

“This Land Is My Land... But Could Be Our Land”

Developing Influencer Relationships to Accelerate Development Success

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Lois Kelly is founder and president of the marketing consulting firm Meaning Maker, which helps companies like FedEx, Hyperion, SAP, eRoom, Copernicus, and Firepond, develop marketing positioning and communications strategies that cut through the clutter and deliver the “aha factor” needed to accelerate the effectiveness of their marketing programs. Ms. Kelly’s singular business passion is creating clarity from complexity. What do people need to know to understand an issue, a product, a trend, a person, a company, a crisis, an industry? Throughout her varied career as journalist, public relations executive, crisis communications specialist, and high-tech marketing sherpa guide, she has focused on helping people understand subjects that are complex and/or mired in dense marketplace fog and noise. Ms. Kelly earned a bachelor’s degree from University of New Hampshire and a graduate degree in business from Harvard University’s Extension School. She’s on the board of Trinity Repertory Theater and the advisory boards of Northeastern University’s Communication Studies Department, Dynamic Diagrams, and Third Screen Media.

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Introduction: The Rising Influence of Influencers on Development Projects

The growing influence of community leaders, government organizations, citizen action groups, environmental activists, and smart growth movements can stop a development project in its tracks – or help streamline hurdles and accelerate success. Today there are an estimated 28,000 activist and non-government organizations (NGOs) keeping a hawk’s eye view on business behavior. And that doesn’t even include the community groups that organize ad hoc around a particular development project.

To help developers determine what they can do to better understand what it means to build effective relationships with influencers, the NAIOP Research Foundation commissioned this study, in which we interviewed 30 developers and “influencers” nationwide to assess what works in building effective working relationships, what doesn’t, and how to build in best practices (see Appendix 1 for a primer on the term “influencer” and relevant academic research). The influencers interviewed included representatives from smart growth, environmental, and community organizations, as well as local, state, and federal government organizations (see Appendix 2 for research methods and procedures).

While other industries have studied how to practically manage organization-influencer relationships, this study is the first to do so for the commercial real estate development industry. Interestingly – and perhaps reassuringly – the findings from the NAIOP study are strikingly consistent with the latest, broader research on managing organization-influencer relationships (see Appendix 1). The study findings provide insights and practical advice in these areas:

- What’s driving influencers to become more involved in development projects
- Common obstacles to building relationships
- The seven characteristics of effective developer-influencer relationships – and practical strategies for building them into business practices
- Recommendations for NAIOP & its members: overcoming obstacles, building skills, investigating new trends, adopting new “influencer radar” tools

Experienced developers may discover that the findings and advice in this report resonate with their intuitive understanding of how to approach relationships with influencer groups. Yet because of the increasing success of anti-developer influencers in slowing down projects – or blocking them altogether – there’s benefit to documenting what does and doesn’t work in navigating relationships that are often adversarial.

The New Realities: It’s the Community’s Project, Not the Developer’s

Developers agree that there is more intense involvement from a larger sphere of influencers than ever before. The cost of complying with more – and more complex – government regulations continues to rise, as does the cost of litigation and “expert” services.

In many cases the first factor is driving the second. As activists and organizations have become successful in building coalitions and using the media, they’ve been able to exert their increasing influence to change regulations and permitting processes.

But why are so many people so passionate about development today? Diminishing open space is alarming people into action, as is the perceived poor track record of community planning and

“A lot of issues get played out on the front page of the paper where they didn’t before.”

– Influencer

zoning in many areas. Many groups don't trust government agencies or planning boards to make what they feel are the right decisions for their communities.

"If we don't act, our communities are at risk. As it is, we have little margin for error in light of how developed our area already is," said one East Coast influencer.

A Western developer was blunter. "We see how the folks in the East have pretty much ruined things over the years. No one in the West – environmentalists and developers alike – wants to see that happen out here."

Put another way, one person explained, "It's no longer the developer's project. It's the community's project. Everything we do affects the fabric of a community. That's why there's so much involvement – and why developers today have to work closely, honestly, and earnestly with members of the community."

The New, New Realities: Opponents Are Smart, Sophisticated, and Oftentimes Savvier

While developers have experience in working with activists and community group leaders, there is a noticeable difference in working with these groups today. They are more organized, know how to quickly develop community coalitions, are savvy in their use of the Web to quickly and regularly communicate with constituencies, and are effective in generating media coverage, often pre-empting developers.

What's driving greater influencer involvement

- "This Land Is My Land": diminishing open space alarming people into action
- "Back to the City" movement: desire to create communities vs. erect or rehab buildings in context of urban population growth
- Wake up call: our community vs. your project
- Increasing government regulations
- Greater & more organized community activism: people distrust both developers and government officials to do what's in the community's real interest
- Environmental issues are more emotional than ever. "No growth, do nothing" is an ever stronger point of view and environmental groups are particularly sophisticated and well funded
- Any development is more public
- Media more aggressive in covering development, controversy
- 24/7 communications society: anyone can publish an opinion and make it very public, very quickly

"I find there is a tendency for anti-developer leaders in the community to speak louder, more often, and with cooler heads than developers," explained a noted professor who has worked on urban housing issues in Boston and has led a community group opposing a shopping development on Cape Cod. "The anti-development caucus in the community may represent a minority, but they can dominate the debate."

In light of these new realities, developers need to incorporate influencer relationship building practices into their business operations. As detailed in the following pages, developers today have to:

- Know who the influential influencers are and build personal relationships with them – "and not just when you need something from them."
- Meet with influencers **as early as possible** to understand the issues from their perspective, likely opposition, and the resulting implications to the project planning process.

- Identify which influencer coalitions can benefit from a project and enlist their support **early**, particularly if you are likely face opposition from another group. “Developers need to be more creative in overcoming opposition from one coalition,” explained a developer. “If an environmental group opposes the project, look at how a senior citizen, handicap, or educational group might benefit and help them tell their side of the story.” Another developer advises to bring in your own technical and scientific experts **early** to counter opposition claims.
- Recognize that compromise and accommodation are facts of life.
- Understand that if a project is really not appropriate for a particular community – and the community members are particularly involved and well organized – there may be no way overcome opposition.

