

Effective Engagement: building relationships
with community and other stakeholders

Book 3 the engagement toolkit



3.6 Civic Journalism

Description:

Civic journalism sets out to provide people with detailed news and information about specific issues to allow them to make the decisions they are called on to make in a democratic society. Newspapers, radio and television stations and the internet combine to provide forums for citizens to question their politicians, polling the electorate to elicit the major issues and then questioning legislators.

Civic journalism is an effort to reconnect with the real concerns that viewers and readers have about the issues they care most about, not in a way that panders to them, but in a way that treats them as citizens with the responsibilities of self-government, rather than as consumers to whom goods and services are sold. Civic journalism takes the traditional five w's of journalism (who, what, when, where, why) and expands them to ask 'why is this story important to me and to the community in which I live?'⁹

Objectives:

Civic journalism aims to develop more democratically active citizens. Civic journalism aims to do this by providing expert comment on an issue, either in the media or by organising face-to-face public debate.

In this way, civic journalism is encouraging citizens to become engaged in democratic processes, or to take some action (e.g. to reduce water use).

Outcomes:

Better informed citizens and more effective media coverage of issues that are more directly relevant to citizens' rights and responsibilities in civic society.

Uses/strengths:

- Can be used to raise widespread public awareness of community issues.
- Offers citizens the chance to determine what makes news in their community through polls or participation in community forums.
- Combines the power of the media to set political and social agendas with the power of individuals and groups to speak out about their issues of concern, and hence can influence the decision making process.

Special considerations/weaknesses:

- The media must decide whether to become involved to this extent.
- May pander to those who are most 'media friendly' (glamorous, articulate people) and hence may not be representative of community views.
- Outcomes will be influenced by the media's agenda.

Resources required:

- News agencies or individual news reporters

Can be used for:

- Engage community
- Discover community issues
- Develop community capacity
- Communicate an issue

Number of people required to help organise:

- Medium (2–12 people)

Audience size:

- Large (> 30)

Time required:

- Medium (6 weeks – 6 months)
- Short (< 6 weeks)

Skill level/support required:

- High (Specialist skills)
- Medium (Computer & other expertise)

Cost:

- Medium (AUD\$1,000 – AUD\$10,000)

Participation level:

- High (Stakeholders participate in decision)
- Medium (Opinions noted)

Innovation level:

- Medium (Some new elements)

Method:

If citizen generated:

1. Contact news agencies with case studies of civic journalism and their advantages for the news media and the community.
2. Organise focus groups, citizen juries, citizens' committees.
3. Advise local media of the opportunity to be involved.
4. Keep contact with key journalists to encourage them to treat this as a 'running story' with regular updates for the duration of the campaign or until the issue is resolved.

If news agency generated:

1. Publicise public meetings, focus groups, etc, to determine what issues are of most concern within the local area.
2. Coordinate coverage with other media (print, radio and television).
3. Invite politicians to discuss issues with citizen groups on camera.
4. Encourage citizens to develop options and publicise these options as an open forum for comment/voting.
5. Present solutions to those who have the power to make decisions and report back on their reactions/responses.

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- <http://www.cpn.org/topics/communication/civicjourn.html> [accessed 07/06/2005]

⁹ <http://www.cpn.org/topics/communication/civicjourn.html> [accessed 07/06/2005]