



Creating the Future for Developers: An Overview

Introduction

No candidate for public office would dream of starting a campaign without doing polls to learn what issues most concern the voters. Nor would a well-organized group seeking to pass a ballot referendum proceed without conducting research to gauge their opposition's strengths and weaknesses. Successful trial lawyers, heading into a big case, use jury selection specialists and model juries, picked to be similar in make up to a real jury, to test what arguments work or don't work.

Yet every day developers spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on projects for which they hope to gain governmental approval, with only last minute, cursory discussions with a small number of people identified — frequently *self-identified* — as "neighborhood leaders". Proponents are then stunned to find other local residents turning out to oppose their project, forcing them into expensive compromises, if not being forced to abandon the project altogether.

There is a better way. Using proven techniques regularly employed by social scientists, advertising and marketing experts, political campaigns, trial lawyers and many others, developers can now gauge the extent of support/opposition and, more importantly, determine what aspects of the project generate the most support/opposition, so that the project will have the best chance of gaining approval by reducing public opposition and reassuring the elected officials that there is no political risk.

The approval process for a real estate development is a political process as well as a legal one. No developer should attempt it without the best information about public feelings, anymore than they would without obtaining good legal advice.

Two primary demographic analysis techniques can be used: focus groups and polling. Whether one or both methods are employed usually depends on the scale of the project. Polling is only effective when the impacted population is sufficiently large, say several thousand or more. Focus groups can be used for virtually any size community or neighborhood. Again, either form of analysis can, and perhaps should, be repeated as the project moves forward.

If the community is already aware of the proposed project, it can be contacted directly, the sooner the better. Even then, much care must be taken to assure that people representative of all potentially impacted constituency groups are contacted and their positions evaluated for their relative importance. Proper weight should be given to their views.

If the public is not aware of the project, and care must be taken not to let the cat out of the bag, it is possible to create a "virtual community" that models in as many ways as possible the impacted one and still learn a great deal. It is also recommended that follow up contact with and analysis of the

actual community affected by the project be conducted after it has become public. It is strongly recommended, on the basis of countless experiences, to reach out as soon as possible.

In high-profile, public matters there is no way to slip things past people. Engendering the feeling that someone is trying to bypass them increases their anger and activates opposition. It is also easier to engage in rational exchanges the further away in time the project is. Irrationality increases in direct proportion to proximity both in time and space. (Latona's Law #7)

No project that substantially affects a city, a community, or even a small neighborhood is ever likely to sail through concept, design, zoning and review by elected officials without delay. But there is no reason why the process has to suffer with avoidable difficulties brought on by failing to plan for foreseeable obstacles, especially those that exist within the project's "knowable future."

What We Do

The Process

In the context of planning and development, The Center for Creating the Future, Inc. works with clients to develop plans, strategies and research to enhance a project's chances of success. In addition to our extensive experience-based knowledge, we employ polling, focus groups and analysis of demographic facts and trends relevant to a particular project or goal.

Polling

When a client wants to promote a project or concept that will impact a broad base of constituents, polling is often the best first step in determining methods and means to create "buy-in" and creating an atmosphere in which government planners and elected officials are more comfortable in granting approval. People who are dependent on voters for their political survival appreciate knowing that they won't be blindsided and tend to be more willing to grant approval more quickly when provided with concrete evidence that they won't pay a price at the polls.

Baseline

At the project outset, *baseline* polling is done to determine where the "targeted public" stands. These polls tend to start out broad and general in nature, then become more specific and questions that relate more directly to the features of the proposed project are included to establish the audience's general receptivity without divulging the true nature of the poll.

The baseline data is tabulated and analyzed to create strategies for moving the project forward. Strategies may include marketing, media, promotional campaigns, lobbying and other persuasive tools to sway the targeted public, government planners, elected officials and, when recommended, local media.

Tracking

After such tools have been brought to bear and have had time to affect change, *tracking polls* are done to judge the impact of the messages, make course corrections and determine the next steps in the process toward approval.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are an important adjunct that should both precede and follow polling when large target publics are affected by proposals and plans. Focus groups are the *primary means* of planning campaigns for approval of projects that affect smaller target publics; small audiences do not facilitate sample sizes large enough to create data sets with sufficiently limited margins of error.

In either instance, focus groups are important because they allow for a level of human interaction and subjective analysis that just isn't possible when conducting polls. In addition, focus groups allow organizations to "field test" different versions of plans, perform dry-runs to gauge the effectiveness of a variety of persuasive methods, and compile more detailed reports and evidence for presentation to decision-makers in the process.

The Center employs two general types of focus groups: "Demographic Modeling" and "Community based." Within these two types of analyses, we offer a wide variety of options determined by the "depth of focus" desired and/or necessitated by the project in question.

Demographic Modeling

Demographic modeling is used early in the planning process for projects in which it is important "not to let the cat out of the bag" too soon. Rather than building the focus group from the actual population of the target public, the group is built by identifying individuals with similar demographic characteristics. An entirely fictitious project that has features, benefits and amenities identical to the actual project is created in concert with the client. The depth of study necessary to obtain the client's desired result determines the breadth and scope of these role playing exercises.

Community-based

Community-based focus groups are employed in instances in which it is not important to keep the project or proposal secret. In this type of study, the group is derived directly from representatives of the various demographic elements of the target public. A combination of role-playing and actual opinion-gathering, these studies are excellent for both initiating contact into the target population and for tracking the effect of project design changes through the project approval process.

Putting the "knowable future" to work (Using study results)

Once studies are completed, results are tabulated and analyses are written, The Center offers continual assistance to our clients throughout the project or plan approval process. We consider the process to be very much like running a political campaign. Our work isn't finished until we've gotten past "election day;" that is, final approval for the project. Of course, in certain instances, we all know that "final approval" isn't really all that "final." We're also there for our clients when the inexplicable arises or changes need to be made, even after the project is nearing completion.

With that in mind, The Center offers additional consulting services to clients and their contractors regarding the following aspects of getting the plan approved:

- Marketing
- Public Relations
- Promotional Mailing
- Community forums

- Media Relations
- Negotiating
- Sharing results with elected officials
- “Spin”

These services are offered either on an a la carte basis, or as a part of a total project package.

How we work

Each project The Center for Creating the Future undertakes is tailor-made for each client in close consultation from the outset and throughout the engagement. After polling, focus groups and other analyses and research is complete, ongoing consultation with clients, client-preferred marketers, lobbyists and other opinion influencers is performed on retainer, by hourly rate, or can be built into the project at a flat rate.