

Ten Tricks for Marketing Neighborhoods as Places of Choice

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1. **Get Clear About What Revitalization and Neighborhood Marketing Are Supposed to Accomplish.** Most bad marketing is confused marketing. What are your outcomes? How will you measure success? Whose behavior do you have to influence to achieve your outcomes? Does your staff and board understand the ramifications of using affordable housing as one of many tools to revitalize a neighborhood rather than as an outcome unto itself? Are they prepared to work to attract people with choices into the neighborhood in addition to responding to the needs of low-income neighbors?

The most common obstacle to organizational agreement about the point of revitalization and neighborhood marketing is fear of gentrification. Have this conversation with board and staff. Talk about ways to promote affordable housing without locking the neighborhood into a low-or no-appreciation market. Talk about the impact of a stagnant or declining market on low-income homeowners. Ask what people think the difference is between revitalization and gentrification. If the organization isn't clear and confident about marketing the neighborhood as a place of choice, marketing staff will get mixed messages and marketing will be confused and ineffective.

2. **Prioritize Neighborhood Confidence as an Outcome.** Many community development organizations undermine their target neighborhoods by focusing on deficiencies, talking in the public media about problems they are fixing, etc. To avoid this, adopt an "acid test" which every program, project, marketing effort – every move the organization makes – must pass in order to get implemented. The one I recommend is ***"Will this program/ project/ strategy /message inspire confidence in the future of this neighborhood among neighbors and potential homebuyers?"*** By using potential homebuyers as part of your imaginary audience, you will be assured of carrying out revitalization programs and marketing strategies in ways that do not undermine confidence in the future of the neighborhood for all kinds of other investors, **including existing neighbors.**

3. **Define, Expect, Cultivate And Reward A Set Of "Neighborhood Values".** One of the greatest influences on a neighborhood's image comes from the degree to which neighbors embrace a set of basic "neighborhood values". The values that support a neighborhood's quality of life and a positive image are simple and obvious, and don't require money to perform:
 - Porches and yards are kept clean and tidy. No trash, no junk. Mown lawns.
 - People do not litter streets and other public areas, and they immediately pick up any litter they find.
 - People put their trash out on trash day in an appropriate receptacle, and they bring the receptacle in within a day of pickup. They do not place trash out days and weeks in advance of pickup because it flies away, is disturbed by animals, and is an eyesore for the street.

- People respect their neighbors and conduct their lives in ways that do not negatively impact their neighbors – no loud music, etc.
- People observe speed limits and other traffic regulations. They do not speed through the neighborhood endangering the lives of children, pets and others. They don't park in the middle of a street blocking traffic while they chat with friends. They don't park their cars in their front yards.
- People take responsibility for their children's actions and teach them to be good neighbors.
- People shovel snow from walks and porches, rake leaves, etc. in a timely manner.
- People do not deal drugs or allow drugs to be sold in their homes. Ditto for other criminal activities.

Do whatever you can to encourage, facilitate, and cajole people into embracing these values. Be creative – I've known organizations that pay for junk cars, old appliances and indoor furniture placed outdoors because for some people these items have value. Set up a tool lending library if people lack lawnmowers and other home maintenance tools. Get help for elderly or disabled neighbors.

And don't be afraid to act against those who refuse to embrace these values. Frankly, if they won't do these very basic things, they do not deserve to be in the neighborhood. Use building code enforcement, environmental code enforcement, and even direct action such as picketing a bad landlord at his home or church.

4. **Focus On Influencing All Sales Transactions – Not Just The Ones You Have An Ownership Interest In.** If your organization builds or purchases/rehabs/sells 10 properties a year, while 30 owner-occupied properties on the open market sell to investor owners who disinvest in the property and rent to tenants without neighborhood values, the neighborhood is experiencing a net loss of strong homeowners and you are bailing water with a sieve. There are many ways to influence sales in the normal market to make sure that properties sell to good landlords or to owner-occupants with neighborhood values who will signal stability and a bright future for the neighborhood.
5. **Be “About the Neighborhood” Rather Than “About the Organization”.** If your mission is neighborhood revitalization, you should be focused more on marketing the neighborhood than on marketing your organization. If you have a booth at a neighborhood fair that draws in visitors, make the booth about what a great place the neighborhood is and how to buy a home there, not about how great your organization is and what you do. Don't lead your brochures and other marketing tools with information about the organization – lead with what the customer cares about, the benefits available to them.

