

Improving the Construction Industry Image

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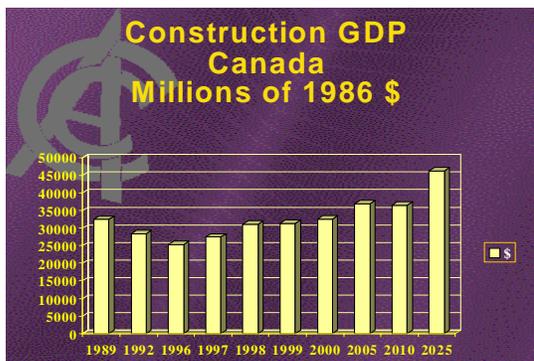
Construction is an essential component of every country's economy. It is responsible for building the facilities and supporting infrastructure necessary for a nation to produce wealth, to provide shelter for and deliver services to its citizens. Construction accounts for a large portion of the economic activity and the bulk of new investment in almost every country of the world. The efficiency with which construction is carried out is a major factor in the competitiveness of a country's industries and the quality of life of its people; yet it is too often dismissed as unimportant and taken for granted.

The world construction industry is a huge sector. The total world construction activity in 1992, the latest figure available, is estimated to be in the order of \$4.33 trillion (U.S.).

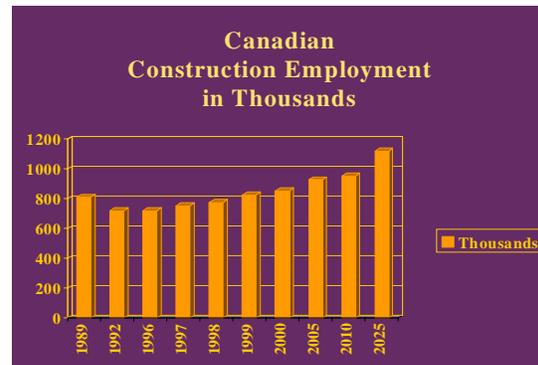
As is the case in other countries, Canadians do not fully appreciate the size and importance of the construction industry to their national economy. Construction is Canada's largest industry, encompassing some 200,000 small, medium and large business enterprises and provides employment for an estimated 800,000 men and women working in manufacturing, fabricating, material supply and installation and erection activities of the industry.

In Canada today, the total construction market, in terms of cash flow or value, is in excess of \$99 billion annually. The "value added" or total Construction Gross Domestic Product is about \$37 billion. Contractors pay approximately \$30 billion in wages and supplementary income each year. The construction industry also annually pays approximately \$14 billion in taxes to various levels of government.

Both the Gross Domestic Product for construction and the number of people employed will increase steadily over the next few years. Construction employment is expected to increase every year until 2025 at which point the number of people employed in the industry will be over 1 million.¹



¹ Statistics provided by Informetrica Limited and available at www.cca-acc.com.



Even with these impressive statistics in mind, many Canadians do not fully understand or appreciate the importance of the construction industry. A recent survey of the Canadian Construction Association’s members revealed that the number one priority for CCA in its external communications should be the enhancement of the construction industry’s image. CCA is committed to increasing awareness of the current realities within our industry today. But, we must work together.

Almost unbelievably, there still exists a misinformed point of view that construction will not have a significant role in tomorrow's economy; that it is an old-fashioned player out of step with the “new high-tech economy”. Politicians would rather say that they have invested taxpayers money in getting students logged on to the internet, or have their photo taken at a computer company than at a construction site or plan room. They forget that it is largely the construction industry that is responsible for putting the infrastructure in place that makes the information highway a reality!

One of the construction industry’s major problems is that it is too often portrayed as slow to innovate, using outdated practices and low-tech equipment. Of course, this stereotypical image of today’s construction industry is not at all accurate.

Change and adaptation to change are critical to the success of firms operating in our industry. The technologies used in today’s construction are continuously being modernised, upgraded and improved. The view that construction is conservative and low-tech reflects a profound misunderstanding of the industry. Structures like the Confederation Bridge, linking Prince Edward Island to the Canadian mainland and the multi-purpose Air Canada Centre in Toronto and the Corel Centre in Ottawa, the Hibernia offshore platforms and GM Place in Vancouver all serve as testaments to the leading edge advances being made in construction technologies. And, while the “visible” aspects of these and other projects is impressive, it is perhaps the “invisible” components which tell the tale of the technological advances. For example, is the general public aware of new forming technologies, new super strength concrete products or the sophisticated instrumentation that is required to operate most facilities? These are nonetheless examples of the types of advances that need to be triumphantly brought to the public’s attention.

Just as the information and communications revolution is dramatically affecting most industries and society as a whole, the construction industry is actively taking advantage of new technologies and incorporating them into practices and procedures. Consider the impact, satellite and Internet technologies alone have had on the industry. Communications with remote construction sites locations was once extremely difficult. Satellite based communication technologies now make many of these problems a thing of the past. Sophisticated survey systems also use satellite based communications links to pinpoint locations for roadwork construction. Through the Internet, construction companies can now more easily access project plans through CoolNet; virtual plan rooms sponsored by local construction associations throughout the country. Many projects also have their own web sites in which project news and change orders are centrally posted, yet widely accessible.

