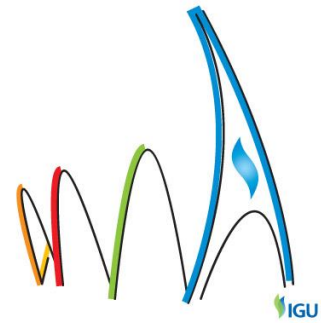


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Communicate Often and Online – Amsterdam Metro (Netherlands) and the N-S line

IN A NUTSHELL

The new Amsterdam metro line was close to being abandoned while already under construction. One key area of improvement was communication with residents, which had been deemed completely inadequate. A new approach based on openness, frequent communication and the use of social media was used turn the tide.

Image: "Let me introduce myself" posters showcased members of the on-site construction team to humanize the project.

BACKGROUND

The Amsterdam North-South line is a new 10-kilometre metro line connecting the north of Amsterdam, via the old Amsterdam city centre, to the business district in the south. It is estimated it will have as many as 180,000 passengers a day once finished. It has 3.8 kilometres of twin tunnels and will connect eight metro stations. Construction started in 2002.

CHALLENGES TO PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

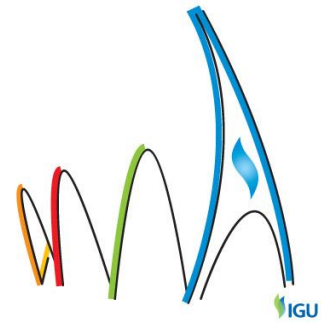
Five years ago, construction was at a critical junction. The project ran overtime and over budget and old Amsterdam houses along the construction route were starting to subside and show cracks in the walls. The project was under such fire that abandoning it altogether was considered. The city considered finding a different transit solution, and citizens lost interest in the big picture. The focus was on damage, the impact to local businesses and the daily nuisance of construction. Nobody was interested in the great promise of a metro line that was five to 10 years away.

The project began in 2002, but its licence to operate was fragile from the beginning. Many

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promises were made that turned out to be completely unrealistic. Eventually, the projected opening of the line was 10 years later than originally planned, the cost skyrocketed from €1.4 billion to 3.1 billion, and the promise that disruption to the community would be minimal was seen as a joke. Huge construction sites existed for years. The project lost all technical credibility in 2008, when groundwater leaking into one of the metro stations caused older houses near the site to subside. The houses were badly damaged and people had to leave their homes as a precautionary measure.



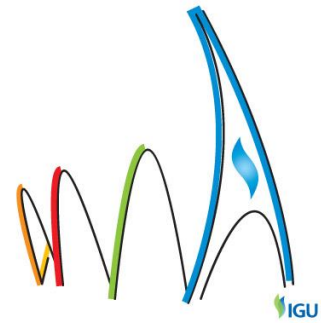
Angry residents were forced out of their homes when the metro line construction caused homes to subside. On the right, the construction manager of the line faces an upset resident who felt she was talked down to as experts continued to tell her everything was under control.

The residents called for an inquiry to determine whether the project should be continued and if so, what measures should be taken to make the construction process safer and more controlled. The municipal ombudsman concluded that accurate and sufficient information was not provided, in particular about risks and setbacks. The execution of major parts of the project was put on hold for more than a year to determine a path forward.

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STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The new metro line was at this point a much-hated project. The purpose of the incoming communications team was huge: transforming the project from the city's worst nightmare into a safe and respected project, one that could even make the city proud one day. In the words of communications manager Alex Sheerazi: "Going from being seen as a national whipping pole to being trusted and seen as a safe as a Volvo." A communications team of eight people anchored a new communications strategy around five core principles:

Being open, transparent and respectful

The team's first major decision was to be transparent about the project. Except for some contractual financial details, nothing was a secret. Project information was open and accessible. One way the team brought this to life was to introduce a huge red arrow on the streets saying: "Here we are now!" (see image below). The arrow indicated exactly where drilling was taking place each day. The project's engineers reacted to the arrow with scepticism at first: "What if we don't progress because of a problem?" The possibility that the arrow's progress might stall or be slower than anticipated was okay with the communications team, as its approach was to be completely open even if there was bad news to deliver or difficulties to overcome. Transparency allowed the team to underline the complexity of the project, and what was being done to solve problems.



