



CASE STUDY

CITY OF HAMILTON: OUR VOICE. OUR HAMILTON. MAKING DECISIONS TOGETHER.

Dialogue Partners was retained by the City of Hamilton to engage citizens in a conversation about which City services were important to them, level of those services and the pros, cons and trade-offs and willingness to pay for those services. This input would be used for City service delivery and infrastructure.

After nine months of planning, in a matter of hours after launching the project to the public, the project began to go off the rails; and within a month Dialogue Partners and the City of Hamilton mutually agreed to part ways.

WHAT HAPPENED?

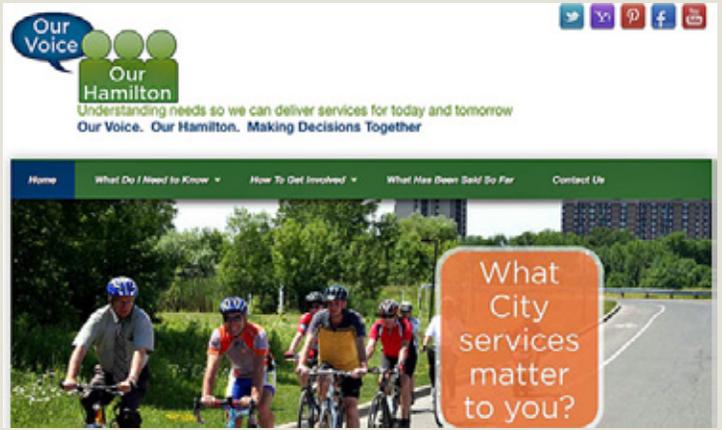
On the day of the project launch, Dialogue Partners used Twitter to begin to generate awareness about the opportunities for engagement. In a response to a tweet from a citizen who wanted “the continuation of voluntary pay for disabled on HSR”, DP asked the person “what is ‘HSR’? Just so we can accurately capture your comment.”

Many Hamiltonians on twitter reacted, implying that DP hadn’t done our homework about the City and began to call us incompetent calling for a local firm to be hired. From there, and over only a matter of hours, those following the #OVOH project hashtag had called for our resignation.

Unfortunately, there were other challenges in the following days which, combined with other information being shared on social media that was untrue, led local and national media to pick up the story.

Some of the other things that happened:

- » Pictures of other towns named Hamilton were posted on the project Pinterest page (we don’t know where they came from);
- » DP planned a community event that ended up conflicting with another City planned event about an important and emotional topic in Hamilton, although we had cleared our event date with City staff;
- » Security was breached on the project website where a hacker installed malware so the website was shut down to rebuild it; and
- » Some people alleged that the project website contained pictures of Ottawa instead of Hamilton (The women apologized days later for her initial tweets - but the echo had taken over); and
- » A communication expert reported the DP team was hiding out in a hotel room in Toronto afraid to come to Hamilton (we weren’t). All this incorrect information was repeated by the Hamilton Spectator.



Above: The project website was designed using a wordpress platform. The photo was supplied by the City and shows a Councillor and community members at the opening of a bike path.

Below: The project mobile app linked community participants to information on the project, acted as a social media hub, and supported a number of tools to allow people to participate in the process.



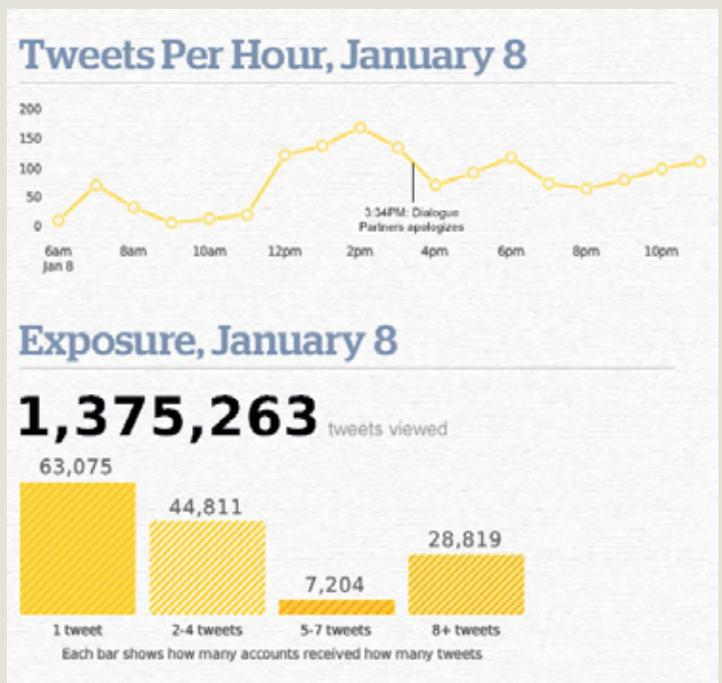
“Despite a mutual agreement to part ways, it is important for me to recognize and acknowledge the meaningful engagement process designed for this project by Dialogue Partners. Furthermore, it is the plan of the City of Hamilton to take what Dialogue Partners has provided us and to implement it going forward.”

