Community Engagement Types & Tools

Community engagement tools vary in their intensity and level of interaction. It is important to consider your intent, scope, timeline and available resources to support the effort when choosing an engagement type and tool. There are three types of engagement tools — thick, thin and conventional.

Thick Engagement

Thick engagement is the most intensive and interactive of the 3 types. Thick engagement tools offer opportunity for group dialogue, sharing of diverse perspectives and experiences, the ability to present a range of views or options, and lay out a variety of possible actions or policies. Some view thick engagement as the most desirable form of democratic participation in decision-making.

Thin Engagement

Thin engagement is quicker, easier, more convenient and less costly than thick engagement. Members of the public are able to express their opinions, ideas and concerns in just a few moments, often allowing a larger number of community members able to contribute to the decision-making process.

Conventional Engagement

Conventional engagement is traditionally used in most public meetings. Members of the public are separated from officials and public comments are usually limited. When the public has limited input in decision-making, subsequent policies are less likely to represent the communities needs and interests accurately.

Thick Engagement
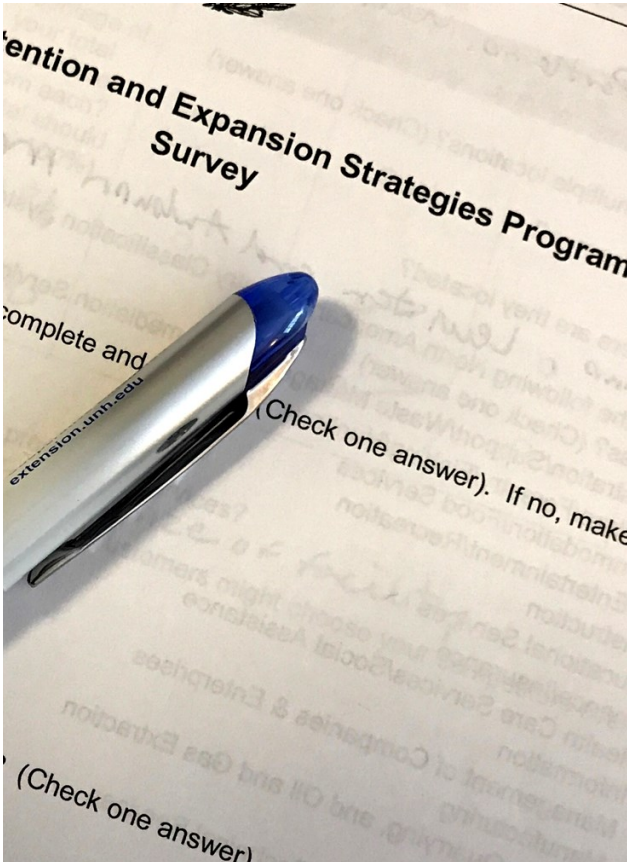
Community Visioning
One process to help a group move from vision to action is community visioning. This process entails engaging the community to develop Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies, and Action Plans.

Community Forum
Community forums are meetings open to the public that involve residents to provide input on projects, issues, problems, and needs.

Word Café
World Café is a structured conversational process in which groups of people discuss a topic at several tables, with individuals switching tables periodically and then getting introduced to the previous discussion.

Community Survey
Community surveys help gather information about local attitudes regarding precisely defined issues, problems or opportunities. Survey questions may be open-ended or multiple choice.

Focus Group
The focus group is a way to gather the opinions or ideas from a small, targeted group of citizens. The intention of focus groups is perhaps more to build a synergy of thoughts and ideas than it is to make projections about the community.

Storytelling Circle
A storytelling circle provides an opportunity for individuals to share their stories or ideas based on a theme or prompt in a group setting. Ideally, groups are composed so that a diversity of perspectives are heard and information represents the greater community as much as possible.

Interview
An interview is a conversation with a purpose, designed to help collect information about assumptions or perceptions of community needs or activities. Interviews are useful when looking for in-depth information on a particular topic.

Asset Mapping
Asset mapping is a technique for cataloguing assets or resources to meet community objectives. The goal is to identify and use assets to improve community, rather than solely focusing on problems or needs.

Thin Engagement

Story Maps

Story maps are an online mapping tool. They are just as they are titled—a map that tells a story. As an engagement tool, map data is collected through crowdsourcing. For example, community members provide a photo of their favorite place and share why via a memory, story, or a wish for the future of that place. Photos are uploaded to ArcGIS online and geotagged on a map that can be shared. A story map can also be used to document a tour, present a history, and explain a project.

Posters

High traffic areas are an effective location for posters that ask questions and collect responses from community members. It is helpful if there is a volunteer present to encourage participation. Mini chalkboards are a creative way to invite community members to respond and snap a photo of their chalked response for submission. Good locations may include a library, town hall, recreation center, coffee shop, bank, or other frequently visited public venues.

Rich Pictures

A rich picture is a visual representation of a system that depicts all of its elements and how they interact. You don't have to be an artist to do this; in fact, some of the most effective rich pictures consist of simple line drawings, stick figures and arrows. Cartoons, labels, arrows and multiple-colors can create an inspiring result.

Post-It Note Flash Mob

This technique simply enables passers-by to post their thoughts about a particular place, building, or community issue or to ask a question using post-it notes. Stickers asking a specific question can also be effective.

Children's Artwork

Engaging children through artwork can be an effective tool to engage the community. Partner with a school or recreation center to ask children a question and have them draw a corresponding picture. Use the artwork to decorate places people frequent like town offices, post office, banks, and local shop windows.

More resources:
University of Kansas, Community Tool Box
The World Café, The World Café Method
ArcGIS, Story Maps
Candy Chang, I wish this was

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