Relationships: Why They Matter; What’s Getting In the Way

Personal relationships are one of the primary bases of influence. In short, people are more likely to do things for, and with, those people with whom they share a close, personal relationship. But what forms the basis for the personal relationship? We commonly think it’s because we like someone, or we feel “connected” with them. But what’s behind those feelings?

Academic research indicates that personal relationships are based on mutual understanding, where both parties seek to understand and work within the other’s framework for making sense of the world. So, if mutual understanding serves as the basis for personal relationships, and personal relationships serve as a primary basis of influence, understanding the other person’s perspective is the key to leveraging influence. Additional benefits of personal relationships include:

“Relationships are impossible without mutual understanding. Mutual understanding promotes relationships. Relationships promote influence.”

– Steve Duck, Ph.D.
Relationships Expert

- A better relationship foundation allows for more candid and direct communication, which can save time.
- Knowing that another person is a real person with valid concerns makes it less likely for people to adopt an adversarial position.
- Building effective relationships is a significant way to navigate the obstacles and challenges that inevitably surface during development projects.

Conversely, not having personal relationships with influencers can result in project delays, litigation, and prolonged public controversy played out on the front page of the media.

From our interviews we observed four common macro obstacles that developers face in building influencer relationships:

1. **Differing points of view:** Developers usually look at a project as *their* project, but influencers perceive it as the community’s project. Too often parties go into a project with very different points of view – and often without recognizing the others’ perspective.
2. **What is smart growth?** No growth, smart growth, sustainable growth....Just what are the right “growth” definitions for a community and its developers? The reality is that communities and environmentalists are grappling with growth planning while development continues. Without having everyone on the same page as to what is the

“right” growth for a particular community, influencers feel like they’re out building the railroad tracks while the developer locomotive is barreling down the tracks. It’s a scary place to be, and one that stirs so much emotion over proposed projects.

Many interviewed, including a leading non-profit smart growth advocate, concur that “no growth” is not a feasible option. “It’s socially unjust to have a no-growth position,” explained the smart growth advocate. “People need to be able to afford housing, get to work nearby, and be part of a community. No growth is really not a socially just option.”

3. **Reputation hangovers:** Often influencers perceive developers as rigid, moneymaking business executives with no concerns for the community or environment. Similarly, many developers view the “enviroes” and NIMBYs as rigid activists with no concerns for economic realities. These stereotypes slow down the relationship building process, which in turn slows many development processes.

“One of our biggest problems is perception. We’re as environmentally concerned as any environmental group, but no one knows this.”

– Developer

4. **Only for the big and controversial projects:** Many developers believe that reaching out to influencers is necessary for controversial projects, but not for others. Yet, we found that those developers who build influencer relationships all the time, for all types of projects, face fewer obstacles for all projects, including the controversial ones. “Establishing both personal and corporate credibility is absolutely critical,” explained a developer. “You have to be willing to invest the time to build long-term relationships to achieve even short-term wins. The personal trust is especially important.”

The Seven Characteristics of Effective Developer-Influencer Working Relationships

Overall factors: personal relationships; projects that work for a community

Creating highly personal relationships based on mutual understanding is one of the overall most important factors in building good working relationships, or what the communication experts call relationship-centered communication.

Relationship-centered communication puts a “human face” on all the parties in a development project, allowing them to communicate with one another as real people with legitimate interests and concerns, not just as adversaries or at the level of common stereotypes (such as evil developers, NIMBYs, bureaucrats, communists, and tree-huggers, etc.). This form of communication acknowledges the inherent value of building relationships of shared understanding with multiple stakeholders, and the short-term and long-term consequences of how acting in a particular way will affect the nature of the relationship among the parties.

“Relationship-centered communication puts a ‘human face’ on all the parties in a development project.”

One of the most striking findings regarding what it takes to build effective relationships was that both influencers and developers identified the same characteristics to be important (see chart below). At one level this is surprising because many people often assume that influencers and developers are working from diametrically opposed, or at least adversarial, positions.

At another level this finding should not be surprising because such features are common characteristics of most of our everyday personal relationships.

Another overall factor is conceiving projects in light of the community. Any development project today does impact the fabric of a community. Understanding what is appropriate for any particular community at the get-go can accelerate community acceptance and deter potentially costly opposition. A well-conceived project is critical to a successful project, avoidance of delays, and litigation.

Characteristics of Effective Relationships	DEV	INFL
1. Early Engagement	50%	50%
2. Effective Listening	71%	29%
3. Education & Understanding	50%	50%
4. Trust & Credibility	64%	36%
5. Accommodation	67%	33%
6. Transparency	33%	67%
7. Adapting	50%	50%

HOW TO READ THIS CHART: The seven characteristics listed in the chart were mentioned in the interviews by both developers and influencers. This chart shows the percentages of developers versus influencers who mentioned each characteristic. For example, of all the respondents who mentioned Transparency as a characteristic of effective working relationships, 67% were influencers while 33% were developers. Of those who mentioned Effective Listening, 71% were developers and 29% were influencers. Note: Because of the qualitative nature of this study, these numbers are not statistically significant and should be read for descriptive, informational purposes only.

The good, the bad, and the annoying

What do developers do really well – and what do they do that annoys influencers? What follows are the seven most commonly identified characteristics of effective relationships, and recommended best practices from developers and influencers on how to build them into a developer’s business operations.

1. Early Engagement
2. Effective Listening
3. Education & Understanding
4. Trust & Credibility
5. Accommodation
6. Adapting
7. Transparency

1. Early Engagement

For most influencers, the most irritating practice of developers was not involving or engaging the influencers early enough in the process of a project. Many environmental and community/neighborhood influencers changed how they viewed a development project based on how early they felt involved.

For example, one neighborhood citizen, who learned about a development project in the newspaper, said she felt like she was “reacting to” the project versus “participating in” the project. Influencers were more inclined to resist a development project when they felt like developers did not proactively seek their input.

“Thinking, designing, engineering, filing, and then talking is too late. Discussion should take place while the project is being formed.”