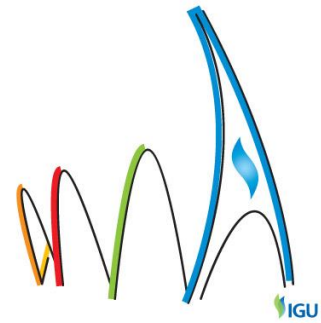
Image 1 - A big red arrow indicated how the tunnels were progressing.

This approach pushed the project from being closed-off to being open, even when there

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were problems. It moved communications from an engineering project to a people project. Instead of defending the project at all cost, the team shared the problems it was tackling, giving it more humility and humanity.

Reposition the project from a technical masterpiece to a challenging project

A much bigger challenge was *rebranding* the project so that it would have a completely different feel. The chart below shows the movement needed to make the project more acceptable to the public. The key idea was to move it away from technical arrogance and sender-driven communications, to a project driven by human relations, conversation and mutual respect.



From distant builders to a sensitive organization.



From scientific researchers to experienced craftsmen.



From a religion of technical know-how to an extremely difficult job and maximum transparency (also about risks)



From closed sites to building bridges and enchantment



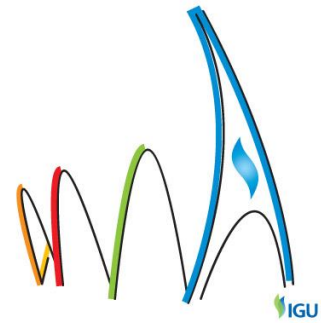
Image - Rebranding the project to better relate to the residents

- The project had to become much more sensitive to the needs and concerns of residents, and stop sounding dismissive about the risks.
- The project had to move from communicating using scientific researchers, who felt distant and somewhat detached from residents, to everyday craftsmen who were doing

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the work.

- The project had to move away from hoping residents would have blind faith in the technology, to involving residents by explaining the extremely challenging and difficult project.
- And the project had to move away from being a closed-off site where nobody was welcome to being an open project, where residents could visit. The underground platform at the Rokin Station, for example, had stairs and a panorama platform from which to watch ongoing work. More than 350,000 people visited the site and the attraction even made it into the *Lonely Planet City Guide*.

Talk about risks as adults

One key question was how to communicate construction risk. The condescending tone of earlier communications, combined with the damage to houses, had outraged residents. The new strategy was to be open and transparent.

One of the first steps the project team took was to proactively communicate risks, by posting them prominently on the website and by highlighting them in letters, stickers, meetings and individual consultations in the areas close to the building sites.

In addition to talking openly about what the risks were, the team also said what was being done to combat them (mitigation measures, alertness as a major cultural element into the organization), and what contingencies were in place in case of an incident (emergency drills, arrangements for providing emergency accommodation etc.).

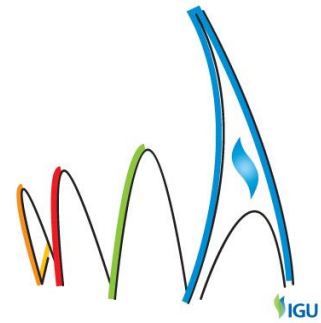
Instead of *talking down* to people, the team shared what could go wrong, even the possible worst-case scenario, and also what would be done in response. The simple fact of acknowledging there were plenty of risks helped residents feel they were being treated with respect. It also built more tolerance for things not going smoothly. People finally felt they were treated like adults.

The new approach was also a relief for the team. It is unnatural for operational people to not

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to discuss risk, as much of their training is focused on is how to keep things safe in a hazardous environment.

