

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

21st Century Public Involvement

Jesica Mackey, Theresa McClure,
Laura Heilman, Michael Darbouze

Due to the advancement of technology and the increased use of the Internet, you no longer have to physically go into stores or get all of your banking done between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Today's technologically savvy population requires convenient solutions to their daily needs. Offering innovative and creative approaches to public engagement can no longer be fulfilled using only traditional outreach methods. We need to reach stakeholders where they spend their most of their time—online. When developing a public involvement campaign, agencies must consider a mix of traditional outreach and online engagement to effectively reach and inform today's population. One of the most effective online engagement tools is online public meetings.

Hosting an online public meeting has become a highly successful and widely used engagement tool in a variety of public involvement campaigns. Using online engagement for public involvement on projects opens a new door to the public and stakeholders. This means an open-house format public meeting for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements is no longer enough. When paired with traditional in-person public meetings, online public meetings can present the same information and offer similar opportunities for comment. Online meetings provide the public with a convenient solution to view project information from the comfort of their home on a laptop or mobile device, for weeks or months, at a time most convenient for them. Agencies may be reluctant in using online engagement simply because it is new and different, but the benefits cannot be ignored. Online meetings are cost effective and provide key stakeholder data.

Cost is always important in government projects and any time you can save money on a project the better it will be received. Online engagement is the most cost effective tool in public involvement. We have all been to an in-person meeting where only 2% of the stakeholders in the project

area attended and after evaluating the cost associated with a room rental and the printing of handouts and boards, the meeting cost can soar to \$50 or more per person. An online meeting can offer the same information as the in-person meeting but will attract a larger number of stakeholders who couldn't attend due to work, soccer practice, or another social event. The cost per attendee for an online meeting can be as low as \$2-\$4 per person.

Using an online meeting still provides the opportunity to gather useful data from your stakeholders just as you would during the in-person meeting. You can collect names, addresses, and emails but by taking a deeper look you can also find out what area of the project they are most concerned about. By using Google Analytics to track the project website and online meeting you can analyze which web pages and topics are viewed, for how long, and how many times. This data can aid in your project messaging and communication plan. If data from the online meeting shows that majority of participants viewed environmental impacts more than any other topic, you can conclude that this area of the project is an important issue to your stakeholder. And you can develop additional ways to inform them of this area of the project in order to reduce project contention. This is information that might not otherwise be discovered at an in-person public meeting with low attendance.

To ensure the full value of online engagement, your outreach efforts must be concise, compelling, and adjusted for each stakeholder group. Internet users don't spend much time on a webpage, as you have about 30 seconds to catch their attention. Using features such as video, infographics, and open platforms for dialogue can increase viewership to approximately 3.5 minutes per page. The key to online engagement is to understand that it is constantly changing and so are the habits of the average Internet user. To reach your audience, you will also need to evolve and change.

Affiliation of authors: HDR, Inc., 3955 Faber Place, Suite 300, North Charleston, SC 29405. HDR, Inc., 8404 Indian Hills Drive, Omaha, NE 68132.

Address correspondence to: Jesica Mackey, Senior Strategic Communications Coordinator, HDR, Inc., 3955 Faber Place, Suite 300, North Charleston, SC 29405; (phone) 843-414-3700; (e-mail) Jesica.Mackey@hdrinc.com.

© National Association of Environmental Professionals 2016

Ultimately, online engagement gives you access to real-time information about how to best involve the public in your decision-making process. As these tools evolve and the demand for these opportunities increases, online engagement on projects and within NEPA requirements will no longer be a consideration, but a demand.

Acknowledgements

This article has been adapted from a presentation made at the National Association of Environmental Professionals conference. Co-contributors to the original presentation include: Theresa McClure, Laura Heilman, and Michael Darbouze.