by Stephen Ibendahl

Respectful Digital Community Engagement

Communities continually seek to improve constructive dialogue with residents, especially when dealing with community-wide issues such as long-range plans, development proposals or community investments. One of the most constructive methods of community engagement is small group discussions. People are more respectful and thoughtful in small group situations. Small groups allow everyone a chance to share their opinions. However, it is difficult to have small group discussions with the whole community. How then do you engage the wider community, but keep the respectfulness of a small group setting? Can digital and online tools help recreate small-group civility?

Today, with a multitude of social media and digital tools at our disposal, it should be easier than ever to engage the community. Unfortunately, the answer is often not an easy "yes." Digital choices can seem overwhelming. The dread of out-of-control negativity dampens enthusiasm for digital community engagement. We have all seen Facebook posts or online comment threads where the resulting online discussion quickly turns into a litany of ever-increasing vitriol.

How do we create better dialogue with residents using social media and online tools? At the i5Group, a consulting firm focusing on community planning, we believe that citizen engagement should be a transparent process. We believe that an effective public engagement process includes informing, educating, identifying, prioritizing and building consensus toward a shared vision. While there are multiple digital and traditional engagement tools to choose from, we have found the following principles help to ensure that engagement is respectful and meaningful (recreating that small group experience).

Principle #1: Give Everyone An Opportunity To Share Their Voice

The first step in providing an opportunity to share their voice is ensuring that everyone is aware of the opportunity. Raising awareness is a key step. Techniques to raise awareness include direct mailings, door hangers, Facebook advertising, banners, street teams, and the existing communication networks of community organizations. After raising awareness, a community should utilize multiple tools for residents to share their voice, including surveys, open houses, focus groups, online comment tools, and social media.

Principle #2: Show The Community That You've Listened

Community engagement is both an art and a science. Showing that you have listened requires the most "art" of the process. Showing you have listened is more than just a bullet-point summary in a document. Every opportunity should be taken to show that residents are heard. A great way to do this is to show the engagement process visually. Share photos of meetings and engagement activities

A boosted facebook post connects residents to an online survey.

via social media, websites, newsletters and other communication channels. When residents can visually see the process, it builds trust that residents are being heard.

Principle #3: Remember That Engagement Is Two-Way Communication

Engagement strategies should strive to create two-way communication. A good engagement process readily shares information with residents while also listening to residents throughout the process to gain insights, build consensus and develop priorities.

While there are many ways to implement the above principles, the following are a few examples focusing on digital and online community engagement.

Create A Hub Of Information

A few years ago, the director of marketing for the St. Louis Cardinals gave a presentation about digital marketing. While the Cardinals use a variety of social media tools (remember the Fredbird Instagram stories a few years ago), their ultimate goal was to drive fans back to a central hub (their website) to buy tickets. Community engagement should also utilize the central hub idea. A community should have a hub of communication, such as the city website (or dedicated engagement website) that becomes the repository of information. Instead of trying to use social media tools like Facebook to have a group discussion (that spins out of control), use Facebook to link residents to a more controlled comment tool on your website.

One communication challenge of many community engagement efforts is that the process can run many months, even years. With long time frames, it

can be a challenge for residents to stay up to date on the process; the website allows residents to easily stay up to date. The website becomes the hub for communications. Other forms of communication (emails, newsletters, social media, etc.) should refer to the website for additional details. The website allows residents to know the upcoming schedule, review past documents and provide input.

Leveraging Facebook – Boosted (Paid) Posts

Facebook is a great tool to raise awareness of engagement efforts and direct residents to input tools. Almost every community now has a Facebook page. However, one of the biggest downsides of Facebook is the limitations of organic (non-paid) reach. Some estimates have put Facebook's organic reach at only 4-5% of followers for any given post. So, if your city has 2,000 Facebook followers, any given post may only be seen by 80-100 followers. Of course, the numbers of likes and shares can greatly increase the number of views. Also, Facebook is constantly tinkering with their algorithms that impact views.

For a relatively small financial commitment, paid Facebook advertising (boosted posts) can make a huge difference in the number of views of a post. As part of a county-wide comprehensive plan, the i5Group worked with county staff to develop a Facebook advertising campaign to promote and raise awareness of open houses and an online survey. For approximately $500 in Facebook advertising, more than 53,000 impressions (views of the post) were made and almost 1,000 actions taken (clicking to the website or survey). So, at a per-action cost of approximately $0.50, the boosted post was more cost effective than direct mail. Obviously, boosting every Facebook post would quickly raise a community's marketing costs. However, for selective posts for key community messages, paid boosts can be very cost effective.

Online Comment Mapping

A great tool for transparent and respectful community input is an online, map-based, comment tool. The public can leave comments on a Google map at a specific location. Custom categories can be created, such as parking problems, dangerous intersections, recommended bike routes, etc. The key benefit of the comment map is that the public can see comments from other people, so it is a very transparent engagement tool. However, users cannot comment specifically back to other comments, so there is an avoidance of the out-of-control comment threads often associated with social media.

Online Surveys

Online surveys, such as SurveyMonkey (a free online tool), can also be a very effective engagement tool. However, a few tips can maximize the effectiveness of an online survey.

Keep it Short

The shorter the survey, the better.

Ideally, shoot for five minutes or less to complete the survey – definitely no more than 10 minutes. The number of questions can vary, but a good rule of thumb is to aim for no more than 15-20 questions.

Balance Multiple Choice and Open-Ended Questions

A good survey will balance multiple choice and open-ended questions. Multiple choice questions are better to rank and prioritize certain responses, while open-ended questions allow for greater nuance in feedback. We often provide an open-ended option (explain why) as part of a multiple-choice question. Open-ended questions are a good way to balance a short survey while also providing an opportunity for more in-depth feedback. If someone is in a hurry, they can quickly answer the multiple-choice questions. Or if they have more time, they can provide additional feedback through the optional open-ended responses. Frequently, one-third or more of respondents provide feedback through the optional open-ended questions.

Make Sure the Survey Results are Easily Understood

Too often survey results from services like SurveyMonkey are presented in default formats that are not easily understood by residents. Be sure to take the time to analyze the results carefully. Summarize the highlights of the survey in easy to read narratives, charts and infographics. There should be a balance between presenting all the results for the sake of transparency that can lead to information overload, versus well-crafted summaries of the survey. Remember that engagement is "two-way" communication. Results of the survey should be presented back to the community in a way that can be easily understood.

One criticism of online surveys is that the survey may not always capture a representational cross-section of the community since it is a self-selecting tool (unlike mailed or phone surveys that can ensure random distribution). However, we have found that online surveys can be fairly representational. It is also important to remember that an online survey should be only one part of your community engagement strategy and not a stand-alone effort. Another perception is that older residents may feel uncomfortable with online surveys. However, in past surveys, we have found that the percentage of respondents over the age of 65 and 75 tend to be greater than their percentage of the community's population.

The above are just a few examples of successful digital engagement techniques. While digital engagement can never fully replicate the respectfulness of a small meeting format, keeping in mind the three principles mentioned earlier can make a community's engagement efforts more effective and trusted.

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