At one point, the project had equipment failure resulting in a very significant leak underground. The leak was far away from the public eye, and could easily have been dealt with quietly. Despite that, the project team decided to communicate, knowing it was of interest to people following the project. "It gets interesting when you get a stomach ache," says Alex Sheerazi, Communications Director of the North-South line, "But when you are the one coming with the news, at least you get to frame it. In addition, it also gave us a great deal of credit among the media. Not only were we claiming to be more open, we had just proved that we actually were."

The Return on Reputation ROR

If experience in these kinds of projects teaches one thing, it is that incidents will happen. And with the high profile and high visibility of the project even small events can have an impact on reputation. The project had plenty of critics, including the local *Het Parool* newspaper, who would jump on any event. Therefore, the communications team knew it would have to build a buffer of goodwill, in the event something were to happen. It would make the project less vulnerable. In addition, the project team had also learned that a bad reputation not only causes public embarrassment, it also gets proponents uninvited from meetings where decisions are taken. Finally, a stronger reputation strengthens the pride and commitment of personnel working on the project.

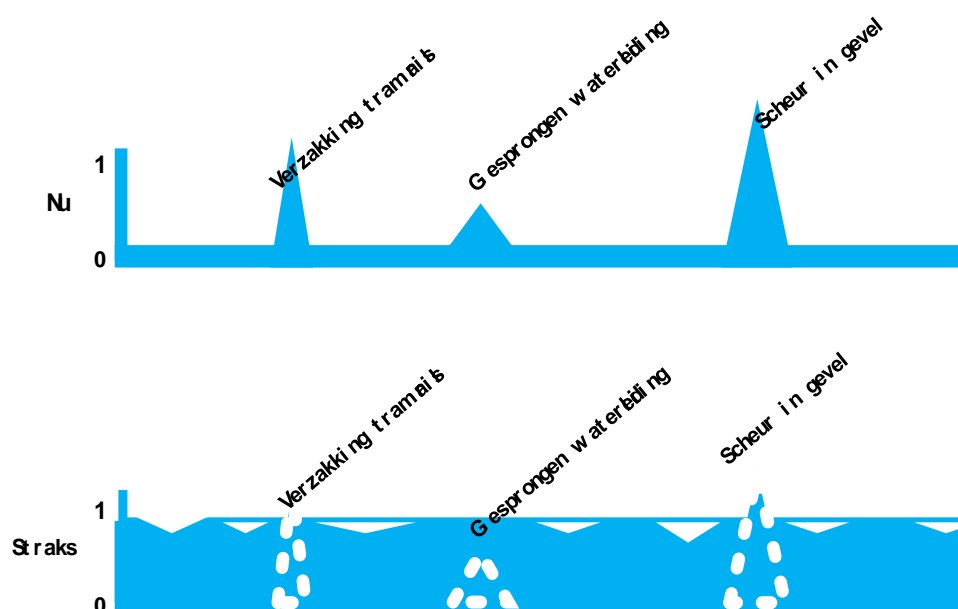


Image 2 - The principle of Return on Reputation is that you build a reputation buffer to help soften the blow should things go wrong.

Another interesting way the project built its reputation was to connect with the citizens of Amsterdam in many different ways. For example, construction provided opportunities for art projects to use the huge spaces underground as a backdrop.

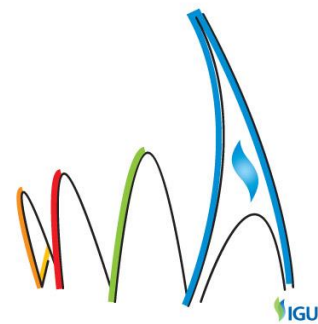
Engage communities online

Social media provided a unique opportunity to listen to citizens and engage them directly. The project took a unique approach to this. For example, every one of the new metro stations on the metro line had its own Facebook page, so that communications would be about the street in front of your house. The website and pages has plenty of pictures of

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ongoing works, people at work, cultural events, visitor impressions, human interest stories and other events. Most were small contributions with everyday news such as where work would be, how children could go for a tour, art competitions, discovery walks, and new stairs arriving on site. In one article titled "Did you spot him yet?", children had to spot a diver who was working in the canals as part of a safety inspection.

