

A New Era of Public Engagement

From Lemonade Stands to YouTube

By Antonio Gómez-Palacio, Joost Baker, Bruce Haden

Every year expectations for public consultation continue to increase in the face of advances in social media and new forms of communication. These new tools promise to engage the disenfranchised, reach out to the unreachable and transform the conversation. But they are not a panacea for meaningful engagement. They, like more traditional tools, are only as effective as the engagement process that is designed and implemented. This article states the case for enhanced engagement in all its forms.

Not all ideas are good ones

Public engagement is often facilitated ideologically as a politically correct gathering of disparate people, where all voices are equally valid. Reality is more nuanced and more political. Yes, all voices should be welcome in the conversation. No, not all ideas have validity.

Facilitating a meaningful process requires: framing the conversation to create clear expectations; and engaging in genuine debate, where all ideas are put through a thoughtful, evidence-based sieve.

In city-building the objective is to imagine and deliver a better and brighter future. The problem is that when facilitation is only preoccupied with delivering consensus, it will often arrive at either the status quo or the lowest common denominator for change. Hence, facilitating meaningful public engagement requires leadership on difficult topics, subject-matter expertise and an honest conversation.

Not everyone can be the decision-maker

One of the best ways to engender frustration and bitterness for a process, is to promise people that ‘we’ will unquestionably do what they ask—and then not to. Another equally effective way to turn people off consultation is to have them express their opinions at meeting after meeting, and then completely ignore them. Somewhere in between, there is a fine line where input can be honestly received and reviewed, and a sympathetic response articulated.

For this to occur, participants need to know what role they play in the process: Are they making decisions, establishing direction, providing advice, providing feedback, or simply being informed. If the roles are clear, it will be easier to align expectations and ensure participants’ voices are meaningful.

Engagement is a two (or more) way conversation

Equally important to the facilitators being able to listen and learn from the public is the public’s ability to listen and learn from the



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process. In the best events, participants and facilitators are able to both contribute and learn something.

Therefore, facilitation is not only an exercise in recording a conversation. It is also an about capacity building. By sharing a knowledge-base participants are able to provide meaningful input and subject-matter experts are able to evolve their understanding.

This becomes especially important when evaluating the merits of communication tools. One-directional engagement tools that do not elevate the understanding of all parties involved will have inherent limitations, and should be used accordingly. Surveys and Twitter, for example, can often result in one-directional input and should not be mistaken for a full engagement strategy.

There’s an App for that

Every day, it seems, a new way to communicate pops up. Many of them are valid, all of them are fallible. Unfortunately, there is no single mechanism that will guarantee meaningful engagement. So, we are left with the need to be strategic about engagement and the selection of purpose-specific tools. Consider the following questions.



Joost Baker

Are we reaching the intended audience? Many social media tools help to reach out to constituencies that do not normally participate in traditional town hall meetings. These participants are a welcome addition to the conversation. However, they are, most often, not the only constituency that requires engaging. Generally, parallel tools are required.

Are we building capacity? Are we able to drive people towards other tools that can? Twitter, for example, in 140 characters is able to create awareness and drive people to a website or a public event. Instagram can create buzz and help animate an otherwise dull event.

Is it truly a conversation? For outcomes to evolve they require multiple iterations with many participants. A single ranting email



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sent to a faceless info@project.org does not constitute a conversation. The deployment of traditional and alternative engagement tools should support each other, allowing dialogue to emerge and develop.

Is the process both open and framed? A risk with any engagement is that the conversation deviates from the realm of possible action or that it is hijacked by a small interest group. With alternative tools (as with traditional ones) the conversation must be framed and managed—allowing for openness and candour within specified parameters. There is nothing worse than a blog that remains unmonitored and is used to bully by a disgruntled and bitter few.

Will it deliver on the intended outcomes? For the conversation to matter it must move forward and be able to inform decisions. It should progress from blue sky, to concepts, to plans, to issues of implementation. Chosen methodologies should assist the progression of ideas.

Hand me the scalpel, please

Choosing the right tool(s), at the right time, for the right audience, is critical. People need to be able to conveniently participate in a way that they feel safe and articulate. Different tools cater to different people, at different points in the process. Twitter, for example, can be extremely effective to generate awareness and buzz with a certain constituency and to drive people towards other engagement tools. It is less effective in conveying the nuances of an iterative conversation. The following four examples offer examples of alternative forms of consultation.

Lemonade Stands—As part of the city-wide Toronto Parks Wayfinding Strategy we had undertaken a wide range of stakeholder workshops but wanted to engage a broader sector of the public. Rather than schedule an Open House, we decided to cart a Lemonade Stand across several city parks. Unlike a scheduled event where every participant is eager to engage in conversation, many people walked by the Lemonade Stand unfazed. At first, we were taken aback. Then, we realized that most of the people we were talking to had never participated in a public engagement process. We were reaching children, tourists, families, new immigrants... the typically silent.

In-the-mode workshops—Consulting on the creation of criteria for prioritizing and funding transportation investments through Toronto's FeelingCongested? campaign, it became clear that we needed to engage people from across the city and from differing commuting patterns—drivers, walkers, cyclists, transit users. Accordingly, we facilitated conversations 'in-the-mode': in parking lots, on city streets, while cycling, on running streetcars and on

subway platforms. In this way, we were able to deepen our understanding with the unique voices of people who live the issues every day, and not just those who self-select to participate in a town hall meeting.

YouTube—Situated in the unique, eclectic, end-of-the road community of Tofino DIALOG led the development of new design concept for the future of the historic Main Street. As part of an extensive community engagement, we created a film featuring long-time residents and business owners telling stories about the history of Main Street and their experiences in that unique place. The interview-rich production was posted to the internet and became a catalyst for a renewed vision. Through this open and accessible media platform, we were able to give the plan an authentic voice, grounded in its own resident population.

YouTube: select your architect—When it came time to reduce the list of potential architects for the new University of British Columbia Student Union Building from seven firms to three, the Alma Mater Society of the UBC used an innovative social media based selection process to reach its final shortlist. The seven long-listed firms presented to students for an hour, and created a video based on their presentation. The firms were given three days to edit the video and post the final product to YouTube. Students were given a week to vote for their top three preferred architects online.

Be strategic

Public and stakeholder engagement should not be a token exercise—it has to be genuine. It is also not meant to be easy—that's how you know you are drilling down to worthwhile depths. To be meaningful, we need to be able to host a true dialogue, where participants engage in a manner that is informed and articulate. We also need to move the conversation forward with vision, arriving at worthy outcomes that meet clear expectations. To do so, we have an increasingly diverse set of tools we can deploy—many are new and exciting, but they can also be distracting. The skill is in understanding the purpose, resources and timing and letting these inform the choice of engagement platforms and tools.

Antonio Gomez-Palacio, MCIP, RPP, a founding partner of DIALOG, is committed to creating healthy places, where people thrive—through dialogue. Bruce Haden is a founding principal of DIALOG and a Lead-accredited professional. Joost Bakker is a founding partner of DIALOG with more than 35 years of professional practice. Antonio, Joost and Bruce will be speakers at the upcoming [OPPI Symposium](#) October 1 & 2 in [Niagara Falls](#).

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