Planning an Online Open House

Online open houses work best as part of a comprehensive and well thought out public involvement process. They don't work in a vacuum and they don't advertise themselves. If you'd like to talk about developing a Public Involvement Plan (PIP) to support your outreach needs, give us a call!

Make a meeting plan

If you're already doing a physical open house, then you might have already written a meeting plan, and it will include a lot of the information that will inform what your online event could look like. Even if you're not planning to do a physical open house, you'll still want to make sure that you have answers to a few basic questions about your project:

✓ **What is the purpose of the event?** Why are you even doing this and why should the public care? If you've been considering doing an open house then this *should* be fairly obvious, but it's still a useful exercise to make sure that you have a refined purpose statement that is easy for the public to understand. You'll also want to make sure that you know what you specifically hope to achieve by holding this particular event.

✓ **Who is your target audience?** Who is impacted by your project and whose opinions matter most? Are you trying to reach out to a particular geographic area? A specific socio-economic group or ethnic community? Having a good understanding of who you want to reach will also impact how you advertise your event, as well as what kinds of survey questions you include so as to assess whether you're reaching your target audience. (This is a good time to also consider whether an online open house is the best way to reach your target audience. Although they are very efficient at reaching across large geographic areas, but may not be as good of a value if the target area is very small.)

✓ **When and where will the event take place?** The great thing about online events is their accessibility, but you should still be considerate of your audience and timeline. How long will the open house last? Too short and you won't get as much participation; too long and you may impact your project schedule if you're trying to inform a particular milestone. If you are holding a physical event, you'll want to consider whether you want your online event to take place before, during, or after it. *Where* you hold your open house isn't as big of a concern, though you still need to think about choosing an easy to remember URL or domain name. You should also think about whether it's going to be convenient for your target audience to access an online event. Although the digital divide is shrinking every year, a lot of rural areas still don't have reliable high-speed internet, and that will impact what kind of content you are able to effectively share … no high bandwidth videos for you.

✓ **How are you publicizing the event?** If you're advertising a physical open house, then you've probably thought about mechanisms to drive attendance. If not, you'll need to consider your audience and decide what kind of supplemental outreach makes sense. Online open houses won't advertise themselves, but they readily lend themselves to being shared by email and social media.

ⓘ *You may or may not feel at this point that an online open house still makes the most sense for what you are trying to achieve. If not, we'd love to talk with you about other outreach options that may be better suited to your needs. If so, read on!*

Event structure

After you've answered these broader questions about purpose and need, you can dive into specifics about what the open house might "look" like. Typically this would inform the physical layout of your open house – the sequence of "stations" and tables – and it also helps inform the organizational structure of an online event. You might also think of the event structure as a table of contents for what you want to share. Often it will look something like this:

1. **Problem Overview and Event Purpose**
   This is where you win or lose attention by making a case for why people should care about the project. It's your elevator speech about the issues at hand and a clear statement about what you hope to accomplish by having the public involved.

2. **Background/History**
   This area is where you demonstrate why the problem is a problem, and how the process has arrived where it is today. You'll want to use this opportunity to catch up newcomers and help answer their questions before you start asking them for feedback.

3. **Proposed Process or Approach to Solving the Problem(s)**
   While this station is definitely not necessary for every project, it's often helpful for the public to understand, particularly on very long or involved efforts where the logic of the course of action is particularly convoluted. When it comes to more straightforward and less abstract projects, this station represents an opportunity to prove to the public that you have a logical plan and know how to follow it.

4. **Possible Solution(s) and Feedback**
   Usually this section will include one or more possibilities for how to address the stated problem(s), and hopefully there will be one or more opportunities for the public to provide feedback about the virtues and vices of each. This is also a good place to introduce questions for public dialogue, if in fact the proposed solutions (or process) would benefit from a public conversation.

5. **Next Steps**
   On the last page(s) of the open house you'll want to leave visitors with some idea of what to expect moving forward. This is also a good place to collect contact information that helps you build your stakeholder lists, as well as additional feedback on the process.

Of course, every phase of every project has different needs and will emphasize different elements of this outline and, while it won't make sense for every project, it should provide a good starting point.

Fleshing it out

For each of the sections outlined above, we'll usually try to assemble the following content:

☐ **Teaser Text** – This is a brief statement about what the station is all about. It should summarize the main points on the page and give people a good sense of the content even if they don't read anything else.

☐ **Body Text** – This is the meat of the page content. Although it's longer than the Teaser, it should still be fairly brief and use simple language and bulleted lists. You might consider whether you want to link to fact sheets or other information from here, but generally you'll want to keep reader focused on the open house, not on downloading and reading PDFs.

☐ **Displays/Diagrams** – This is the supporting imagery for the station. If they are available, we might think about breaking down existing open house boards into relevant graphics and text that we can add to the page body. If boards aren't available, consider what other kinds of images, maps, diagrams, or photographs would be useful in explaining this information.

☐ **Video** – Consider whether video would help in explaining the content of the page. If so, consider the availability of staff, supplemental footage, and supporting imagery.

☐ **Questions & Exercises** – What feedback do you want to get about your content? What kind of questions will be the most useful for getting the answers you need? Would it be useful to facilitate a public conversation as part of this process?

☐ **Style & Appearance** – Is it important to match the look of a particular agency or organization? Consider adding images to each station page that add interest and provide visual clues and context for what the section is about.

Conclusions

This summary should give you a pretty good idea of what goes into creating an online event. Of course every project is unique, and we'll work with you to create a custom approach that works for you.

If you're interested in learning more, contact us:

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