

How can the benefits of union construction contractors and tradespeople be promoted? That's what the Construction Labor Management Council (CLMC) of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. asked itself in 2003. To answer this question, the Building Advantage campaign was created. This article is a case study of one way to achieve improved communication and collaboration between labor and management.



One Way to Market a Joint Labor-Management Program

by John Topp

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The Beginning

In 2003, several leaders in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area construction industry came together to improve communication and collaboration between labor and management—a historically challenging issue. Their goal was to strengthen the organized construction industry's economic future by highlighting the productivity, reliability and quality of its work. This was no small task, but one that needed to be tackled to secure a strong future for all of the unions and signatory contractor members.

The leaders called themselves the CLMC. This organization's mission is to:

- Foster excellence in work quality, job performance and timely job completions
- Build relationships among crafts, employers and customers
- Create synergistic opportunities for growth
- Address issues of mutual concern to contractors and craft workers
- Market skilled trades throughout southeastern Wisconsin.

CLMC decided to actively promote the benefits of hiring union construction contractors and tradespeople. To do so, they partnered with the Allied Construction Employers Association (ACEA) in 2003 to

commission studies that would gauge the perceptions of unions among a variety of audiences.

Not surprisingly, the results of these studies showed an overall negative perception of union construction among all audiences—including union members. To combat these perceptions, CLMC created a brand under which to market skilled trades. This campaign, called Building Advantage, was launched in fall 2003, with a multifaceted marketing strategy.

Combating the Perceptions

Building Advantage's goal is to recover market share for union construction by changing the existing paradigm from "lowest price wins" to "best overall value wins"—basically encouraging potential customers to choose union contractors and tradespeople based on their overall value, not choosing a builder based solely on the lowest bid.

This is a tough challenge in the cost-conscious Midwest. Many project owners—both residential and commercial—choose builders based on the bottom line. But sometimes, those builders deliver inferior workmanship that can cost a project owner thousands of dollars down the line, eliminating whatever savings they saw on the front end.

In addition, the research showed that most people perceived the unions as expensive and even overpriced. Although the unions often deliver competitive bids, many project owners felt they simply couldn't afford to hire union workers.

The Building Advantage campaign combats these perceptions by highlighting and promoting the many benefits of union construction through integrated marketing and public relations (PR) strategies, both internally and externally.

Funding

The next challenge was to secure long-term funding for the Building Advantage campaign. Funding comes from automatic deductions from the workforce and the respective contractor employers. This is a negotiated agreement in which both parties demonstrate the value of this initiative.

Funding for the first year, 2004, consisted of just \$185,000 to conduct the preliminary research. \$30,000 came from la-

bor organizations and \$30,000 came from contractor organizations, plus a seed grant of \$125,000 from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) was obtained to jumpstart the process.

In 2005, 62% of aggregate workers were investing in Building Advantage. Each year, that number grew and, in 2007, 80% of aggregate workers were investing in Building Advantage. It is projected that in 2008, 95% of workers will be investing in this campaign.

What's more is that total annual contributions are now close to \$1 million—about five times the amount raised the first year.

However, not all of that money goes to creating marketing programs and materials to promote union construction. About \$350,000 of it goes to the Building Industry Group's Skilled Trades Employment Program (BIG STEP), a program Building Advantage helped establish to increase minorities' understanding of and access to the skilled trades. The program helps more minorities qualify for the apprenticeship programs, increasing the chances minorities will build a lifelong rewarding career in the trades.

A significant percentage of Building Advantage funds is contributed to BIG STEP because this program is regarded as a critical component to securing qualified workers, and to securing the future of the industry.

BIG STEP also reflects the area's diversity. Building Advantage strives to mirror Milwaukee's population diversity in its own ranks. It is also recognized that to attract minority workers, there is a need to offer support to help minorities enter the apprenticeship programs.

