

MEETING THE CUSTOMERS FACE TO FACE – THE CASE OF THE BJØRVIKA INFORMATION CENTRE

J. SOLHEIM

Advisor, Norwegian Public Roads Administration, Norway

JOHANNE.SOLHEIM@VEGVESSEN.NO

ABSTRACT

The Norwegian Public Road administration's (NPRA) Bjørvika project is a complex road and tunnel project in the capital of Norway. Building began in 2005. The project involves Norway's first immersed tunnel, a rock tunnel, a suspension bridge, tramways, cycle roads and approximately 6 km of road in the centre of Oslo. It is tied to the largest city development project in the city since the mid-1600s. Approximately 100 000 cars drive through the project site each day. The project will be completed in 2014, at an estimated cost of NOK 5.9 billion. The Bjørvika project information centre opened in the fall of 2005, and has had an average of 4000 visitors a year since then. The information centre has three main purposes; to explain the use of public funds for a large-scale infrastructural project; to build and develop the NPRA's image; and to recruit and retain employees both for the NPRA and for the contracting sector.

By meeting the customers face-to-face and welcoming dialogue, the information centre was intended to facilitate an environment of trust and openness between the NPRA and its customers. Films, experiences (project exhibition, guided tunnel-walks), presentations and dialogue give the customers positive experiences with the NPRA, to contribute to their overall view of the organisation. The paper will discuss how the Bjørvika Information centre has facilitated the NPRA's customer relations.

1. INFORMATION CENTRES IN THE NPRA

1.1. From project visits to information centres

The NPRA has long had a tradition of inviting students, pupils and locals to visit their road and transport projects. This has served two main purposes, firstly meeting face-to-face with clients and neighbours of their projects both to disperse information and to engage them in dialogue, and secondly; ensuring knowledge exchange between the NPRA and the institutions educating its future work-stock. The visits would take place as class-visits or open days where neighbours were invited to the project offices to learn more about the project.

The first information centre of the NPRA was one run jointly with the Swedish Road Administration on the Svinesund Bridge project. The Svinesund Bridge was constructed between 2003 and 2005. It now forms the main transport connection between the two countries, and between Norway and the rest of Europe. It was a popular information centre where visitors could follow the construction of the two-hinge concrete arch bridge over the Svinesund Strait, and learn more about the complex joint venture between the two neighbouring countries' road administrations.

When the Svinesund Bridge was completed there was interest in creating a new information centre in the NPRA. It was early decided that the E18 Bjørvika project would

be an interesting location for the new information centre. It had a central location, right next to the main station in the centre of Oslo; it had innovative technological aspects, the Bjørvika Tunnel would be Norway's first immersed tunnel; and the project would be in the centre of the largest city development project Norway has seen since the 1600's, thus it would be interesting for a whole range of visitors, from planners, building engineers and architects, to neighbours and road users. The Information centre in Bjørvika opened in 2005, at the same time as the construction of the Bjørvika Tunnel started.

Today, the NPRA has several information centres, including one in connection with the Hardanger-bridge project in the Western region, and one based on the joint venture between the NPRA and the Norwegian Railroad administration in Minnesund in the Eastern region.

With facilities and staff to host visits every day and on a larger scale, the NPRA's information centres take the traditional project visits one step further. By having information centres, the NPRA can invite road users, neighbours, future and current employees and others to share positive experiences on the NPRA's own territory. The information centres give the NPRA the opportunity to have direct contact with the customers, on the NPRA's terms. Exceeding the customers' expectations in regards to openness has been an important factor in the development of the information centres. Openness and pre-emptiveness are two of the main principles in the Norwegian Government's and the NPRA's communication policies, because they create an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Guiding all of the NPRA's activities, including the development of information centres, are the NPRA's values. The NPRA's values are to strive to:

- Take responsibility and build trust
- Be open and customer friendly
- Be open-minded and create job satisfaction

The information centres, by opening the NPRA to the public, build trust. By helping to build a common culture and sense of purpose among the employees of the NPRA the centres are also helping to create job satisfaction among NPRA employees.

1.2. The E18 Bjørvika project – a natural site for an information centre

Planning for the E18 Bjørvika road project began as early as the mid-1980's, but its future was first set in 2003, when it was decided to build the new Opera house in Bjørvika and the City of Oslo resolved the *Fjord-City vision* signalling the beginning of a new era in Oslo.

Before 2003, Bjørvika was an area in the centre of Oslo dominated by old industry and traffic – part brownfield, part traffic junction. More than 100 000 cars drove through Bjørvika on an average day, making it one of the most heavily trafficked areas in Norway. The traffic created an almost insurmountable barrier between the city and the waterfront. The *Fjord-City vision* is a city development project consisting of building 5000 waterfront apartments, 20 000 work-spaces, museums, parks, schools, and a new, state of the art Opera house. For the *Fjord-City vision* to be realised, the greatest barrier between the city and the fjord needed to be removed. The E18 highway was to be moved from the waterfront to an immersed tunnel under the fjord, and a new, urban road network was to

be built in Bjørvika with a focus on public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The NPRA started construction of the tunnel in the autumn of 2005.