— Chris Murray, City Manager
City of Hamilton

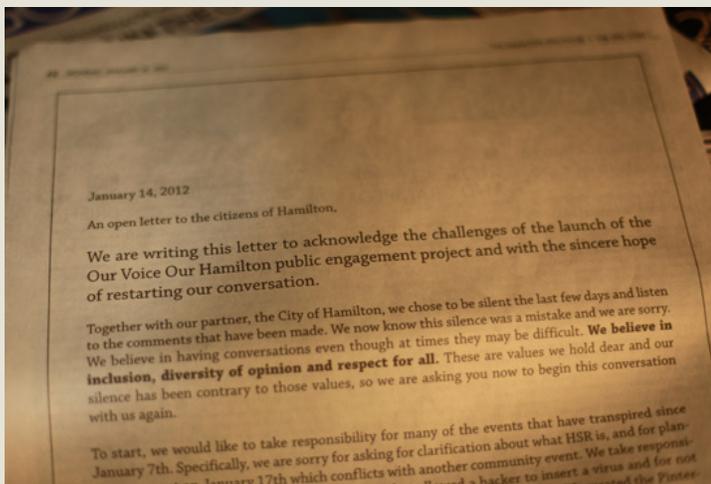
In spite of the public outcry, hundreds of residents felt that it was an important conversation to have, and participated by completing the online survey and commenting on the project Facebook page in the three days the consultation was ran before things went silent. Unfortunately for some people, those who were trying to get the project shut down became bullies and criticized and intimidated anyone trying to participate constructively.

When the project website was hacked, the City of Hamilton requested that Dialogue Partners take down the site and stay silent until the City and Dialogue Partners could regroup and come up with a plan. We agreed. In the days that followed we saw newspaper and online articles pop up that were one-sided and perpetuated the false information. We decided that silence was not golden and that we needed to speak up.

We issued an apology for our missteps to both the citizens of Hamilton and City Council, posted a blog on our website with our side of the story, and set the record straight.



Twitter was very active the day after the launch. These statistics were compiled by CBC Hamilton.



Dialogue Partners placed a full-page ad in the Hamilton Spectator. This picture is from blog run by Dave Heidebrecht.

In communicating to Council, we encouraged them to honour ALL voices not just the loudest ones. We advised them to think about whether DP had become a block to participants being able to have a conversation about city services, and if so, we suggested that another consultant be appointed to complete the project.

After discussions, Dialogue Partners and the City agreed the best way to serve ALL residents voices in this conversation about City services would be if DP did not facilitate it. We decided that in the best interest of the project and all citizens of Hamilton, we would step away.

STILL A SUCCESS

It is not an easy business decision to step away from a project – there are financial and reputation implications. However, we believe we acted in the most ethical way possible; to remove ourselves from the conversation when it became about us.

In spite of the outcome, this project was successful in many ways:

- » We developed a **solid, meaningful engagement plan** that will continue to be used for the project by the City, and implemented by staff.
- » We created **innovative tools** such as an online game that walked participants through a day in the life of Hamiltonians and the services they come in contact with.
- » We developed a **mobile app** that allowed people to participate on the go.
- » We **condensed 350 city services** into a short reference booklet for participants that was easy to read and relate to.
- » **Hundreds of people** participated in the survey and online discussions in a period of less than 3 days.

DP learned many lessons about leadership, risk and how to equip organizations how to engage when times get tough.