Results and Challenges

A campaign like Building Advantage is meant to reap rewards over the long term. This can make it difficult to quantify success in the first years after the campaign's founding. Financial backing also has an effect on the campaign's success. Each year more support is gained from labor and management, but there is still a long way to go before attaining the funds truly needed to make a lasting impact.

Despite these challenges, the campaign has already garnered significant

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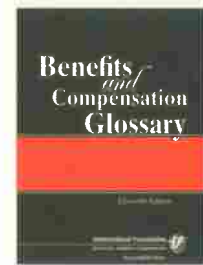
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awards and recognition. Regardless of the initial low financial support, the 2005 campaign contributed to a 6% increase in employment in 2005 as compared to 2004.

Currently, the Building Advantage member base consists of 20 labor unions and their members, six management associations and hundreds of southeastern Wisconsin contractors. This internal network has already proved to be a strong force for introducing and reinforcing the Building Advantage brand.

The message to workers was clear: Always have a higher standard of excellence in your work through quality craftsmanship, continued learning and finishing projects on time.

However, like much of the country, the Milwaukee area is facing an economic downturn that is negatively affecting the industry. According to the research, residential building permits are down by nearly 50%, and it appears that commercial construction will be down by 20% at the end of 2008.

These statistics make the Building Advantage campaign even more critical, and it is striving to implement tactics and programs that bolster support as it moves into uncertain territory.

Successful Projects

Building Advantage has enjoyed the success of several projects.

Launch Campaign

The initial launch campaign, started in 2004, included a variety of marketing tactics. As the true beginning of Building Advantage, the launch established the tone, identity and messages still relied on today. All of these tactics were founded upon the

extensive research conducted in 2003 to gauge opinions about the unions.

The major components of the launch campaign included:

- Name
- Logo
- Brand identity (look and feel)
- Goals
- Messaging/tone.

The first phase of the campaign was an internal launch of the program. This targeted current members of the trades, helping them understand the benefits of their industry and how to be proud of their career choice. One issue that was prevalent among current members was the feeling that their career choice was inferior to those of college-educated workers. The internal campaign worked to change that feeling and replace it with a sense of pride among tradespeople.

The second phase consisted of an external campaign launch to the public, anyone who might hire union workers. This far-reaching phase included billboards, bus shelter ads, advertisements, promotional items, brochures, sponsorships of events, media relations, a Web site, radio ads and more.

With both audiences, the first step was to promote the Building Advantage identity to build recognition of the campaign and its name. The best way to do this was to present the campaign multiple times to the same audience.

Through these tactics, over 80% buy-in from union members in southeastern Wisconsin was gained—the first step in securing funding and support for the long-term success of the program.

Web Site

As everyone knows, the Internet is a mainstay among most Americans. A Web site, www.buildingadvantage.org, continued the brand identity and messaging of the overall campaign with a few specific goals of its own. Established in early 2005, it was updated and expanded in 2007 to reflect the growth of the campaign.

The Building Advantage Web site includes information about:

- The Building Advantage campaign
- Benefits of union construction
- How to find area contractors
- Career opportunities
- Educational outreach
- Multiple other tools and research.

The Web site is often the first in-depth

encounter many people have with Building Advantage, making the site the champion of the brand and message, and one of the most critical facets of this initiative. In summer 2007, a contractor locator with over 900 listings by category was added. This comprehensive directory helps project owners find the right contractor for their project.

Job Site Tours

During summer 2007, Building Advantage organized an internal campaign to meet with union trades workers on job sites around the Milwaukee area. This gave the opportunity to meet the workforce and help them understand the importance of supporting Building Advantage.

In appreciation of their efforts, lunch was provided to each job site in addition to an informational packet, Building Advantage T-shirt and an in-depth discussion about the challenges facing union trades. The message to workers was clear: Always have a higher standard of excellence in your work through quality craftsmanship, continued learning and finishing projects on time.

The goal was to make trades workers aware of Building Advantage. But another goal was to educate them on how they can directly impact the success of their projects and their future in the industry.

