

Easing Construction Disruption

Property owners and managers often fear that FTTH construction will bring howls from inconvenienced residents. However, following best practices can minimize disruption.

By Allen Powell / *S&N Communications*

Multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) owners and managers face a dilemma. According to a study by J Turner Research, 64 percent of apartment dwellers say they would move or not renew their leases if they were unhappy with the Internet service in their apartments or condominium complexes. However, these same residents are quick to complain about disruption during the large-scale construction necessary to deliver these technologies.

Residents aren't the only ones annoyed. Everyone, from builders and developers to building owners, suffers when dealing with inexperienced service providers that plan poorly. At S&N Communications, we've learned the value of communication and proactive planning, particularly when construction projects are pending and getting ready to kick off. S&N has tested some of these practices in MDUs and others only in single-family-home neighborhoods, but we believe they would all be applicable in MDUs.

In residential areas, our team goes above and beyond to ensure minimal disruption. People's homes are their sanctuaries, and *any* disruption, especially from noisy, messy construction work, is not enthusiastically embraced. Whether or not it's fair, MDU building owners and managers typically face the brunt of tenant complaints.

However, if owners and managers are willing to get out ahead of the problem and spend time (and maybe a few dollars) communicating with their residents, complaints and ill will are likely to take a dramatic dip. Combine that communication with best practices from an engaged infrastructure construction company, and you've got the recipe for the ultimate resident/construction experience. Here's what everyone involved on a new broadband project can do to ensure minimal disruption.

BEST PRACTICES FOR INFRASTRUCTURE CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES

Community outreach. Before S&N begins any project, our crews knock on every door (yes, *every door*) in our work path and explain the upcoming work to be done. We lay out expected start and completion dates, answer questions and emphasize the benefits of our work – faster connectivity and more bandwidth. If no one is home, our crews leave behind a customer door hanger that contains the scope and location of our work and the cell phone number of our site superintendent.

This is a relatively simple task in a single-family, detached-home neighborhood. For an

Community outreach is the No. 1 best practice for construction companies undertaking infrastructure projects. Knock on every door, or schedule meet and greet time with community groups.



A construction crew can make a mess of a lawn...

MDU, be sure to ask permission from the owner or manager before your crew starts knocking on doors. During visits, have crew members wear name tags with your company's contact information clearly visible.

HOA meetings. If a project involves multiple or large MDUs, an option is to skip the door knocking in favor of (or in combination with) a meet and greet with apartment dwellers. Schedule a two- to three-hour time period during which people can drop in and ask questions about the scope of the work, how long it will take, what the benefits will be upon completion and so forth. As many apartment dwellers fear that mess and chaos will remain after a construction company departs, show mocked-up pictures of what the construction area will look like before and after the work.

Infrastructure construction companies should be careful to return the area to as close to its original state as possible. Homeowners, businesses, building owners and apartment

dwellers all breathe easier when they understand you'll put back what was torn up. Tip: serve cookies and punch. (Trust us, it's a draw.)

24-hour call center. For every project, we staff a 24-hour hotline that alerts our location managers each night with phone calls and email regarding



... so showing residents what the finished product will look like is reassuring.

MDU owners and managers can minimize discontent by explaining to residents how they will be able to use their upgraded broadband infrastructure. Pizza parties help keep people happy, too.

any unresolved issues. Though this is not cheap, the benefits far outweigh the costs. Most questions and complaints roll in when people get home from work. Their frustration levels rise if they can't reach anyone and have to take time out of their workdays the following day to track someone down. A 24-hour call center smooths end-user relationships, and you'll be a hero to your primary contractor when its phones aren't lighting up with questions and complaints

Daily tailgate meetings. Though they don't directly involve customers, daily tailgate meetings at the start of each workday allow supervisors to update crews on any concerns or requests expressed during the prior workday so that issues may either be resolved or not repeated.

Damage prevention team. We send out a damage prevention team to show up unannounced for real-time audits and post-inspections of our crews' work. Knowing they may be held

accountable at any time keeps crews following best practices on the job.

Post-project outreach. After the project is complete, circle back with everyone. Go door-to-door one last time, dropping off customer door hangers with contact information for questions or complaints. Extra touch: At S&N, if it is applicable, we leave behind a special "How to Care for Your Sod" instructional door hanger.

BUILDING OWNERS AND MANAGERS CAN EASE THE PAIN

The efforts of an infrastructure construction company can go only so far. Even if it does everything right, a perceived lack of concern from building managers may create an uproar from MDU residents. Here are messages that building owners and managers can use to keep discontent to a minimum.

Lead with the end result. The best thing any building manager can do is convey the positive outcome

of a project. Let residents know why putting up with the mess is to their benefit. For example, if fiber to the home is installed, they stand to gain increased bandwidth for home energy management services, home security systems and medical monitoring services. They will also have enhanced connectivity for telecommuting and home-based businesses, not to mention more and faster bandwidth for social functions such as Facebook, Skype and Twitter. Throw in faster cloud computing, and the construction hassle becomes a much easier sell.

Communicate early and often.

In these days of email, e-blasts, texts, newsletters, Facebook pages, door hangers, direct mail and the ever-popular "flyer taped near the mailbox," there's no excuse for residents not to have a big heads-up that a construction project is coming their way. Let them know months in advance, if possible, so they can plan accordingly. Early notice is also a great way to get residents excited about the broadband and wireless capability changes being made on their behalf.

Throw in some fun stuff.

E-newsletters and written notices are all fine and good, but show residents that you have a heart. Organize a pizza party to kick off the construction. Host a movie night halfway through the project to say, "We appreciate your patience." And seal the deal with a free post-construction car wash.

Though keeping everyone happy may not be possible, the majority of residents will be willing to overlook reasonable inconveniences associated with the disruption caused by wired and wireless infrastructure construction – if they feel acknowledged and listened to.

And if free pizza and a movie are part of that mix, so much the better. ❖

SEVEN SIMPLE WAYS TO SAY, "EXCUSE OUR MESS!"

Pick a few or do them all; these tactics will help keep residents updated and happy during the construction process. (Budget per 100 tenants.)

- Printable "Excuse Our Mess!" explanatory note cards with mini dustpan and hand broom: \$715
- Information in community newsletter: \$ 0
- Pizza party to kick off construction (pizza, soft drinks and plates): \$475
- Automated voice mail from an automated calling service: \$ 10
- Movie night (movie rental, popcorn and popcorn boxes): \$175
- 20 Posters \$ 80
- Post-construction car wash (based on average car wash costs) \$800

Allen Powell is the president and CEO of S&N Communications, a provider of wired and wireless infrastructure construction, professional services and underground utility locating with 52 field offices in 35 states. Find out more at www.sncomm.com.