– Developer

Regulators, planning, and zoning board members also commented about the delay in involving them in the project. These influencers consistently commented that many problems with a project surrounding impacts, zoning regulations, etc., could have been avoided had the developer come to them earlier in the process.

Finally, one developer said that it was important to engage influencers early on because you will need that time to build the relationship. It takes time to learn about the others’ concerns and perspectives and starting early on allows the time for these conversations to occur and for the relationship to develop. She used the analogy of how one never gets a second chance to make a first impression and that if a developer is “not able to make the relationships at the first phase you won’t be able to the relationship at the later phase.”

Early engagement best practice

- **Map out whom to engage (vs. merely inform) at what step, but start early on in the process:** Think of talking with and listening to various influencers within concentric circles. Start in center with vital community and government leaders about the concept. Then move to next circle of opinion leaders as a sounding board, building their coalition. Then move to the general public and media when a concept has been fleshed out with the input from the innermost circles.

“Engagement is not just about making contact with influencers. It’s about understanding them from their frame of reference, and making sure they feel understood.”

- **Hold public workshops for bigger projects before a vote, where the purpose is informational.** Public workshops are informational sessions, often held in a high school gymnasium or other public meeting venue, where town or city officials and community members can see visual representations of the proposed projects, get their questions answered, voice their concerns, make suggestions, and otherwise feel involved in the process. Developers benefit from such information sessions because they have the opportunity to interact with influencers, meeting one another face-to-face, learn objections to the development early on in the process, and have the chance to clarify misunderstandings, all before a public hearing takes place where the emotional stakes are higher because all parties are faced with a decision to show support for or vote down the project. Holding public, informational sessions makes the process of involving influencers a more formal aspect of the planning process for a development project.

2. Effective Listening

Effective listening was mentioned in nearly all of the interviews. When listening is effective there is mutual influence, not just in one direction. Effective listening was described as:

- Acknowledging that people have different viewpoints and concerns;
- Seeking to understand what those alternative viewpoints and concerns are, from the other parties' perspective;
- Respecting differing viewpoints as valid and legitimate.

Effective listening best practices

- **Don't assume stakeholders are enemies and/or stereotype groups:** For example, the Smart Growth movement is not one monolith group with the same agenda, but a series of different movements that vary greatly from state to state, many of which are pro-development. Prejudgment of others is one of the biggest obstacles to effective listening, yet is a common practice, especially where there is a history of adversarial relationships.

"The Smart Growth movement is not a monolith. It's young, evolving, and there are a lot of groups, with many varying perspectives."

– Influencer

- **Listen, really listen:** A number of influencers said that developers did not really "hear" their concerns. We got the sense that while some developers said they listened, they were not engaging in listening practices such that the other person or group *felt listened to*. "Listening to" a group does not necessarily mean accommodating to their every request. It does, however, mean acknowledging their concern, respecting it as a valid one, showing how an accommodation can be made, and if an accommodation cannot be made, patiently explaining why an adjustment cannot be done, and then offering to brainstorm other alternatives.

- **Understand and respect emotions:** Many projects are opposed due to emotional issues, which can't be addressed by data points. Listen in order to be able to uncover what's behind the emotion, and then address those root causes in a way that respects the feelings of the community.

"A project may be legally and technically possible, but that doesn't make it acceptable."

– Influencer

- **Flip your thinking: what's in it for them?** Understanding the other person is what builds relationships. One of the things that annoy influencers is when developers overly focus on their own financial benefits of projects with scant attention on the benefits that make sense to the community. Planning boards and other stakeholders want a balanced perspective on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of development, as well as how the project contributes to the future of a community. Thus, emphasize more than the financial benefits. As several influencers emphasized, "It's not all about dollars and cents, economic growth, and abiding regulations."

- **...and then flip it again: what's in it for you both?** In focusing on the relationship you are implicitly finding and building common ground. There are a number of points where various stakeholders overlap in their interests, but you have to listen for them. For example, some developers live within the towns and cities where they are developing, so both groups have a common interest in making a better community. Sometimes the common ground is surprising, where a prominent national environmental group actually supported the developer's interests in a court case against a community neighborhood.

3. Education & Understanding

Effective working relationships require that all parties be educated and understand the potential upsides and downsides of a project. In fact, it is in the developer's best interests to have more educated and knowledgeable parties.

"Ignorance around development is not necessarily bliss."
 – Influencer

Even with an adversarial win-lose perspective, having a more knowledgeable opponent doesn't make sense because it only gives them more "ammunition." However, from a collaborative approach, there are at least five advantages:

- More knowledgeable parties provide for more realistic expectations of what a development project can and cannot do.
- It creates the possibility for a better-informed discussion.
- It allows more intelligent brainstorming of ways to work around sticky points.
- It builds trust. "By investing the time and money to help the community understand a particularly complicated traffic engineering issue, we were actually able to build understanding and get the project green lighted more quickly," said a developer. "More importantly, it built trust. Community members knew that we had done our homework, earnestly looked at all alternatives, and designed with their interests in mind. Without this understanding of the issues, they would have remained skeptical."
- If influencers know of other influencer groups and their concerns, those parties can work together with the developer. Developers benefit from this because they deal with fewer parties when negotiating the terms of a project. For example, a developer explained that one influencer group lobbied on behalf of the developer with several influencer "fringe groups." He went on to say, "Having a real understanding of what we were proposing, the lead community group had little tolerance for nonsense from opponents. They told the others that we were going 'the extra yard' and that it was time they stopped protesting."

Education & understanding best practices

- **Educate your opponents, as well as your supporters:** They may not agree but if they understand and view developers as trustworthy and credible, there is less likely a chance for huge protests.

