

Eight Principles of Public Outreach

RECRUITING DIVERSE GROUPS TO PARTICIPATE

Joe Goldman, AmericaSpeaks
Joseph Peters, Ascentum
February 22, 2010

“If you build it, they will come” may be a useful mantra for constructing baseball diamonds in cornfields, but it does not work very well for organizing public forums, online or in person.

Recruiting large, diverse groups of citizens to participate in public forums can substantially improve their quality, credibility and impact. Unfortunately, many organizers go to great lengths to prepare for public meetings that are only attended by small groups of the usual suspects.

Following the release of the Open Government Directive, agencies across the federal government launched online processes to seek public input about their Open Government Plans. Each agency has approached public outreach in a different way and the result has been a wide variation in the levels of participation by the public.

Regardless of how many people have submitted ideas so far, all agencies can benefit from employing strategies to generate broad participation and diverse perspectives. The following principles serve as a starting point for developing an outreach strategy. As long as the

doors are open, outreach can still be effective – it is never too late to start.

Principle 1: Relate to People’s Lives By Crafting Your Message Carefully

People don’t use or relate to the language most often used by policy experts and government bureaucrats. When naming your forum, writing your outreach materials, and crafting your talking points, consider how your topic directly impacts people’s lives. How do people talk about the issue and why do they care about it? Is different language or customized messaging necessary for specific audiences within your community?

Language matters. Take the time to test your messages to make sure you get it right.

Don’t invite people to attend a forum to talk about regional economic competitiveness in the global economy.

Do ask them to come together to talk about what we can do to ensure that our kids don’t move away because they can’t find jobs.

Principle 2: Use Active Outreach Strategies that are Engaging and Interactive

Forum organizers often rely on passive outreach strategies like flyers, meeting notices and press releases that present information without ever engaging the people they hope to recruit.

These printed materials can be useful to raise awareness about an event, but they aren’t the best way to convince someone to participate. Personal interaction—in person or over the phone—creates a stronger connection with people and increases an organizer’s ability to convey the importance of an event.



Salesman and campaigners have known this principle for years. Selling products and winning votes are best accomplished by knocking on doors and making phone calls. Get out there and talk to people.

Don't build your outreach strategy around flyers, newspaper listings and email blasts.

Do recruit volunteers and ambassadors to get out and talk to people, organize phone banks, make presentations and speeches, and set up tables at highly trafficked events.

Principle 3: Enlist Trusted Spokespeople and Ambassadors

The most effective outreach message will be conveyed by people who are trusted by a community. Some segments of a community may deeply trust a faith or school leader. Other segments of a community may trust a political leader or media personality. Think about who you want to reach out to and who each of your target audience trusts. Enlist those people as spokespeople to directly reach out to their constituents, speak to the media, or appear in advertisements.

Don't just send anyone into the community to reach out and recruit participants.

Do identify trusted ambassadors to explain why people should participate.

Principle 4: Touch People Multiple Times through Multiple Mediums

Most people have been forced to develop filters to weed out the many requests they get to participate in events and activities. Every day we are constantly bombarded with invitations, advertisements and solicitations. In order to break through and reach people, it is necessary to touch them at least three times. They may ignore your message the first time they hear it and give it little thought the second time, but the third time they will hopefully give it real consideration.

Make sure they hear about your event in the media, read about it on Facebook, and then talk to

someone at church or their subway station. Design your strategy to incorporate multiple vehicles for your outreach strategy.

Don't limit your communications to one or two mediums.

Do design an outreach and communication strategy that incorporates multiple mediums.

Principle 5: Communicate Why Participation Matters

No one wants to go to a meeting that will produce another report that will sit on a shelf. People want to make sure that their time is worthwhile and will make a difference. If you can convey why participation will make a difference and have influence, people will commit time to contribute to the process.

Don't assume that people will show up because the topic is important.

Do take the time to explain what will happen after your forum and how the public's ideas will be addressed.

Principle 6: Track Who is Coming and Adjust Your Strategy as Needed

From the beginning, it is important to ask yourself, "who must or should participate?" You must articulate and understand what your outreach goals are for each demographic segment of the community. While your initial outreach strategies and tactics will be effective at reaching some of these goals, they are unlikely to be successful at reaching all of them. Set up a registration system and pay close attention to who is signing up to attend. Adjust your strategy as you see that certain groups will be underrepresented.

Don't assume all of your outreach strategy will be effective.

Do create a system to monitor registrations that can adjust your strategies and tactics as needed.

Principle 7: Assume that Half of the People Who Intend to Participate Will Not Participate

Some people will have family emergencies, Some people will have to work late. Some people will forget to participate. Some people never planned on contributing and just said they would come in order to make you go away. Unless there are unusual circumstances, it is not unreasonable to assume that 40-50% of participants will not show up if you are recruiting the general public. Set your outreach goals with these no-show rates in mind and take steps – like reminders– to reduce no-shows.

Don't plan on everyone attending who signed up.

Do take steps to increase the likelihood that registrants will attend and assume that a significant number of registrants will not attend.

Principle 8: Take your outreach to social media – especially social networks

Social networks are the new virtual water coolers, post offices, and cafes where people socialize. The good thing is that you don't need to go to every office tower or rural post office and drink unhealthy levels of caffeine to reach the 100 million people on social networks. Facebook pages and communities that have an interest in your issues already exist (if you don't already have your

own organizational presence). You just need to do a little legwork to track them down. The same goes with bloggers. They are most often looking for news and content to share with their followers and are only too happy to spread the word about your initiative.

Social networks like Facebook also allow you to undertake highly segmented advertising campaigns because every user has a profile. Age, gender, and geography can all be segmented. Affiliation with interests or pages can also be segmented. You can create ads that directly reach your audiences for a matter of cents. Think of ad options on Google or even YouTube. They are cost effective for modest budgets. Do a Twitter search on your organization's top issues or name. What comes up?

Don't ignore social media and social networks in your outreach strategy.

Do consider creating messages and targeting participants in social networks and investigate the power of cost effective advertising using these media.

AMERICA SPEAKS

Joe Goldman, AmericaSpeaks

ascentum

Joseph Peters, Ascentum