to expand the appeal of controversial projects – really resonated with me," she says. "Realising that the media are looking for a story to tell – and that we can be the source for that story – is pretty empowering."

Turning 'change' into 'progress' requires everyone involved in the project to 'think media' from the outset, says Mark.

"What is the opportunity? Who do I need to talk to and convince this is a good idea? Who will oppose it, and why? How might my work be portrayed in the press?

"If everyone asked themselves these questions from the outset, negative media coverage would be less common and easier to contend with. It's a skill anyone can learn to help make progress, rather than some dark art reserved for PR professionals." **LG**

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