- **Be a credible source of relevant, easy-to-understand information:** One of the best ways to build trust is to communicate in ways that the other person prefers to use and can comprehend, both through direct communication and with the media. If you want the press to understand your point of view and write about it correctly you have to provide the objective, factual information that they need, in a straightforward, candid way. If you want a town to be able to make an informed decision but they lack the technical background to make that decision, consider paying for specialized consultants or peer reviewers to assist the town.
- **Know when to aggressively bring in experts to talk their talk.** When influencer groups start playing hardball and bring in scientific, environmental, and legal experts, the developer should consider hiring her or his own team of credible experts, particularly in regards to environmental issues. “If you don’t bring in the experts early and resolve environmental issues, the environmental groups will hammer you,” explained a developer who lost several million dollars on a project due to environmentalists’ “endangered species” arguments. “If the opposition brings in scientific ‘experts’ to dismiss or block a plan, hire equally qualified experts to help you understand issues, develop alternative proposals, and meet their expert opinion with yours,” he advises.

4. Trust & Credibility

The issue of trust came up in every interview. One developer stated that the “key to trust is a track record of honesty.” More fundamentally, trust is based on the principle that each person feels like the other person truly understands their point of view. Across all types of personal relationships trust is a key component, laying the foundation for a healthy and effective relationship. It is often understood in terms of credibility, which has two key components: competence and sincerity.

<p>“The key to trust is a track record of honesty.”</p> <p>– Developer</p>
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Influencers need to trust that the people providing information about the project are competent and knowledgeable, and that they are sincerely concerned about the well being of all those affected by a development project.

Most importantly, developers have to deliver on what they promise. “There’s nothing more worse than when developers promise the community one thing, and then go through political back doors to deliver something less,” said one influencer. “If a project changes and you can’t do something, tell us why – and as early as possible.”

Trust & credibility best practices

- **Be candid about the drawbacks:** Address the possible drawbacks of a project and how to look at those drawbacks in light of the bigger picture implications of the project to the community. By proactively presenting the WHOLE picture, you build credibility and trust.
- **Use one point-of-contact:** Have one spokesperson working with all the stakeholders. This practice builds consistency of communications and understanding of issues for stakeholder groups. It is critical NEVER to have consultants be the “face” of the project.

- **Build understanding with all relevant influencers – before, during, after projects:** Be more proactive in identifying influencers. One developer suggested using a networking process wherein you always ask the question: “Who else should I be talking with about this project?” Building relationships takes time and it’s easier to have open dialogue when people aren’t wedded to particular issues. Therefore, developers need to focus on understanding as a long-term proposition, not just on a short-term, project-specific basis.
- **Use civic advisory committees:** Several developers suggest using civic advisory committees as a means to solicit feedback and involvement from community influencers. Such bodies allow community members a legitimate voice in the planning process and create the opportunity for more creative solutions to problems that affect the community. Further, these boards allow developers to work with people who already are, or will become, more knowledgeable about the project. Proponents of advisory committees offered two caveats to their use. First, it is absolutely essential to have both supporters and detractors at the table in order to represent the full spectrum of interests. Otherwise, the committee will be perceived as simply window-dressing. Second, do not neglect other community members who might not be as knowledgeable about the project (as a result of not being on the committee) and/or because the civic advisory committee may not fully represent their interests.
- **Develop a proactive plan for building credible, trustworthy reputation in community:** “Be as honest as you can, as early and as often as you can,” advise several developers. Further, recognize what the community sees as important and address those aspects on their own terms. Most importantly get involved in the community beyond any one project, helping influencers understand who you are as a business and a person, and what you stand for. In addition, “make it your business to become a trusted steward of the community.”

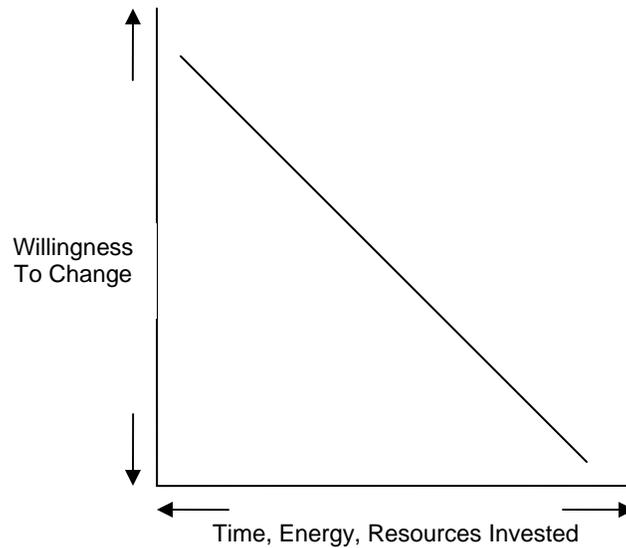
5. Accommodation

Another feature of effective working relationships is the ability to be flexible and accommodating.

People are often unwilling to accommodate because they feel they need to give up some control over their vision for the project. If people are set on one position they are less willing to seek out more information or adopt their patterns of thinking so that a more creative solution can be reached.

Both influencers and developers agreed that there is an inverse relationship between one’s willingness to change and the amount of time, energy, and resources invested in a project (see Diagram 1 below). The less people have invested in a particular outcome, the more willing they are to change; conversely, the more time, energy, and resources they have invested, they are less likely to accommodate to other’s views. Because of this dynamic, it is easier to build relationships when people are not tied to particular positions. Further, this ties back to the importance of early engagement between developers and influencers.

Diagram 1: The Accommodation-Investment Principle



Accommodation best practices

- **Adopt the 3Rs:** Respond to criticisms, redesign if necessary, and reach accommodations. If you can't accommodate all their requests, explain why. Be open to different types of designs and approaches. Some influencers feel that developers sometimes don't want to flex because they have certain building approaches down pat and deviating from these eats into margins.
- **Look for creative approaches to opposition:** Another way to reach accommodation is to explore who the project does appeal to. What other influencers might be motivated to support the project? Some developers advise that you should assess who can benefit and then build a strong coalition with these constituents to influence other influencers and build project support. Examples cited include: appealing to handicapped groups to help secure approval of drive-through windows, and activating individual landowners whose dreams of building their homes are at risk because environmental groups are blocking development on the land that these individuals own.

6. Adapting

When parties are sincerely seeking to comprehend what the other means each party learns how best to adapt their communication to the other party.

Knowing how to adapt to the communication needs of influencer groups can be a powerful tool that communicates a sense of concern for the other party and shows that you respect their needs.