Figure 1 - Bjørvika City Development (ViaNova, NPRA)

The Opera-tunnel was opened by HRH the King of Norway in 2010, and one of the most complex tunnel-constructions in Norway is now in operation. The next phase of the road project is to build the road network for the new Bjørvika with space for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport users and cars. The majority of the road project will be completed in 2014. During the next 10 – 15 years other developers will be working on building work-spaces, apartments, museums, schools and parks. The significance of the city development to Oslo, the technological significance of Norway's first immersed tunnel, the historical significance, Bjørvika was once the cradle of Oslo – made it a natural choice of location for the information centre. It is a project where technology meets society and a project which symbolises the NPRA's many-faceted role in society.

2. THE BJØRVIKA INFORMATION CENTRE

The Bjørvika Information centre consists of a permanent exhibition and a meeting room with facilities for showing films and presentations for up to 50 people. It is open to the public weekdays from 1200 – 1430, but the majority of visitors are scheduled groups at all times of the day.



Figure 2 - The Bjørvika Information Centre (Statens vegvesen, NPRA)

In the exhibition, the walls are decorated with text and images highlighting several aspects of the E18 Bjørvika project and general information about the NPRA. Information can be found in Norwegian and in English. Technical aspects of the project are highlighted alongside city development, cycle routes and public transport. One part of the exhibition is dedicated to recruitment, demonstrating the variety of job-opportunities the NPRA can offer.

Most visiting groups are taken to a large meeting-room seating up to 50 people adjacent to the information centre. They are shown films and presentations tailored to their interests. The centre accommodates to engineers, students, pupils and other groups. Some groups are given presentations by the engineers working on the project, and others by the communications-advisors managing the information centre. Time for questions and dialogue is a priority. A typical visit to the centre will culminate with a site-visit. When the Opera-tunnel was under construction, it was a popular site to visit. The “Eastern Tangent” (working-name) bridge, a cast-iron suspension bridge linking Bjørvika south and Grønland north of Oslo’s central train station is currently often visited. The visitors are provided with safety-shoes, vests and helmets to comply with the NPRA’s health and safety standards. Continuous dialogue between the Information centre and the projects’ health and safety coordinators to plan routes and clarify issues also ensure that the visitors are safe during the site visits.

2.1. Customer groups

The Bjørvika information centre serves three main purposes. First of all, the NPRA is facing, as most road administrations, large challenges in recruitment in the future. More than 1000 new engineers are needed during the next ten years to replace those who are about to retire. By showcasing one of the most technologically innovative projects currently in the NPRA's portfolio to students, technological associations and other interesting groups, the NPRA hopes to market itself to future employees.

Second, the centre serves the neighbours and users of the road system through Bjørvika, Norway's most heavily trafficked area. The Bjørvika project has, in NPRA terms, a long duration. Although the imposition for traffic users in Bjørvika has been, and will continue to be, as small as possible, in some instances the capacity of the road system has had to be reduced. This has meant longer travel times for commuters and an increase in the rush-hour period. The information centre is used to inform users about the traffic situation today, but also to show the users what the situation will be in the future, to show them that there is light in the end of the tunnel. The idea is that when people know why the E18 Bjørvika project is here they are more likely to accept, and see the temporality of the situation.

Thirdly the information centre has served the NPRA's own employees and retirees. After a large reorganisation in 2003, when the road agency that formerly had a operations department became an entirely administrative organisation, there was seen to be a need for internal culture building. In 2010 the NPRA went through another large reorganisation. The Bjørvika-project was unique in Norway, and something for the NPRA's employees could be proud of. In the first years of the centre, the largest group of visitors were from within the organisation, and several units put their summer-excursions to the Bjørvika project. For employees who do not work on project sites, visiting the centre was an opportunity to see the material product of the NPRA's work.

In addition, the NPRA often receives requests for visits from foreign delegations. The Information centre in Bjørvika, with its central location and large-scale project, has been a natural site for these visits. It has thus also become a venue for the NPRA to market itself internationally.

2.2. Marketing the information centre

Word-of-mouth was the most important marketing tool for the information centre in its first five years. The NPRA's more than 5500 employees played their part through their networks from technological forums, automobile clubs to Rotary and Lions associations. The Bjørvika information centre has also printed a brochure with information on the project and details about the information centre. This has been distributed to schools, neighbours and visitors and at conventions and congresses.

