VIRTUAL
ENGAGEMENT

MAKING AND MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS IN A NEW VIRTUAL WORLD

BY THE HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

H-GAC
Houston-Galveston
Area Council

Opportunity

Organizations like the Houston-Galveston Area Council are exploring opportunities to expand virtual engagement to new levels. Virtual engagement can expand the agency's reach to a greater number of residents across our 13-county region efficiently, effectively, and at an affordable cost. This document will cover virtual engagement tactics that can be utilized, ways to address the digital divide, and diversity and inclusion. These tactics will allow members of our communities to continue to participate throughout planning processes from a distance.

Tools and Tactics

VIRTUAL PUBLIC MEETINGS
Virtual public meetings have become more popular than ever. These public meetings allow more people to "attend" the meeting from the comfort of their own office or home. This convenience allows residents to participate without the concern of access to mobility, navigating through traffic, and the need for childcare. During virtual public meetings, taking interactive breaks allows the audience to regain focus through an activity. This can be something as simple as taking a poll. A meeting procedure document should be created (internally for staff hosting, panelists, and externally for the general public) that outlines virtual meeting etiquette and directions on how to join the meeting. These meetings can be streamed live on Facebook where residents can then host "watch parties."

One drawback to virtual public meetings is the missing element of face-to-face personal conversations between residents and the project planners. Personal virtual meetings can be offered following a virtual public meeting to provide a one-on-one experience with a subject matter expert. This allows residents to ask questions that they may have from the virtual public meeting. A five to ten-minute time limit should be in place to accommodate meeting with as many residents as possible during an established time period (ex. two hours).

Regulations implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for Title II (state and local government services) and Title III (public accommodations and commercial facilities) must continue to be met. Virtual meetings must be high quality and cannot produce lag, must provide clear images, and a clear audible transmission of voices without irregular pauses in communication. If an interpreter is utilized on screen, the interpreter's face, arms, hands, and fingers must be clearly visible. A live caption option should be available to accommodate persons with hearing disabilities. It is important to keep in mind organizations are required to give primary consideration to the aid or service requested by the person who has a communication disability.

INTERACTIVE WEBSITE – An interactive website can serve as a storyteller and creates a safe space for residents to engage freely. This type of site would include information about the project, surveys, polls, storyboards with an interactive map that allows pinning and comment submission (GIS), 3-D renderings (GIS), project timeline that identifies where you are in the process, an embedded informational video, an interactive quiz, downloadable coloring sheets for children, and a "stay informed" option that allows residents to submit their email to receive project status updates and future meeting notices. Once public meetings have been held, materials such as presentations, maps, and handouts can also be added and accessed online. Things to keep in mind are the layout, color scheme, ease of use, the functionality of the site, and language translation capabilities.

SOCIAL MEDIA – H-GAC utilizes social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube as communications tools. Content is strategically created for each platform and audience. These posts can be organic or paid promotional posts. The paid advertising allows for ads to geo-target a specific audience. This can be executed by entering select zip codes, age ranges, and interests.

Through social media, you can continue to "humanize" your agency by adding humor, introducing staff members to followers, adding interactive activities such as bingo and trivia games, and informing followers of upcoming events and public meetings. Facebook also has the ability to stream live from Zoom, Webex, and other video conferencing resources. While streaming live, audiences watching the livestream via Facebook can create "watch parties," which allow their followers who are not currently following your organization to tune in to the livestream as well, expanding your audience reach. Instagram also has a "live" feature. Here, you can set up interviews with media, hold a live conversation with an elected official, or have a subject matter expert go live about a topic and answer any questions that are submitted in real time (hurricane preparedness would be an example).

Videos posted on Instagram are typically short – about 30-second to one-minute videos. However, IGTV allows the posting of longer videos. These videos remain at the top of your page, making it easy for followers to find. Since these videos remain at the top year-round (unless removed), it is important that the IGTV content is always relevant. A "who are we" video as an IGTV post would be a good example of this. Facebook has the capacity to upload longer videos directly to your organization's page. Facebook and Instagram both have a "stories" feature. This allows you to post a photo or short video that will expire in 24 hours. Multiple unrelated stories can be posted, or a single major story can be posted in segments. This technique provides the audience with an anticipation as they wait for the next slide to learn more. LinkedIn traditionally serves a more professional audience. Here, you can engage with stakeholders and post job openings. All platforms allow the posting of original content, including videos and the ability to share others' content, and to tag appropriate partners. A YouTube channel can serve as a hub for all your videos and video playlists.

