



DIALOGUE
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Bringing people together

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THE COMPETITION OF ENGAGEMENT: Getting people in the room

by Tannis Topolnisky

You spend hours, weeks and months planning, you have a great event planned, you want to hear from people, you really want to do this right. And then a handful of people show up. We've learned that traditional advertising doesn't cut it. There are two things that truly help bring people into the room: 1) how you get the info out and 2) what you say about it. It requires a bit of creativity for both.

Moving beyond web postings and newspaper ads to get the word out. These are still important sources to use, however, if you've always done this and you always get the usual suspects, or poor attendance, maybe it's time for a change. If you received an invitation to two parties on the same night, one was from a long time friend and the other from someone you didn't know, which party would you choose to RSVP to? Likely the person you know and have a relationship with. Same goes for engagement activities. You have a relationship with those people who show up all the time to your events, and so they keep coming. But how do you get all those other people who are impacted, affected and interested in the issue to come to your party when you're complete strangers? Find their friends and ask them to invite them for you. We have found that when we take the time to call organizations directly and ask them to not only participate, but more importantly to ask them to ask their members, networks and friends to participate themselves, to spread the word through their channels or to even host their own events. The impact of a real life phone call from someone versus sending an anonymous, faceless email is significant. When we call to invite people we hear things like "wow, no one's ever asked us before", "how do we find out about more of these kinds of things" and "I appreciate the phone call". It's personal, it shows you do care and it starts to build relationships.

What to say about it once you've got their attention. If you've reached someone on the other end of the phone or you've got them to read your ad, now is your chance to grab their interest. People are busy, it is our job to show them how they are impacted by the issue and what expertise they can bring to the table that is essential in order to make the best decisions. It's not all about you, but often we explain things in our own terms from our own perspective because that's how we're used to talking about the project. So think about it from theirs.

*"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.
It is the only thing that ever has."*

- Margaret Mead



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Read these lines. What are your response and reactions to them and why ...

- Business Plans & Budget OR Our City. Our Budget. Our Future
- Asset Management OR Building A Different Relationship
- Infrastructure OR Providing For the Future
- Service Levels OR Re-Imagining Our Schools

Most people don't have the expertise to be able to provide you with advice about how to optimize investment process for infrastructure renewal. That's the expertise of the City planners. While at the end of the day those may very well be the decisions that are made, what's important to people and the expertise that they can bring to help make these decisions is about the City services they use, why they value and use them and their expectations of these services. They can tell you things like they want to have enough water to run a load of laundry and bath their kids at the same time. They can tell you if, and how much, they are willing to pay for this. And they can tell you if they're still willing to have this level of service if it means shorter hours of operation at the rec center.

When framed this way, these are the kinds of conversations people have probably already had in their heads or with their families and friends. They can see that they do have something of value to contribute and that the topic is of interest to them.

Now you've got them thinking, and now you've made a connection. These strategies help get people in the room.

And, did you notice which IAP2 core values you'll be achieving by doing these things?

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