Different sections in the NPRA have marketed the centre to their target groups. For instance, the Human Resources departments working with recruitment have facilitated connections between the centre and the schools and universities with which the NPRA cooperates. The International department of the Directorate of Roads has channelled visiting foreign delegations to the centre.

Finally, the information centre has been listed on the tourist website VisitOslo.com, and on the NPRA's website. Those interested in finding out more about the project online are likely to find information on the project's information centre. In the spring of 2011 the information centre is undergoing changes. It will alter its focus from the first phase of the

project, technology and the immersed tunnel, to the next phase, the urban road network and public transport. A new marketing plan to reach the new target audience is underway.

3. VISITORS TO THE INFORMATION CENTRE

The Bjørvika Information centre has had approximately 14 300 visitors to the centre since opening in 2005. In addition, approximately 60 000 visitors have attended the annual *Open Day in Bjørvika* in this period. Approximately 1/3 of the visitors to the information centre have been from schools, from primary, secondary and higher-level education. The second largest group of visitors, particularly during the information centres' first two years, are NPRA employees. Other large groups of visitors are from the public sector (13%), different clubs and associations (16%), and private companies, particularly construction companies (15 %).



Figure 3 - A site visit to the Opera Tunnel under construction (Kjell Solem, NPRA)

3.1. Recruitment

Around 1/3 of the visitors to the information centre have been from schools, from primary, secondary and higher education. The NPRA is, like road administrations throughout the world, facing challenges in recruiting its future work-force. The agency will need approximately 1000 new engineers to replace those who will retire during the next ten years.

Several programmes in the NPRA are working towards this goal. A *Summer Job Programme* for engineering students at some schools and universities has been very popular in recent years. Each year around 30 recent graduates are employed through the NPRA's *Recruitment Programme*. It is a two-year programme that gives the graduates a broad knowledge of the NPRA, and lets them try several different positions in the organisation. A third programme is aimed at recent employees less than 33 years of age, the *Young Programme*. It is a year-long programme aiming, among other things, to give new employees broader knowledge about the NPRA, and, through coaching, realise their potential. Using ongoing projects and activities to showcase the organisation has been an important factor in all three programmes, and the Bjørvika Information centre has been a popular destination for the participants.

3.1.1. Universities and other institutions of higher education

Universities and other institutions of higher education are the largest group visitors from the education sector, comprising a third of them, or about 10 % of our total visitors. These are the students the NPRA is most active in marketing itself to.

The information centre is in close contact with the universities in Norway offering engineering degrees relevant to the NPRA, but also with business schools, architectural schools and other institutions of higher education.

The information centre aims to offer the students high-quality presentations on specific topics tied to their background. The presentation topics can vary from tunnel-technology, concrete, project-management, ITS, city development to design. Visits from schools with which the NPRA is collaborating often includes a session with the NPRA Human Resources department to talk to the students about their opportunities within the NPRA, including the *Summer Job programme*, the *Recruitment programme* and the *Young Programme*. Occasionally a new employee has been invited to speak about their experiences as a recent graduate employed in the NPRA. External speakers with particular expertise are occasionally invited to these events. An event with planning students, for instance, might include a speaker from the City of Oslo to go in depth on the *Fjord-City vision*.

The students are invited to ask questions and join in dialogue with the presenters. After the presentation they are invited on site to see the project in action.

3.1.2. Pupils in vocational school

Another group of students the NPRA is interested in targeting are the pupils in secondary level vocational education – for instance specializing subjects such as concrete, shuttering, construction etc. Pupils in this group comprise about 20 % of the centre's visitors from the education sector.

Although the NPRA does not itself have an operations unit (construction is contracted out), it has a wider mandate to recruit to the construction sector, helping to ensure a steady pool of employees for the NPRA's contractors. For these students, the centre offers presentations inside the centre, followed by extended site visits. Often their teachers join in on the presentations tying the project presentation to specific topics they are learning in school. For some of the younger students it is their first time visiting a large project site, and a visit to Bjørvika might give them an idea of what the future will bring.

3.1.3. Pupils in Elementary School

14% of school visitors to the information centre are elementary school pupils. These pupils are most often given a presentation in the centre, with pictures and film. Occasionally they are invited on a site visit. School children are usually taken through the site by minibus.

Since opening in 2005, the information centre has participated in a project designed to encourage pupils from Hovseter School in their scientific pursuits. Each year Hovseter School sends 6 6th-grade classes for presentations, site-visits and cinnamon rolls. The focus of the visit is been to demonstrate how the science they are learning in school is being applied in real life. There is plenty of time for dialogue with the students, and their questions range from general roads and transport issues to specific aspects about the project. After their visits, their teachers incorporate the Bjørvika project into their lessons.