NEWSLETTERS & EBLASTS
Regularly scheduled newsletters keep residents and elected officials informed of what's currently happening and about upcoming events. Special edition newsletters can consist of project specific information and updates. These types of newsletters would target a specific audience interested in the project.

TRAININGS / VIRTUAL PROGRAMS
While we live in an era of technology it is important to be mindful of those who are unfamiliar with modern technology and how to use it. Training videos can serve as a step-by-step guide. The videos should address how to download required applications (Zoom, GoToMeeting, Webex), how to log into meetings, where you can leave a comment during the public meetings, and any other additional information. An educational video can be created to better visually explain this information. Providing these types of resources can help residents feel more at ease and encourage them to participate in your meetings.

Virtual programs are similar to online learning and are targeted to youth and young adults. Many high school and college students are familiar with distance learning, which is what makes these programs successful.

There are many benefits that can result from a successful virtual learning program. It allows you to begin building relationships with a younger demographic, it encourages young constituents to become involved in their own communities, and it educates them on the world of urban planning and how they can become future planners.

WEBINARS – Webinars typically serve as online trainings or seminars. This format allows for more people across the region to attend and allows for those who missed the webinar to view a recording. A webinar series can provide useful information on a weekly basis. This allows interested participants to return for more information, furthering your credibility as a reliable and consistent resource for your communities.

A webinar hub on the main H-GAC website provides a central location where all webinars can be found and allows residents to explore multiple webinars covering different topics.

The Digital Divide

While virtual engagement is a convenient and effective tool, we still need to acknowledge what is known as the digital divide. This divide addresses the lack of access to internet or technology equipment, such as laptops or desktops, smartphones, or tablets. A study conducted in early 2019 by the Pew Research Center shows that white people are more likely to have access to broadband internet service than Blacks or Hispanics.[1] The study also identifies that whites, Blacks, and Hispanics are more likely to have access to a smartphone than to any other piece of technology equipment.

Our region is made of large amounts of rural areas, and Americans who live in rural areas consistently have lower levels of broadband adoption.[2] This means

rural residents are less likely to have internet access and modern technology equipment.

It's also vital to understand who is not online. Women of color (Black and Hispanic) over the age of 65 are most likely to not use the internet (mostly due to being unfamiliar with how to use the internet and applications).[3] A step-by-step guide, as previously mentioned, can help to include this population.

Many organizations are revisiting traditional tactics that were used before the internet. Telephone town halls, text messaging options, pre-postage postcard mailers with a survey on the back, and notices sent with utility bills are some examples of these tactics. Other features can be used in conjunction with online tools. Most video conferencing tools have a "dial-in" feature that allows people without internet access to call in and listen to meetings and provide comments. Public comments can be received via postal mail and recorded on a voicemail line. Local community outreach, such as pop-up meetings, will focus on finding people where they already are. Building relationships with local community centers or other community stakeholders is also important since these organizations have established trust from their communities.

Diversity and Outreach Case Study

"Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being invited to dance." Verna Myers, *Founder, Verna Myers Consulting Group*

It's important to recognize the cultural diversity of our great region. Within the 13-counties we serve, 37% of the population is white, closely followed by 36.8% Hispanic/Latinx, 16.9% Black, 7.4% Asian, and 1.9% other.[4] When reaching out to diverse communities, it's important to understand how to reach each group individually. There is no cookie cutter method that fits reaching these diverse communities. The concept of "intersectional diversity" also needs to be understood. How you communicate and target a third-generation Hispanic woman with a career and college education may be much different from how you target an older Hispanic male who does not speak English and works multiple jobs to support his family. Because they are both Hispanic does not mean they will prefer the same method of communications.

Finding leaders within the communities and building relationships with them is vital. This is not referring to elected officials, rather advocates and individuals that have roots deeply planted within the community who are respected by the residents.

Internal discussions amongst staff members could be a great way to share ideas about how to conduct better outreach to these diverse and sometimes hard to reach communities. Conducting a roundtable with staff members that look like and relate to the communities we are trying to reach has shown to be productive and effective at other organizations. University outreach can serve as a great way to reach diverse populations as well.

DIVERSITY

Conclusion

As audiences' communications tastes continue to evolve, so too must our strategies for reaching those audiences. As public participation professionals, we must to continue to listen, learn from, share with, and engage with the residents across our region to ensure each member of our community is involved in the planning process. A strong virtual engagement plan is just one of many strategies that will help expand your audience reach and make your outreach efforts successful. It is our hope that this plan can be a part of your overall outreach success.

REFERENCES

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[4] H-GAC Regional Demographic Snapshot https://datalab.h-gac.com/snapshot