

Construct a Better Plan from the Start

Construction is an afterthought for operators, who consider it a necessary evil. But the construction process is an opportunity to start the client relationship off on the right foot.

By Bryan Rader ■ *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

Recently, I had coffee at a real estate conference with several prominent property owners. “How are things going with your operators?” I asked the group.

“Awful,” one of them blurted. “They’ve done one of the worst construction jobs on my property that I have ever seen in the past 20 years.”

“What about you?” I asked another.

“I’m seeing the same thing,” he said. “They don’t show up when they are supposed to. They cut lines. They try to enter apartments without permission. They never inform my on-site managers about what they are doing.” (And these owners were talking about some of the largest cable and phone companies in our market!)

Have we not yet learned that the “construction” part of the process is as important as every other element of a strong relationship with a client? Property owners are complaining louder than ever about poorly installed boxes, unsecured wires, uncovered holes and ditches, temporary outages, and poorly kept schedules.

And the biggest mistake?

“Communication!” ranted one of the owners, as he set down his steaming hot coffee. “These guys don’t communicate with anybody.”

This problem is not simply limited to new greenfield sites; it’s even more apparent on existing properties scheduled for an upgrade.

According to the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, the cable TV industry spent \$12.4 billion on construction-related work in 2006, up from \$10.6 billion in 2005. This is spread across hundreds of markets, covering infrastructure in single-family units, com-

mercial business centers, and certainly in multiple dwelling units (MDUs).

If construction is such an important part of the game, why don’t cable operators try to keep better score? How you treat the construction process is the first indication of how you will treat your client long-term.

I’ll bet I’ve heard every possible construction-related complaint over the years, ranging from muddy boots in the leasing office, to contractors using the prospective resident’s bathroom, to trucks being parked in resident parking, to work begun before 8 am, to equipment stored near a flower bed.

“It’s all about respect,” explained a small property owner in the Midwest. “Many operators show no respect for your property, your grounds, your facilities or your staff. They bulldoze their way in to get service to their subscriber.”

I’ve seen both very good and very poor examples of operators maintaining control during the construction process. There are common issues that can have a significant effect on how well PCOs perform during this “first impression” part of the relationship.

Assign a Manager

Several key steps must be taken to avoid problems. Private cable operators must assign a strong project manager to each construction project. The manager must be held accountable for both the project budget and client satisfaction.

Project managers must communicate the scope of work, the timing, the impact to the property (aesthetic impact as well as impact to residents) and the potential disruptions that might occur during the work. They must be proactive with property managers, telling them on Monday what to expect during the rest of the

week. They must have identification for everyone on their crew. And they must conduct frequent walkthroughs on the property with staff to gain approval for restoration work before leaving the site. A good project manager has control of the project, making sure that the client is part of the process and receives proactive communications.

We frequently used construction crews who shared the same respect for our clients that we had. I remember an underground crew in Florida that was always on time, outfitted every crew member in a bright orange company shirt, and never started before 8:30 am. They were proactive, showing the manager what part of the property they’d be covering before the work began.

I’ve seen “three ring circus” construction, too. This doesn’t build confidence with new clients.

Our larger competitors – the MSOs and RBOCs – are not making construction a pillar of their success right now. That makes it all the more important for PCOs to do it right. So often “construction” is an afterthought for operators, a necessary evil for being in this business.

But it can also be a great point of difference, too. I hope you can “construct” a pillar of success in this part of your business. **BBP**

About the Author

Bryan J. Rader, former CEO of Media-Works before selling the company in 2006, has recently founded a new firm, Bandwidth Consulting LLC, to advise operators and providers in the MDU market segment. He also remains President of IMCC. Contact Bryan at bryanjrader@yahoo.com or by phone at 636-536-0011. You can learn more about Bryan’s new firm at www.bandwidthconsultingllc.com.