For too many Canadians, particularly youth, politicians and educators, the image of the construction industry is very negative. When selecting careers, students, parents and teachers view construction as a place to work if you can't find another job. Projects are not built solely with hammers, nails and sweat. Skilled labourers, tradespersons, superintendents, engineers, architects and project managers are just a few of the key members of any construction team.

With the general ageing of our population, perhaps as never before, construction is competing with other industries for young people to enter the industry. Some of these other industries are portrayed as being high-tech and therefore more inviting to today's younger workforce. In order to attract youth to construction jobs, the industry needs to shed its low-tech, unappealing and negative image as a "career of last resort". The projected growth in construction employment shown earlier can only be achieved if we are able to attract tomorrow's workforce to our industry. We must make our industry more attractive to youth by showing the reality of today's construction practices and dispelling the myths of what "was".

All too often, this negative image is reinforced by the mainstream Canadian media. Advertisements often portray the stereotypical "out of shape, dirty, male" construction worker with ill-fitting jeans and a bewildered look on his face. Television, newspaper, magazine and billboard ads reinforce the myths of construction, and outdated stereotypes.

All construction associations and industry members across Canada must make a concerted effort to increase government and public awareness of the essential contributions our industry makes to the national economy. For its part, the Canadian Construction Association is developing mechanisms and structures to take a lead role in addressing this negative image problem on a national basis. A Marketing and Promotion Committee, in co-operation with the other CCA Councils, Committees, and member associations across Canada was established in 1996 to develop new marketing and promotional initiatives. The committee's major goal is to create a broader base of public appreciation of the size, impact and importance of the construction industry and its vital contribution to the quality of life for Canadians.

In 1999, the Canadian Construction Association undertook the production of a new bilingual, careers in construction brochure, "School's Out...Now what Do I Do?". In late December, over 75,000 copies were sent to CCA member Associations for distribution throughout their province. This was the first time a publication (which also came out in poster format) included national telephone and web site information for ease of reference. Initial responses from educators, students and the construction industry alike are positive and a second run is currently being contemplated.

In Alberta, Merit Contractors Association, in collaboration with other construction associations and the Alberta Government, developed and distributed over 80,000 "Careers in Construction" brochures to schools across the Province (NOTE: HOW ABOUT A GRAPHIC INSERT OF THE BROCHURE IN THE BACKGROUND). This brochure featured modern graphics, and "upbeat" information about potential career opportunities. The Alberta Construction Association will soon be sending a construction career resource binder to all schools, and over the past two years a video on the construction industry and the roadbuilding sector has been aired repeatedly on television, as well as distributed to all schools in Alberta. Merit in Alberta sponsors awards for students completing a construction-related course in over 100 high schools in the province.

As an important first step, opening a dialogue with educators is a key example of how the myths of the construction industry can be replaced by more accurate images of today's industry. For example, the Merit Contractors Association recently teamed up with Alberta Education (Learning) and the Calgary Public School Board in developing a pilot program designed to increase awareness of the construction industry among high school educators. The project, called LATTE for Learning About Trades Technology Education, involves teachers, guidance counsellors and principals. The premise is that educators, at all levels, are in positions to influence the career choices high school students make. Following a safety orientation program the various educators donned their hard hats and laced up their safety boots and spent a full day working on a construction job site.

Another very exciting initiative is underway in Alberta, which could ultimately have a nation-wide impact. This industry wide initiative is a collaborative effort involving purchasers of construction services, construction associations, unions, contractors, suppliers and both levels of government. In April, 2000 a CD-ROM focussing on construction trades careers will be distributed to every school, library and career centre in the province. Using a combination of high-energy graphic design, music, video clips text and an easy-access database, users will be able to interactively explore various construction trades. A modified version of the CD-ROM will also be accessible on an updateable Internet website (www.insertnamehere.com) and will include links to other construction-related websites.

Jointly, efforts such as these will help alter the image of the industry and will ultimately attract more young people into construction by dispelling the myths that they will wind up in a “dead end” and unrewarding career. To change the general perception of construction, the industry must help the media and general public become better informed. What is needed is up to date statistical information and materials, which show the industry in a new and more positive light.

To change the general perception of the industry, we have to ensure the media and public at-large are properly informed about construction. By providing information and materials which show the construction industry in a new and appealing light, attention can be drawn to our efforts at shaping opinions about the construction industry.

The construction industry’s image will not change overnight. But it will change with a persistent and unified voice. Everyone, in all sectors, must make it a priority to be more conscious of the image they are presenting to the general public so that the industry can be seen in a positive light. To achieve this, it is ESSENTIAL that industry personnel work hand in hand with; roadbuilders, general contractors, trade contractors, architects, engineers, tradespersons, managers, superintendents, etc... Everyone must promote the industry in a much more positive light.

Today’s construction is high-tech, fast paced and an exciting industry to work in. Participation in the industry has resulted in extremely successful and rewarding careers for thousands of men and women. For the long-term sake of our industry, more of our youth need to be encouraged to make it a career choice. Construction has built the Canada around us today and will continue to do so in the future. The decision to make construction a career enables participants to say, “I built that”. Not many other choices will result in the same amount of pride, the same level of remuneration and the same spirit of entrepreneurship. Why not encourage someone you know to come and join us?