To date, over 800 lunches have been served at multiple job sites. The program was so highly regarded that the tours had to be continued into the summer of 2008 to accommodate all of the requests. This has also opened doors to other opportunities within the individual unions and contractors. In addition, the message to the contractors was also reinforced.

Guest Speakers

In October 2006, Mark Breslin, a speaker, trainer and strategist specializing in market share strategies for labor and management, was invited to speak at five Building Advantage-sponsored events. This included two dinners for the top leaders in the industry, lunch and breakfast meetings at two major job sites and an event for 800 apprentices.

Breslin helped union members understand the importance of what they do every day and how each member could keep the union moving forward. The goal of these events was to gain buy-in from

the influencers and members in order to grow market share and maintain the union way of life.

The events reinforced the Building Advantage message from a third-party, objective speaker who supports union workers as much as he challenges them to strive for higher standards.

PR Campaign

The extensive PR campaign began in fall 2004 in conjunction with the launch campaign. One of the most important components of this campaign was the ongoing, biweekly *Daily Reporter* columns by Building Advantage executives discussing industry issues.

The *Daily Reporter* is Wisconsin's construction newspaper and is designed for and read by industry professionals, from architects and engineers to general contractors, subcontractors and suppliers. The publication's daily circulation is approximately 2,500 with approximately 3.1 readers per copy. Readership is statewide and spans portions of Illinois, Minnesota and Iowa.

In addition, PR tactics included several annual state and regional events:

- Career fair coverage
- CONEX Wisconsin construction show
- Home Builders Expo
- Wisconsin Technology Teachers Conference
- School Counselors Conference
- Graduations
- School visits
- Recognition events in the *Daily Reporter*, *Business Journal* and *Small Business Times*.

The PR campaign contributed to a large increase in Web visits, local broadcast media coverage of career fairs and nearly 100 editorial stories in over a half-dozen different publications.

2007 Media Campaign

In the beginning of 2007, the first major advertising campaign was implemented. For this rollout, several different media outlets, including billboards, radio, print and online were used to promote the message that union tradespeople are the best choice in construction.

To build a cohesive advertising cam-

paign, the same message was repeated through all of the ads: Building Advantage contractors and tradespeople represent a higher standard of excellence—including quality, professionalism, project management and overall value.

The goal was to build awareness in the general public about Building Advantage contractors and tradespeople and generate a more positive image of union trades.

The Power of One Newsletter

This quarterly newsletter geared toward current union members mailed its first issue in February 2007. Since then, it has been a crucial way to reach out to 21,000 members, contractors and labor leaders and excite and inform them about their industry.

The goal of the newsletter is to instill a new sense of pride and personal investment into current members. Since the first issue was mailed, calls from the unions with interesting stories and member spotlights to share have provided more stories than the newsletter can hold. Stories not fitting in the current issue are shared with the media or are held for the next issue, providing a constant stream of newsworthy items.

Beyond Marketing Efforts

In addition to these traditional marketing efforts, CLMC—the founder and main support system of Building Advantage—has extensive involvement with other vital areas affecting the construction industry.

A health care coalition has been developed to keep abreast of ways to save money on health insurance costs. The financial resources committee helps encourage union pension funds to invest in

local communities, giving back even more to the places where members live, work and play.

Personal customer contact for awareness of the product is maintained with leaders in the community, such as:

- Mayors
- County supervisors
- Common councils
- School boards
- Private developers
- Industrial and commercial companies.

Summary

The Building Advantage campaign is a unique partnership that is crucial to the building industry's success. With the support of members and communities, attitudes are successfully being changed and awareness of union products and services is being promoted. To that end, Building Advantage continually reaches out to members for support—financially and mentally—so the campaign can build long-term success for every construction union member.

These first years of the campaign have been ones of great growth and opportunities. Through the funding practices and marketing tactics outlined here, Building Advantage's place in the construction industry has been established.

B&C

This article was based on a presentation given by the author at the 53rd Annual Employee Benefits Conference in Anaheim, California in November 2007.

For information on ordering reprints of this article, call (888) 334-3327, option 4.



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