For example, one developer shared how he has increasingly used computer animation for large projects to help influencers better conceptualize what the project could look like. Another developer mentioned how he made sure not to use jargon when explaining technical details of the project to non-developers. Yet another developer remarked on how she went door-to-door before a public hearing because she knew the neighborhood members most heavily impacted

by the project would appreciate learning about the impacts from her rather than in the newspaper.

Adapting best practices

- **Avoid developer “talk”:** Don’t assume your audiences understand the complexities of financing or a project’s technical implications. Get out of talking about and thinking about the project in your own style and adapt to the understanding level of the audience. “We probably should have a more intricate understanding of development technicalities and financing, but we don’t,” explained an influencer. “Developers need to take a deep breath and *not* assume that we understand their project complexities.”
- **Develop/enhance professional skills – coalition builder, communications expert, educator, and “psychologist”:** Both developers and influencers agreed that successful developers today need to be competent in areas far beyond financing, planning, and technical issues. Specifically, developers need:
 - The listening, understanding, and empathy skills of a good psychologist.
 - To be able to clearly communicate complex issues with a complex set of audiences, many of whom are adversarial and many, like the media, who don’t want to be “sold” or persuaded, but informed within varying contexts.
 - To be masters of building coalition support with and among diverse groups that have diverse interests, on local and statewide levels. The days of working primarily with the planning boards and permitting authorities are long gone.
 - To take the lead as credible community educators on issues like smart growth, water quality, and transportation. The goal would not be to push a project through, but to develop a more educated public that will be able to understand and react to possible proposals in a more informed and rational way.

“Developers today need to be educators, psychologists, coalition builders, and PR experts.”

– Influencer

7. Transparency

Communicating in an open, direct, and honest way is essential to building relationships – especially today when people are still smarting about the unethical “behind-closed doors” corporate behaviors of the Enron’s and Tyco’s.

Influencers often perceived developers as being “strategic” or “secretive” in their communication efforts and this often related to developers not engaging the influencers early enough in the process.

Some influencers felt that developers used tactics wherein certain promises were made about accommodations during negotiations only to backtrack when it came time to make good on those earlier promises. Additionally, one state environmental regulator noted how developers frequently tried to “sugar coat” impacts rather than stating them up front. By not being direct and transparent at the beginning, time and energy is wasted in trying to sort out what the true impacts of a project will be.

Transparency best practices

- **Set up project-related websites:** Use websites to make information about the project available to anyone and everyone. Project-related websites can be relatively simple, but should include relevant information for various influencer groups about the project, including the plans, technical details, images of proposed developments, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and an e-mail link.

The website serves as a record for what the developer plans to do, so that if someone says that the developer did not do what they said they would, the developer can simply say that we did what we said we were going to do and the plans have been posted on the website all along. Including images of the proposed development helps the influencers to envision the plans. Posting FAQs helps to diffuse questions before they become issues. And providing an e-mail link provides a channel for communication that occurs between the influencer and developer and perhaps makes it less likely that the concern or question is raised for the first time at a public hearing.

- **Submit complete and comprehensive information when filing:** Developers sometimes think “less is more” when filing a project and will only provide information if it is asked for. Often times, however, certain information – like photometric studies, sound analysis, shadow studies, and drainage reports – may be beneficial to help make a more informed decision. This will save time so that the decision makers do not have to come back and ask for it later. Thus, sometimes “more is more” when it comes to filing project information.

To learn more about how the findings from this study relate to existing research on the characteristics of effective working relationships and best practices, see Appendix 3.

Six Reasons Why Developers Don't More Actively Build Influencer Relationships

If developers recognize the fundamental principle of creating understanding as the basis of relationships, and thus influence, why don't they always act on this knowledge? There are a number of reasons, the six most common ones being:

1. Perception that creating mutual understanding takes time and costs money
2. Belief that staying under the radar until “official approvals” are locked up is the most efficient route
3. Perception that building relationships only matters when it's a controversial project
4. Developers are afraid of doing outreach
5. Developers are leery of giving up project control
6. Developers skimp on their homework

Pay me now or pay me later

Some developers perceive that coming to understand influencer groups in the development process takes more time and costs more money. This perception is 100% accurate, but only in the short-term. Identifying relevant stakeholders and finding out what their real concerns are does take time and cost money.

But every developer we talked with said that it saved them time and money later on in the project because concerns were addressed early on; the developer was then able to build

community support and gain approval, and ultimately there were fewer project delays. In other words, the way to “speed” trust building is to take the time to understand influencers’ concerns early on and factor them into the project. To paraphrase an old advertising slogan, “You can pay me now, or you can pay me later.” But paying later almost always costs more.

When stealth backfires, the rage can be ruinous

One of the riskiest developer beliefs is that it’s best to keep the wraps on a project until most of the official approvals have been won. All the influencers interviewed found that this practice is one that makes them especially angry and distrustful of developers. It fuels their outrage and protests, and provides them with ammunition to use with the media and other community coalitions: “See, those sneaky developers are not to be trusted and don’t really care about the impact of the project on OUR community.” The result to developers can be a lengthier approval process, project delays, negative media coverage, and a tainted reputation, which also makes it more difficult to gain acceptance of future proposed projects.

Not controversial to you, but it may be to them

Third, developers sometimes think that they only need to build relationships when it is a controversial project. After all, if there is no controversy then everything should go through the normal permitting and approval processes without worry.

But there are two problems with this approach. First, it is true that working relationships with influencer groups based on understanding are especially important for a complex project surrounded by multiple, competing visions (that is, controversy). But it is also the case that an optimal time to build relationships is when people are not necessarily tied to a particular outcome.

One regulator, for example, felt that it was best to get a feel for how the developer should plan projects to meet regulations apart from a specific project, due to the Accommodation-Investment Principle (discussed above).

The second problem with the perception that developers need only to be concerned with relationship building for particular projects is that the developer might not think there is a controversy when there actually is one. If this happens, it probably means the developer did not do a good enough job of proactively initiating and/or maintaining influencer relationships in order to determine what aspects of the project would and would not constitute a problem.

