
“WHADDAYA THINK?”

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR ENGAGING PUBLIC INPUT

by Stu Nicholson

Public meetings have their place – and they have their drawbacks. More governments are relying on useful apps to harvest ideas and feedback.

“But enough about me. What do you think about me?” once joked Alan Alda’s Hawkeye Pierce character, fishing for compliments from an Army nurse on the classic TV show “M*A*S*H.”

The remark speaks to how hard it is for government and other entities to seek and get useful public input on important issues. How do you harvest what the broader public really thinks?

“Let’s hold a public meeting!” is the traditional approach, and a well facilitated gathering is effective ... up to a point. Low turnouts or meetings hijacked by organized naysayers can skew the range and depth of public feedback.

The good news: The use of online engagement tools is increasing among those trying to involve more people in shaping public policy, service delivery and infrastructure projects. While it can be tempting to rely too heavily on them – “There’s still no substitute for good, face-to-face meetings to really read and understand the mood and opinions of the public,” says Jamie Greene of the consulting firm Planning NEXT. These apps have an important place in the toolbox. A few examples include:

- **MetroQuest** responds to a couple of developing trends in gathering public input, according to company co-founder Dave Biggs. “Attendance at public meetings is declining, and those who show up aren’t always representative of the broader community,” says Biggs. “People who aren’t motivated to show up may still care strongly about an issue, but they want faster, easier, less intimidating ways to participate.”

MetroQuest engages the community with websites, kiosks, iPads and/or smartphones. Typically MetroQuest is used at least two times during a public-engagement process:



early on to seek input on the goals and vision for the initiative, then later to seek input on draft alternatives or recommendations.

“We tapped MetroQuest to engage a larger audience to provide feedback on the Oasis Rail Corridor project in Cincinnati,” says Richard Dial, senior transportation planner for one of the project’s consultants, HDR. “We were able to hold virtual public meetings in addition to the physical meetings.” Dial says MetroQuest’s extensive data collection provided the project team with demographics and preferences that helped advance the discussion.

- **MindMixer** was created by planners Nick Bowden and Nathan Preheim in 2010 after driving home from a poorly attended public meeting. “It struck us hard that the traditional process for engaging the public in important civic discussions was broken,” says Bowden. Even so, he adds, they didn’t buy the popular wisdom that low turnout necessarily meant that people were apathetic.

“We don’t think of ourselves as the online equivalent to a town meeting,” says Preheim. “The line between online and offline is harder to see than ever. Most people carry smartphones in their pockets. MindMixer is available

24/7, so they can visit it and contribute easily.”

“MindMixer’s great for brainstorming with the public on the direction of the community as well as on specific projects where we need to know how the public thinks it should look and function,” says Kimberly Sharp, deputy planning and development director for the city of Westerville, Ohio.

- **PlaceSpeak** taps into the organizational and civic need to gather accurate and meaningful public input on any public-policy issue.

Company founder Colleen Hardwick was dismayed at the level of public discourse on Internet forums or when well-intentioned project websites were “hijacked” by organized opponents. She cited one client who was pleased with more than 2,000 Web responses, only to discover that more than 1,200 of them came from the same IP address.

“We created a more secure process that encourages thoughtful discussion and provides valuable geographical information,” says Hardwick. “It’s a geo-social model that requires users to create a profile with their location and take ownership of what they post. It’s one person and one vote.”

Xenia, Ohio, Planner Brian Forschner chose PlaceSpeak because it gives community conversations a good start. “It really amounts to a conversation between citizens,” says Forschner. “Democracy works when citizens get together to pool ideas.”

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