Remember – you are not in business to be in business, you are in business to promote and restore the neighborhood.

6. **Segment the Market.** “One message fits all” doesn't work best in marketing. People are different, with different interests and priorities, and they want

marketing to speak directly to them. For each marketing goal, figure out who your key target markets are, and refine the product, message and marketing strategies to what will work best for them.

Many nonprofits react negatively to the idea of market segmentation because they think it is designed to exclude people. Quite the contrary; segmentation allows us to provide better customer service, more appropriate products, and helps us spend the most resources on the people with whom we will have the greatest chance of success.

- 7. Consider Risk Tolerance in Marketing.** When you identify target markets, particularly for home purchase, begin marketing with groups that have a high tolerance for risk, and work your way up to those who have a lower tolerance for risk. For example, a common consumer behavior model describes categories of people who buy a new product over time in a bell curve:

Innovators: A small group who buys first because they value being different. In neighborhoods, we often see artists and the gay community take on a declining neighborhood that eventually turns around. It is only after they “forge a trail”, so to speak, that lower-risk groups will consider a neighborhood with a questionable reputation. Other buyers may have a higher tolerance for risk because they grew up in the neighborhood, they already rent there, it is worth it because they work nearby, etc.

Early Adopters: The next group, slightly larger, who will buy a product after they see the innovators buy it. In neighborhood homebuyer terms, these could be markets like friends and family of existing neighbors, more skeptical renters, people who work nearby and want a shorter commute, people without kids for whom school quality is not an issue.

Early Majority: The next group, much larger, with, again, a lower tolerance for risk. They are made more comfortable about purchasing a product because they watched the Early Adopters do it. For neighborhoods, these could be families with children in the neighborhood public or parochial schools, young couples without kids who visit the neighborhood regularly for some reason, and people from all the previous groups who just had a lower tolerance for risk.

Late Majority: This next group follows the Early Majority at the peak of the bell curve. They would never have considered buying before the Early Majority did. These could be families with kids who could choose from other city neighborhoods, people of higher incomes who want their investment in a home to appreciate, children of older neighbors who now believe the neighborhood is worth returning to, etc.

There are a couple of other, even lower-risk groups that finish out the bell curve in this model. The important lesson here is not to focus first on attracting people in the Late Majority, because you will waste your resources.

8. **Find Buyers Who Will, By Their Choice Of The Neighborhood, Signify To Others That The Neighborhood Is Improving – And Then Market Their Choice Like Crazy.** In Battle Creek, Michigan, Neighborhoods Inc. was able to recruit a past president of the local Urban League to buy a home in the target neighborhood. This was a person everyone knew could have chosen many other neighborhoods, and who caused neighbors to believe the neighborhood must be getting better. By making sure everyone knows when someone like this buys, you can push your way up the bell curve of risk tolerance faster.
9. **Change the Subject.** One problem most declining neighborhoods face is a reputation with the media and the general public characterized by problems like crime and drugs. There are two ways to deal with this. The one that doesn't work is to attempt to change public opinion by talking about what the organization is doing to fight those problems. This usually reinforces the image of crime and drugs by reminding people all the time of the problems you are trying to solve.

The other approach, which works better, is to actively change the subject. Give the media and the public lots and lots of stories about things that are wonderful in the neighborhood. And don't act surprised that something good is happening in the neighborhood. For example, don't do a story that says "although this neighborhood is oppressed and downtrodden, a few dedicated neighbors are planting a garden anyway!" Do stories on the private gardens in your neighborhood, on the ethnic restaurants and groceries if you have them, on the winners of your Good Neighbor Awards, on recent home renovations, on recent homebuyers. Think of your job as *replacing* the image people have of your neighborhood rather than changing it.

10. **Make Things Special.** As you consider options in neighborhood strategies and marketing, try to always figure out how to make a building, a park, a street, a neighborhood entry – whatever it is you are working on – look *special*. For an overall neighborhood, this may mean identifying the sub-neighborhoods, naming them, developing logos for them, and then putting up banners and gateway signs that define them. For a home improvement or rehab, figure out what it would take to make that house look like the best house on the block. What's special in one place will be different from what it is in another, but it is always easy to figure out. The accumulation of making individual things special produces a special neighborhood. Special inspires confidence and special sells.