Fear factor: the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know

A fourth reason that developers do not build relationships with influencers is for fear of making the outreach.

This fear often stems from a kind of peer pressure, which can take two forms. One form is that the developer does not want to be seen as going out on a limb, or being a lone wolf. The thinking is that if other developers are not going to make proactive moves, I do not want to either. A second form is that the developer does not want to be seen as contacting “the enemy” and being perceived as a traitor by other developers.

Control is illusory

Fifth, developers are often reluctant to give up too much control of how the project will progress. This may be related to the strong entrepreneurial spirit and sense of control characteristic of many developers.

The assumption here is that if a developer invites others into the project and solicits their feedback, then they will have to do something about it, which might mean changing their initial plans. Part of the issue here may be that the developer has gone too far down the line of making investments and is thus unwilling to accommodate to changes requested by influencer groups.

“It’s not the developer’s project; it’s the community’s project.”

– Developer

Other times, the developer may perceive that the influencers are not educated or knowledgeable enough about the issues and thus wants to avoid the hassle of dealing with them. One developer, however, contends that the perception of control is illusory and stems from a fundamental misunderstanding about whose project it is. Developers often think and talk about projects as “their” project, when really it is the larger community’s project, of which the developer is one part.

Homework is mandatory

Finally, developers sometimes do not build influencer relationships because they simply skimp on their “homework.” As discussed above, the realities of today’s development projects require developers to really understand local issues and the profiles of the players, and to operate under greater scrutiny from a variety of publics.

Recommendations

Based on this research and our professional expertise in helping other organizations and companies with similar issues, there are several next step recommendations for NAIOP and its members to consider.

Overcoming major obstacles

- **Developer reputation:** We recommend that NAIOP consider developing a positioning and market awareness program to put a new public “face” on the developer: “he’s not your father’s developer.” Focus on showing how developers design with a community in mind, incorporate leading environmental practices, and integrate sustainability best practices and “next practices.” At a minimum, provide a reputation management “tool kit” that developers can use to change influencer and public perceptions of those developers in their communities and regions.
- **Smart growth:** Another NAIOP program to consider is creating a national education program on how Smart Growth is the most socially just approach to serving all citizens. This counters the “no growth” activists and creates a human angle on why growth is necessary. Additionally, we recommend NAIOP consider a follow up study that helps members more fully understand the many emerging Smart Growth movements: who are the influencers surrounding Smart Growth; what are their perceptions about developers; how can developers build effective relationships with these influencers within the context of Smart Growth.

Building skills

- **Training programs:**
 - *Developing a reputation management marketing program:* How do you operationalize programs to build your reputation and become known as a

credible steward in the community. What to do, how to do it, how to know if it's working.

- *Using the Web in new, more strategic ways:* How to mine blogs, boards, and ListServes to uncover and monitor community/activist concerns; how to create project-centered web sites that educate, inform, and provide a way for influencers to communicate their questions and concerns.
- *Effective listening skills seminar:* How to more proactively “listen,” particularly to opposition, which implies a recognition that the basis for building relationships, and influence, is in understanding the other from their perspective and ensuring that they feel heard.
- **Peer-to-peer advice network:** An additional approach is to develop a peer-to-peer network discussion board on the topic of influencer relationships, moderated by a skilled expert, in which members can share best practices, ask for and offer one another advice, recommend resources, etc.

Adopting new “influencer radar” tools

- **Offer members monthly or quarterly “radar maps”:** Such maps allow NAIOP members to visually see the increasing/decreasing intensity of current and emerging trends, like Smart Growth, water, etc., and also see what topics and organizations are most closely linked to those trends. This sort of market sensing and insight data would help developers better understand which issues they need to know about and be concerned about. It also helps NAIOP better understand where to focus national relationship building and lobbying.
- **Blogs & boards mining:** A complementary or alternative approach to helping developers keep a pulse on market issues is to provide quarterly or bi-annual mining on the most influential environmental and smart growth web sites, message boards and blogs. This would provide insights into: what are the “hot” topics in play in the public discussion, who’s leading the discussion and why, how can NAIOP and its members use this market intelligence to develop both reactive and proactive strategies to deter emerging obstacles.

Investigating new trends

- **Community benefit agreements (CBAs)** are an increasing trend on which NAIOP should consider educating its members. CBAs are project-specific contracts negotiated between developers and communities. CBAs can theoretically be used to negotiate anything, such as traffic or environmental mitigation, for any type of major development project; so far, however, they have been used for economic, equity, and social justice issues (namely, living wage jobs and affordable housing) on development projects that receive large public subsidies. Though negotiations between communities and developers have been around for many years, CBAs as distinct, formal documents have been around since about 2000.

For communities, CBAs are a way to ensure that benefits going to the broader community and not just the developer and the landowner. For developers, CBAs are the

answer to getting their projects approved in a reasonable amount of time. Other benefits:

- CBAs provide greater certainty to developers. Developers can count on a certain level of public support for their projects.
- CBAs help to get past, or at least provide “cover” from, people who are NIMBYs or no-growth under any circumstances by creating pro-growth constituencies.
- CBAs help developers feel good about their community contribution. Developers often like to perceive themselves as “city builders” and most have a desire to be seen as good corporate citizens.

In a sense, CBAs are like pre-nuptial agreements because the CBA helps facilitate an increased understanding of the other and greater certainty for all parties to the agreement. This is especially useful if the parties start from an adversarial position based on suspicion. Finally, CBAs do not have to just be agreements between low-income communities and developers, but could become vehicles to promote discussion among multiple influencer groups (economic, environmental, etc.) about what constitutes good development.

Appendix 1: Academic Research & Popular-Press Writings on “Influencers”

Defining “influencers” and “influencer relationships” for this report

We started with the notion that relationships are inherently persuasive and influential, which led to the idea of “influencer relationships” between commercial real estate developers and those people in environmental, governmental, and community or neighborhood organizations.

From there, we needed an easy, shorthand way of identifying those people or groups who could affect development projects. We considered using a term like “stakeholder,” but we felt it did not capture the fact that a person or group may have a “stake” or investment in a particular project but fails to take any action that would consequentially affect a development project, either due to lack of resources, lack of will, etc.

