

Creating Pictures that are Worth a Thousand Words

Pictures are the most neglected communications tool in the municipal arsenal. If you want to impress your Council by improving your municipality's marketing and communications programs, better use of pictures is probably low hanging fruit.

Start by looking at how the news media use pictures to tell stories. While it's true that most news images are taken by professional photographers, they apply some simple rules that anyone can follow. Good photos:

- Are simple
- Show close-ups of one or two people in action
- Explain what is happening and why it's happening
- Inspire emotion
- Tell a story

These rules can be applied to the promotion of any public asset, service or program.



This photo was used by the federal government to promote Canadian aid to Pakistan after an earthquake. There is no action here. In fact, a group of public servants has stopped working to pose for it. The image does not provide context, tell a story or inspire emotion.



Thankfully, the same website offers this second photo that leads with a close up of a Canadian soldier. The red cross on his arm tells us that his mission is compassionate. In the distance, colleagues work to unload supplies from a cargo plane. This photo tells the story of a relief effort and inspires national pride.



This third photograph is even better. Here male and female Canadian soldiers work together to deliver clean drinking water to villagers who are not used to seeing women in uniform.

This simple, inspiring scene speaks volumes about the mission and celebrates Canadian values.



This picture is the municipal equivalent of the first photo - and we have all seen lots of them.

This ‘ground-breaking’ photo features a large line of people who smile as they turn sod. It’s not inspiring and it doesn’t tell us much about what is being built.

You may need to take a photo like this if many stakeholders are involved, but this is not the photo that explains what you are building and why.



This smaller group of four elected officials and stakeholders provides a close-up shot with a little more action.

This may be interesting enough for your local newspaper, but don’t count on it.



This close-up of one person in action was a ‘direct hit.’

Here a former Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing takes a sledge hammer to an older social housing complex so a new one can be built in its place.

The Globe and Mail covered this event in full colour.



The photo above was taken when the federal government agreed to share gas tax revenue with municipalities. Heads of council from across Ontario were on hand to mark the event. Once again, a line of people doesn't offer much excitement.



A more compelling photo was created at the same gas tax event by inviting elected officials onto the bus and encouraging big smiles.

Often great photos are waiting to be created within a few feet of the average photos that are being taken. It's up to staff to recognize (or create) these opportunities and to 'direct' officials at the event.

Scout-out event locations in advance and plan ahead. You don't want surprises when cameras are rolling.



Thanks to economic stimulus funding, many municipalities have great new buildings and infrastructure investments to talk about. When featuring these investments it pays to remember that stories are about people, not concrete. From a photography standpoint, you have a few options.

One common approach is to photograph the construction signage. Generally, these signs make lousy photos. You could have an elected official, or three, stand under the signs.

Realistically, you would still be left with a pretty lousy photo of elected officials standing under a sign.



You might be tempted to provide a wider shot that presents the project and the signage together. Unfortunately, the sign quickly becomes unreadable and the human story is lost. A wide shot of a pool may showcase your engineering feat, but it doesn't explain why tax dollars were invested in the project.

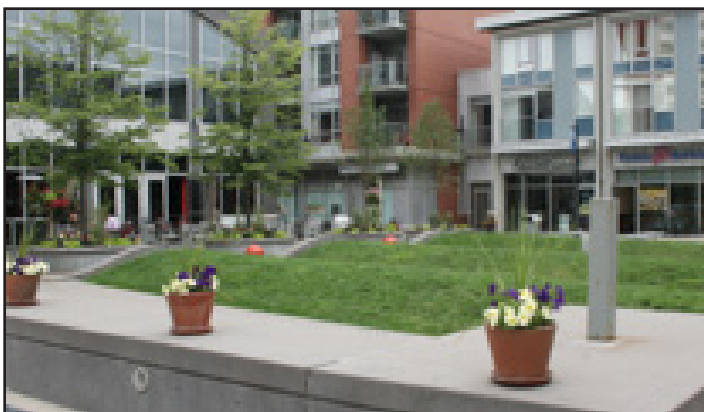


One very under-used option is to profile the project while it's under construction. Adding elected officials to this shot of a pool's construction would earn you a promotion. Elected officials in hard hats communicates 'investment, community building and job creation.' It's all positive - provided that the project is on-time and on-budget.



Nothing tells the story of a community pool better than a wet kid. Once again, we have a simple close-up of one person in action. The rest of the crowd provides the context - which is, 'you wish you lived in this neighbourhood.'

Add fun to your innovative architecture and you have a winner.



This parkette is great, but where are the people?



Again, a family enjoying the park completes the story.



Is this a picture of a river? No. It's a picture of a pedestrian trail that was supported by the Federal Gas Tax Fund.



Adding people that are enjoying the pedestrian trail showcases what the trail is and the value that it creates for your community.



If you want to inspire your community to rally around Remembrance Day activities, drive home that some community members have been lost and others are grieving. Tread carefully here and get the family's permission first. However, most families would appreciate your effort to encourage greater participation in your Remembrance Day events.

It has to be noted that good photographs are also high-resolution photographs. While many cell phones can take decent pictures, limit their use to photos that will be shared electronically via e-mail, website posting or social media. You can always reduce the resolution of a photo, but you can't make a cell phone shot work in a print publication. Decent Digital SLR (Single-Reflex Lens) cameras that take beautiful, high-resolution photographs can be purchased at all camera shops and most electronic stores. They combine point-and-shoot convenience with high quality lenses and other features that allow anyone to capture great photos instantly.

Taking your own photos adds the advantage of photo ownership and clear rights to use. You would also be wise to have a simple photo release form on hand for the subjects that you are photographing. E-mail me if you want to see the one we use.

Finally, take lots of shots. Digital SLR cameras take fast, disposable pictures. Take 50 shots at an event and you are bound to love at least one of them.

All municipalities, large or small, can benefit from the use of great local photographs. Look for simple scenes that tell a story about what your community is doing and why. Capture close-up pictures of a few people while they are in action, and inspire emotion through the photo if possible.



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