3.2. Visitors from the NPRA

The second largest group of visitors, particularly during the information centre's first two years, came from inside the organisation. In total, approximately 20 % of the centres visitors have belonged to this group.

The NPRA is an organisation with more than 5 500 employees spread around locations across the country. In 2003, a large reorganisation of the NPRA took place, and the operational units of the organisation were privatised and the NPRA became a truly administrative organisation. Another reorganisation took place in 2010. Following these reorganisations there was a need to build and develop a common culture within the organisation.

In its first years, the information centre was the location for many of the NPRA's divisions' summer excursions. Often sections of the NPRA would book the meeting room adjacent to the information centre and have section-meetings in the first half of the day, and after lunch they would receive a presentation and visit the construction site.

The staff of the NPRA Call Centre for the Eastern region has been regular visitors to the centre. They direct calls to locations across eastern Norway, and answer a wide variety of callers' questions about the NPRA. It is important for their work to know about what is going on in the region. The NPRA's legal section's employees have a lot of involvement with road projects, but they are rarely out on the project sites. Seeing some of the work that is being done first hand contributes to their sense of belonging in the NPRA. It is hoped that the information centres, by illustrating the NPRA's role in society, can also help build a shared identity among the employees in the NPRA.

3.3. Neighbours and Users

Other groups of visitors to the centre have come from the public sector (13%), different clubs and associations (16%), and private companies, particularly engineering and construction companies (15 %). This group consists mainly of people interested in specific aspects of the project, or neighbours of the project. Like other visiting groups they are given presentations tailored to their interests and they are invited on site visits.

The neighbours and the users of the project are mainly met through the groups mentioned above, and through large-scale events like the *Open Day in Bjørvika*.

3.3.1. Open Day in Bjørvika

There are a great number of actors in the Bjørvika city-development project. The land-owners in the area, the Railroad authorities, the harbour authorities, the City of Oslo, the developers, and many more are all involved in the *Fjord Vision project*. Gaining visibility in this landscape of actors has been an important aim of the information centre; however the centre has often collaborated with these same actors in information dissemination projects and events.

In 2006 the first Open Day in Bjørvika was held, organised by the NPRA, the Municipal Plan and building authorities and the Public Construction and Property management (Statsbygg) which were responsible for building the Opera. The event had an estimated 6000 visitors the first year, and the goal of the project was to show Oslo-dwellers 1: what the different actors were doing in Bjørvika, 2: that it was possible to walk around and explore this part of the city. The Information centre played a natural role as a collection point, and videos, presentations and dialogue was shared with the visitors. The following

years the number of visitors increased, to 20 000 visitors in 2009, the year the Opera-building site was opened to the public for the first time, and more than 15 000 visitors in 2009 when the Opera Tunnel was opened for pedestrians. The number of actors involved has increased yearly, and the event has become a major happening in Oslo on the last Sunday of August each year.

The *Open Day* is an opportunity for neighbours and users of the road system through Bjørvika to come to the information centre and take a look at the project, and to get an idea of what Bjørvika will be like in the future. The idea is that the information will make it easier for the customers to accept longer travel times through the area and occasional traffic deviations for a period.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bjørvika Information centre has since opening received more than 14 300 visitors, and approximately 60 000 visitors attending major open events. The principles of openness and pre-emptiveness in the NPRA's communication policy have been guiding for the development of the information centre. By creating a space for dialogue and communication and welcoming different groups, the NPRA is building its own employee culture, marketing itself to future employees and creating an atmosphere of openness and trust with the road networks' users and neighbours. It has been a goal for the information centre that the visitors' expectations are exceeded, to challenge their views about the NPRA, and to get them excited about technology, city development and transport.

Almost half of the NPRA's employees have at some point visited the Bjørvika Information centre. Of the attendees of the *Recruitment programmes* in recent years, several had been introduced to the NPRA through the Bjørvika Information centre before they applied for the programme. A centre for communicating the motivation behind the E18 Project and the end goal has been useful in facilitating relations with neighbours and users of the project, particularly during open events like the well attended, annual *Open Day in Bjørvika*.

In recent years the NPRA has opened new information centres tied to specific road projects continuing the tradition for openness and pre-emptiveness in its communication to the public. The Bjørvika information centre will stay in Bjørvika until the road project is completed.

REFERENCES RÉFÉRENCES

1. Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church affairs (2009). Statens kommunikasjonspolitikk (Government Communication Policy) as accessed on http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/FAD/Vedlegg/Informasjonspolitikk/Statens_kom_pol_web.pdf (15.01.2011)
2. The Norwegian Public Roads administration (2011). Statens vegvesens kommunikasjonsstrategi (The NPRA Communication Strategy)
3. Kojedahl, I. (2007). Informasjonssenteret i Bjørvika 2005-2007 (The Bjørvika Information centre 2005-2007), The Norwegian Public Roads administration