So, we shortened our original phrase “influencer relationships” to “influencers” to refer to those people outside of the development community who could affect, positively or negatively, the course of a development project. We feel that the term “influencer” highlights the inherent communication and relationship dynamics that are at the heart of today’s development projects.

The study of influence: an overview on “influencer” research

The study of personal influence and the idea that there are certain people who are especially influential over others has fascinated researchers, practitioners, and the general public for over 60 years. Various names in both academic and popular circles these people have been called opinion leaders, influentials, and Influential Americans[®], while the process of personal influence has been linked to, or synonymous with, various phenomena such as compliance-gaining, word-of-mouth marketing, and tipping points (the point at which an idea, behavior, or product “tips,” crossing a threshold from being a minor phenomenon to a wild epidemic).

Existing work published on this topic has conceived the influence process in four distinct ways.

Individual influence

The first, and earliest, approach is to look at the *individual level*. Research that adopts this perspective looks at the characteristics of an opinion leader or how to identify a person who is influential. Much of the early research on opinion leaders (in the 1940s and 1950s) was actually tied to the study of media effects. At the time, the media was seen to have direct, powerful effects on people (which connoted the images of “magic bullets” and “hypodermic needles” to describe the effects).

However, findings from a study on the media and voting behavior (“The People’s Choice” study) by researchers Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet found that the media was not as direct or powerful in its effects as initially thought. Instead, the researchers noted the consequential role of personal influence and relationships in a social network. That is, people didn’t necessarily change their opinions as a result of being exposed to the mass media, but as a result of interactions with their family and friends.

The researchers also found that influence flowed from particular individuals – dubbed “opinion leaders” – who shared certain similarities with those they influenced.

Finally, the researchers found that the opinion leaders had more exposure to the mass media, compared to the rest of the population. These findings led to the two-step flow model of communication (mass media to opinion leader, opinion leader to rest of population). There were

some problems, however, with this initial line of research. For example, subsequent studies found that the two-step flow was too simplistic.

Further, according to Dr. Gabriel Weimann, a communication researcher and author of *The Influentials: People Who Influence People* (1994), opinion leadership studies never measured leadership, but rather influenceability. Opinion leadership is “not an authoritative, charismatic, or leading figure but rather a position of an expert among his or her peers, a source of advice on a particular issue or subject” (p. 71).

Despite the criticisms of the early paradigm, the idea that there are certain people who are influential on certain topics like fashion and politics sustained the attention of both academic and market researchers.

The most sustained market research program on “Influential Americans” has been conducted, since 1973, by the Roper polling organization. Representatives of RoperASW, Ed Keller and Jon Berry, documented the results of their organization’s longitudinal studies in a book entitled *The Influentials* (2003), and identified the following characteristics of influential people; they:

- know many people
- soak up large amounts of information
- know a lot about some things, and something about a lot of things
- are 2-5 years ahead of the public on many important trends, such as the adoption of major technologies, or new ideas, such as the balance between work and family life
- have a definite sense of themselves
- have a clear sense of what is and is not important to them (p. 15).

Structural-networks: social networks of influence

In addition to approaching influence at the individual-level, a second approach investigates the influence process at the *structural-network level*. Research that adopts this perspective analyzes social networks (friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.) by “mapping” who talks to whom about what topics, who trusts others in their network, and who people go to for advice, among other things. The goal is to determine the structural position of those most influential in a social grouping and how a person’s position in the network explains their ability to be influential.

According to Dr. Ronald Burt, a researcher at the University of Chicago who studies social networks, opinion leaders are people who enjoy competitive social and business advantages but are less visible because they “are not people at the top so much as the edge, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups.” A recent book by Rob Cross & Andrew Parker entitled *The Hidden Power of Social Networks: Understanding How Work Really Gets Done in Organizations* (2004) represents an excellent example of the structural-network approach.

Memetic theories: societal influence

A third approach to influence involves *memetic theories*, which broaden the focus beyond the individual and network levels, and focus on the societal level. These approaches look at how cultural memes, or ideas, spread throughout society. For example, Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* popularized the phenomenon by the same name which claims that a product, idea, or behavior becomes influential when the following three factors are present:

- the communication occurs with people who are socially connected, knowledgeable, and/or persuasive
- the message is memorable
- contextual conditions exist appropriate for the product, idea, or behavior.

Memetic theories help to explain sudden social and cultural shifts, including social and environmental movements.

Relational influence: personal relationships

A fourth, and most recent, approach to personal influence emphasizes the *relational* basis of influence, or how personal relationships are themselves influential. This line of research starts with the assumption that relationships are inherently valuable and are based on mutual understanding, or the comprehension of the other's way of making sense of their world. Given this comprehension of the other's point of view, it is possible for people to approach sometimes adversarial relationships from a position of mutual respect and trust, which then facilitates influence.

Dr. Steve Duck, an expert on communication and personal relationships from the University of Iowa, summarizes this approach in the following way: "Relationships are impossible without mutual understanding. Mutual understanding promotes relationships. Relationships promote influence."

This relational approach to influence is consistent with the latest trends in the field of public relations. Rather than just using communication to manipulate or change public behavior and to enhance the organization's own image (a traditional view of PR), a new framework has emerged, focusing on mutual benefit for both the organization and the publics with which the organization interacts. No longer can relating with influencer groups be seen as a simple matter of communicating the right message to a target audience with the hope of changing the organization's image. Instead, in addition to creating an image, organizations must take specific actions that lead to the mutual benefit of their organization and those in their environment. This new role for public relations is most clearly seen in what is known in academic circles as the "relationship management perspective."

According to Dr. John Ledingham and Dr. Stephen Bruning, two leading researchers in the field of organization-public relations, the relationship management perspective recognizes that the outcome of public relations work should be to build relationships with influencer groups that are based on mutual understanding and benefit. They define an ideal organization-public relationship as "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard." Their work has shown that maintaining relationships with key influencer groups is not only ethically sound, but can also have consequential outcomes to bottom-line business objectives. Thus, relationship management can not be seen as a peripheral or secondary concern to management decisions; instead, building and maintaining these relationships needs to be a strategic focus throughout the entire organization, including at the highest levels of management.

