

# The Empire State Building: From vision to delivery in the blink of an eye



First of all, a confession. The Empire State Building has a special place in my heart – it’s where I proposed to my wife in 1988. The 86th floor viewing balcony looking out over the Hudson River towards New Jersey, as dusk came down on a balmy September evening...

It wasn’t quite a spur of the moment thing. When I knew we were going to New York it seemed like the obvious place to choose – one of those global symbols that everyone has heard of and can relate to.

The funny thing was, when I arrived in New York and first had a wander around Manhattan I initially struggled to spot where the Empire State Building actually was at street level. Its entrance and first few floors don’t seem that striking when compared to the other buildings in that part of town. That’s because it was conceived not just as a symbol for a city, but also as a commercial building – like most of midtown Manhattan it houses offices and workers. It’s only when you crane your neck upwards that you become aware that this is a bit more than your usual office block...

There are many remarkable aspects to this iconic building, but one of the less well known of these is the story, and speed, of its construction. Part of the impetus for this was provided by the rivalry between one of its initiators, John Raskob of General Motors, and Walter Chrysler, whose own building was completed in 1929 and was then the tallest in the world. Ego is a powerful force for action.

Equally important, though, was the fact that this was to be a commercial development, with income to be derived from renting out the office space – the quicker the space could be built and rented, the sooner the building could

‘earn its keep’. As the building’s other chief founder, ex-Governor of New York Al Smith put it; “...the Empire State Building was not erected for the sake of mere bigness, but because the logic of events pointed to the region from Fortieth Street to Madison Square, and from Broadway to Park Avenue as the compelling new office zone”.

The whole Empire State project was a remarkable co-operation between the architects, who set the vision and the strategy for the building, and the contractors who implemented the design. While it began as an ambitious vision to create a striking tower that would rise up into the sky like a giant pencil, from the very beginning the pressure of time – a target opening date just 18 months from initial design – meant that a large dose of practicality needed to be injected into the build. Smith and Raskob did themselves an enormous favour by selecting both an architect and a building firm that had vast experience of construction in New York, and who had a healthy collaborative attitude. From the very start there was a highly commercial focus to the whole project.

Here are a few examples;

- The design, while clearly reflecting the desire for elegance and extreme height, also delivered against the need to deliver flexible office space with plenty of light and window frontage – all the set-backs that mark the

rise of the tower and the floor plans were designed to meet this requirement

- The use of limestone to face the building delivered both a striking depth of colour to the finished external walls, but also had considerable economic virtues. It was cheaper than brick, it was easily cut and shaped – indeed, it could be cut to size at the quarry, eliminating the requirement to finish the masonry on site – and it was highly durable, with an estimated lifespan of five hundred years
- The size of the overall building site was huge, but this was used to best effect to assist project management and efficiency – a series of entrances led to a vast storage area within the rising walls of the building, reducing disruption and delays to deliveries. An internal rail line and system of lifts then ensured that all materials were efficiently transported to their required destination
- The whole building was constructed using materials that minimised the requirement for handwork on site – it was essentially an example of mass production, with windows, mullions and spandrels all designed so that they could be replicated in huge quantities at their manufacturing location and then simply assembled on site
- Imagine the time that could be taken out of the working day if a construction worker was required to descend from 70-80 floors up down to street level for his lunch-break – the contractors were well aware of this and commissioned a series of cafeterias regularly spaced through the building's floors throughout construction to provide nutritious fuel to keep the workforce going

The overall result of these initiatives was to break all previous records for constructing a skyscraper – and this within the context of the largest single building ever seen on Manhattan. Despite the highly ambitious timescales all the key mile-stones were completed ahead of schedule (most by at least a fortnight).

This was no accident – it was the result of an appreciation of the need to combine clear thinking with effective doing. And it's a great lesson for people in business.

Often, the pressures faced by a business demand urgent action – ambitious growth plans, challenging sales targets, competitor incursions and so on. CEO's and shareholders are often impatient for activity, but they also demand accountability. It can be a pretty stressful dilemma, balancing the need to do something quickly with the concern that the solution is properly thought through.

As with the Empire State Building, the answer to this dilemma is to inextricably link the thinking process with the development of a clear action plan. The difficulty, often, is finding people who recognise this need and who can deliver against it – the business world seems to be full of people who are thinkers and people who are doers, but rarely do the two meet or, more importantly, co-operate.

At The Brand Nursery we've always understood the need to combine clear, logical strategic thinking and creative idea generation with a practical approach to delivering outputs, quickly, efficiently and cost-effectively. We've got the combination of skills and experience that enables us to pin-point the key issues, to identify potential solutions, and to determine how best to act upon them.

That's why we make sure that every project we undertake has a clearly staged project plan; a tailored process (not an 'off-the-peg' fixed approach) that helps your business to reach the solution to your challenge, and to also define an action plan to actually put these solutions into place. We've thought about developing a 'branded' project process – it would give us a catchy 'badged' product to sell – but we honestly don't think that's the right way to work. Every brand and every business problem is different, so we'll carry on developing the process that's right for you, rather than falling back on the one that suits us.

And, like The Empire State contractors, we recognise that time is one of the most precious commodities that we have – so we also ensure that this process will be delivered as quickly as you need it to be. We're not tied to ploughing through seven (or nine, or, god forbid, eighteen...) key stages if your issue doesn't require this – we can be as thorough and inclusive as you want us to be, but we won't include any elements that aren't essential to delivering a focused, intelligent, ownable solution.

We're not going to promise that every brand challenge is going to result in as dramatic, elegant and lofty a result as the Empire State Building, but we do believe that our flexible, tailored approach is the best way to help you turn a business problem into a commercial opportunity.

Got any skyscraping issues on your mind?  
Do give us a call.