The Twitter feeds and Facebook comments also used the builders, planners and diggers as spokespersons. They would address the citizens directly and talk about their daily work in simple language.



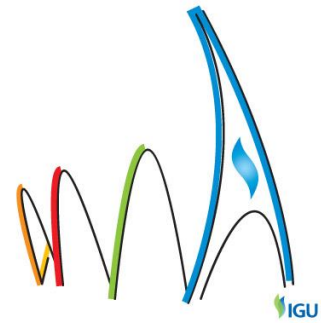
September 2011: A tunnelling crew poses in the tunnel built by the boring machine 'Noortje' on the western side of the Damrak. The image reinforces pride, experience and craftsmanship.

The social media team consisted of two people. They created a platform for all social networks and web activities and community contacts and construction workers would also contribute to the flow of information. The reactions and conversation were central in the approach. Increased credibility is a result of dialogue, transparency, cooperation and co-creation.

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There was no moderation or censorship of the answers. The rule of thumb was “don't be stupid”, and common sense was assumed to direct the team's responses. Ninety-five per cent of questions were answered this way. Sometimes questions were escalated. And if a mistake was made? The person would admit the mistake and apologize. This approach again was rooted in a firm belief that people don't listen to you because of your authority, but because they think you are open and authentic.

Today, the website also has a LiveCam to show daily progress. Over time, the project has built a substantial network and community of followers, fans, critics, journalists and politicians.

Choose your spokespersons by not choosing your spokesperson

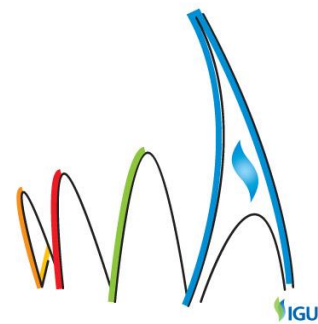
Finally, the people who engage are key. The project had assigned community contacts for every metro station. The project would get huge credit if an upset resident would call and have someone at their doorstep in a few minutes to see what was going on. The project never trained any of the professionals in engaging with the public and the media and as a result, journalists respected them and did not go after them.

“My final advice is to do this work with a smile,” Sheerazi concludes. “You are much more sympathetic when you can do things with smiles and don't take yourself overly seriously.”

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Image - The project team was forced to reroute a sewage pipeline above ground to continue drilling. The sewage pipe would be extremely visible and go over a square and past a restaurant. The project team invested in decorations, making it a trail of green and light instead of a big nuisance.

MAKING THE MODEL WORK

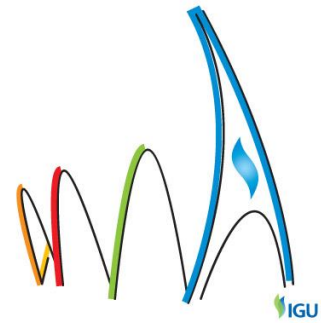
The model applies in all three areas:

Build Trust	Co-create value	Engage & communicate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No more secrets - the information was accessible. Craftsmen on the project as spokespersons. Show humility: this was a complex project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise interest in the challenge of the project by showing everything that was going on. Connecting the project to art, photography, children's entertainment and tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constant online communications using social media. Every metro station had own community relations person.

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SOURCES

- Presentation by Alex Sheerazi, Communications Director of the North-South Line for the IGU, Rotterdam, October 2014.
- Vision document on the web strategy of the North - South line by Alex Sheerazi and Freddy Elink Schuurman, 11 June 2013
<http://www.noordzuidlijnkennis.net/noordzuidlijn-web-strategy-opportunities-and-obstacles/>
- www.hierzijnwij.nu website and Facebook pages.
- All pictures courtesy of Alex Sheerazi.