How findings from this study relate to existing academic research on organization-influencer relationships

This study represents one of the first applications of the relational approach to the commercial real estate development industry. The findings from this study are strikingly consistent with the latest, broader research on managing organization-influencer relationships. For example, existing research has identified a number of dimensions, or characteristics, of effective relationships between an organization and their publics, including: trust, openness, satisfaction, as well as demonstrating involvement, investment, and commitment to influencer groups. These dimensions are remarkably similar to the seven characteristics of effective working relationships reported in this study (early engagement, effective listening, education and understanding, trust and credibility, accommodation, transparency, and adapting).

Another salient overlap with existing research concerns the concept of “control mutuality.” In academic research, control mutuality refers to the extent to which both parties agree on who has the legitimate right, or power, to influence the other. The more similar the perceptions of both parties about who has the right to influence the other, the more likely an effective working relationship can develop. This concept was most clearly captured in the quotation by one astute developer: “It’s not the developer’s project; it’s the community’s project.” If developers perceive the project as “theirs,” then they are more likely to perceive they have the right to influence other groups to accomplish their project. However, if influencers affected by the development view the project as the entire community’s, then they are more likely to perceive that they have greater, or at least equal, right to influence the course of the project. This disparity in perceptions presents a formidable obstacle preventing a quality relationship from forming, and making it more difficult to complete the project.

Finally, this study also found several best practices and strategies for each characteristic of effective working relationships. These strategies are also consistent with the latest research findings on relationship-building and dialogue in organization-public relationships. For example, researchers Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor suggest that effective dialogue includes the following skills:

- the ability to listen, empathize, and identify common ground among parties;
- adopting a long-term rather than short-term orientation to achieving objectives;
- scanning the environment and seeking out individuals and groups with opposing viewpoints;
- soliciting a wide range of opinions (internal and external to the organization) about issues of policy;
- the ability to contextualize issues within local, national, and international frameworks.

Based on the findings from this research study, it is clear that the relationship management perspective is consistent with the characteristics and best practices of relationships between commercial real estate developers and environmental, community and government influencer groups.

Conclusion and suggested resources

The four approaches to influence presented in this brief summary offer alternative, sometimes complementary and at other times conflicting, perspectives on a powerful phenomenon. While this report draws on all four approaches, the relational approach receives the greatest attention and informs our decision to use the term “influencers.” To learn more about the relational approach to organization-influencer relationships, read the following:

Stephen D. Bruning, Allison Langenhop, & Kimberly A. Green. (2004). Examining city - resident relationships: linking community relations, relationship building activities, and satisfaction evaluations. *Public Relations Review*, 30 (3), pp. 335-346.

Walter J. Carl & Steve Duck. (2004). How to do things with relationships... And how relationships do things with us. In P. Kalbfleisch (Ed). *Communication Yearbook*, 28 (pp. 1-34). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

John A. Ledingham. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. 15 (2), pp. 181-198.

Michael L. Kent & Maureen Taylor. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28 (1), pp. 21-38.

John A. Ledingham. (2001). Government-community relationships: Extending the relational theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 27 (3), pp. 285-295.

John A. Ledingham & Stephen D. Bruning. (1998). Relationship management in public relations: Dimensions of an organization-public relationship. *Public Relations Review*, 24 (1), pp. 55-66.

Appendix 2: Research Methods & Procedures

Participants in this study (n=30) included commercial real estate developers, consultants, and lobbyists (n=18; 60%), and representatives from environmental (local, regional, and national scopes), government (local and state levels), and community or neighborhood groups (n=12; 40%). A list of potential participants from the commercial real estate industry was provided by NAIOP representatives. These developers were identified as having a wealth of experience on projects that required significant involvement with government organizations, environmental groups, and community members. While some governmental influencers were also provided by NAIOP, the majority were identified by commercial real estate developers who had worked with the influencers on particular projects, or were specifically targeted by the research team in order to make the sample of influencers more diverse and representative. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. The research project was approved by Northeastern University's Division of Research Integrity's human subject review committee.

Data were acquired through a single 30-45 minute phone interview conducted by the principal investigators (a minority of the interviews lasted for 60 minutes, and one interview was conducted face-to-face). Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and were audio-tape recorded and later transcribed.

Two different protocols were used; one for those in the development industry, and one for community, environmental, and government influencers. The developer protocol contained 11 questions on the following topics: background questions about experience working in the industry, working relationships and communication with key influencers, characteristics of effective working relationships, questions about the company's business strategy relative to influencers, reflections based on specific projects, and advice they would provide to other developers.

Sample questions included "Based on your experiences, does the quality of the relationship between your company and the community, government, or environmental groups help or hinder the completion of a development project? If so, what aspects of the project do they impact?" and "Does your company have a planning process as it relates to people in community, governmental, or environmental organizations whose actions or opinions can affect your development projects? If so, please describe that process."

The influencer protocol contained 14 questions on the following topics: background questions about experience working with those in the commercial real estate development industry, working relationships and communication with developers, characteristics of effective working relationships, questions about the organization's strategy relative to developers, reflections based on specific projects, questions about what developers do particularly well and what developers do that annoy their particular influencer group, and advice they would provide for developers to engage in better working relationships.

Sample questions included "In general, what makes for a good working relationship with people in the commercial real estate development community?," "What do developers do well in working with a group like yours?," and "Are there any things that developers do that really annoy you?"

Participant responses for the characteristics of effective relationships between developer and influencers were coded into categories by the principal investigators. These responses were analyzed according to principles of thematic analysis as described by communication

researcher William Foster Owen. Consistent with Owen's three criteria, we noted a theme's emergence when there was 1) recurrence (similar meaning was communicated but different words were used), 2) repetition (the reiteration of key words and phrases), and 3) forcefulness (indicated by vocal features such as inflection, volume, or pausing that set off certain portions of an account from others). Best practices identified by both developers and influencers were then associated with each characteristic of effective relationships.