5 WAYS TO INCREASE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC MEETINGS
INTRODUCTION

Imagine if the public input process on developments that happen in communities across the country accurately reflected the views of constituents. What would that look like?

It would mean transportation options had optimal routes for residents, business and industrial developments could start without delay and there would be the right amount of firefighters or police officers on duty at all times.

Citizens might be surprised to learn that they have the power to affect these important decisions every day by attending and participating in public meetings, and government leaders rely heavily on citizen engagement to accomplish their outcomes. In Granicus’ recent State of the Clerk survey, we asked more than 700 government clerks to indicate the level of importance their organization placed on citizen engagement. The majority — more than 55 percent — of respondents indicated that citizen engagement is very important to their missions.

And they’re right. Increasing citizen engagement in the public meeting process is a win-win for everyone, which is why we’ve provided best practices for making it happen at your organization.
1. POST YOUR MEETING NOTICES ON MULTIPLE CHANNELS

In an ever-changing digital age, there are many easy and cost-effective ways to inform your citizens of upcoming meetings. Leveraging multiple channels like social media, dedicated feedback channels, text messaging and your organization’s website are some good ways to ensure citizens receive your meeting message.

Social Media: Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube have allowed people all over the world to connect with one another. Many organizations in the private sector also utilize many of these channels to communicate with their customers and prospects.

When it comes to public sector meetings, social media can be a great tool for spreading the word and reaching your audience. Testing your message on various platforms can also help give you a good sense of where your audience is most engaging.

Example: The Town of Castle Rock, Colo., frequently uses its Facebook page to post reminders about upcoming Town Council meetings, along with a link to the agenda.

Text Messaging: Text messaging is another valuable tool when it comes to meeting awareness. A text messaging service can automate this process for you so you don’t even have to think about it. Citizens will automatically get an alert on their phone about an upcoming meeting. Granicus provides text messaging capabilities with our Interactive Text Messaging platform, including new features.

Email Marketing: In a digital world, email stands the test of time. In the private sector, there is a high return on investment for email marketing (for every $1 spent, companies see $38 in return). In the public sector, this can translate to more people getting their flu shots, or more people being aware of your important program or service. When it comes to public meetings, email marketing can have the same affect — more visibility and opportunity for people to know the details of your meeting, and the higher the likelihood that they’ll participate. The GovDelivery Communications Cloud is the largest communications platform for government — to learn more, visit the GovDelivery Communications Suite overview.
2. PROVIDE OUTLETS FOR CITIZEN FEEDBACK

In our recent Public Sector Trends Report for 2017, respondents were asked a question about how they intake feedback. Not surprisingly, the greatest response was with phone calls. While it was once the primary communication channel, taking in feedback from citizens through phone calls and analyzing those comments and putting them into reports can be time-intensive. Consider these other channels for intaking feedback:

Dedicated Citizen Engagement Tool: Many local governments use a dedicated citizen engagement tool to gather feedback from citizens. For example, the City of Austin, Texas, another current Granicus client, uses its platform, SpeakUp Austin!, to gather feedback from its constituents about how to improve the City of Austin. This is part of the reason it was awarded a “designation as one of the top-ranked U.S. Digital Cities” in the U.S. in 2016. The City primarily uses its SpeakUp page to give citizens a platform to introduce new ideas.

Make it easy for citizens to request to speak at public meetings by enabling them to do so online. eComment, a Granicus product, allows citizens to give online feedback on specific agenda items; it also gives them the ability to make a request to speak in person.

Optimized Website: An up-to-date website is a great way to engage your citizens while simultaneously making processes easier on staff. If your website is easy to use, easy to navigate and clear of clutter, constituents will be able to accomplish service-related tasks (such as paying parking fines, applying for permits or researching public records) simply and quickly. This can also mean more time for staff to spend on citizen outreach.

Example: In the City of Santa Barbara, Calif., a website update complete with the CivicaCMS (a government-specific content management system by Granicus) enabled more than 80,000 website visitors per month to view relevant content and accomplish tasks.

Text Message Surveys: What better time to take feedback than at your meeting? One of the most effective ways to get instant feedback is with text message surveys. Consider passing out fliers with a text message survey, or advertise the survey at your meeting. With 95 percent of Americans owning a cell phone, surveys via text message can be a very accessible way for people to provide feedback.

(Now) we have a lot of ways for people to contact us and ask a lot of questions; so we can engage more, and really provide more of a conversation than just a tell, says City of Santa Barbara Webmaster Scott Nelson.

Fliers handed out at a economic development engagement town hall.
3. BE TIMELY

Timing is everything — especially when it comes to communication. Posting important dates, deadlines and opportunities for engagement is a process, and may not adhere to the “less is more” rule. Here are helpful deadlines for ensuring you are timely with your meeting communication:

**Meeting Info:** Increasing attendance or engagement in your public meeting all starts with the most valuable information: date, time and location. Make sure these details are communicated on a regular basis — and well ahead of your actual meeting (we suggest weekly reminders, then one day before).

**Agendas:** Before your meeting even begins, a helpful tool to increase attendance is posting your agenda. This can help generate interest, increase transparency and alert citizens to relevant topics of discussion. Make sure to prominently post dates, times and locations very clearly so interested parties know exactly where to go and when to be there.

**Meeting Minutes:** After the meeting is over, it’s important to immediately publish minutes either on your website or through another engagement platform (including agenda management applications). This is a process that can be easily automated. Allowing citizens to easily access minutes can help them see the important and relevant issues that were discussed. Furthermore, they can review decisions that were made and understand how they will be affected.

4. BROADCAST MEETINGS IN REAL TIME

Having the ability to watch meetings, even when citizens are unable to attend in person, is an invaluable service to provide to the public. It’s especially valuable to the elderly, those with disabilities and citizens without access to transportation or child care. It also provides a level of service, convenience and transparency that constituents will appreciate and enjoy.

**Webcasting:** Broadcasting live public meetings online affords the public a convenient avenue to follow along with the decisions being made in their community that will ultimately affect them. Perhaps the greater benefit is that the public can stay informed without the need to be physically in person at the meeting chambers or having to wait a certain number of days for the minutes of the meeting to be posted. For those citizens who want nothing more than to know what’s going on as events are happening, live-streaming video makes this a reality.

**On-Demand Video:** Having the ability to watch an archived meeting from the comfort of their own homes first may help potential meeting attendees understand the meeting process: what order issues are normally discussed in, when speakers get to present and how votes are recorded and decisions are made. Live and on-demand meeting video helps demystify the meeting experience for new attendees, and makes the idea of going to a public meeting less intimidating.
5. CONNECT THE DOTS

While the world is becoming increasingly digital, it doesn’t mean that in-person attendance or feedback gathering is going away — quite the opposite! Technology allows those in government the chance to optimize the traditional public meeting into a more involved process so that we can enhance our decision-making processes and increase citizen engagement.

Many government clerks and elected officials report at least one or two regular attendees, if not more, at public meetings.

A good way to keep meeting attendees coming back — and encourage new attendees — is to make them feel included and heard in meetings.

Ultimately, every participating member of the public wants to see real, tangible outcomes from their engagement. Make sure citizens understand how their feedback and input will be used in the decision-making process. Adding a “Democracy in Action” section to your organization’s website is a great way to track and display projects and initiatives that were suggested by citizens, allowing them to see that their involvement does make a difference.

ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

1. Post Your Meeting Notice on Multiple Platforms
   In an ever-changing digital age, there are many easy and cost-effective ways to inform your citizens of upcoming meetings. Leveraging multiple channels like social media can help amplify your message. Test engagement on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to see what has the highest level of engagement.

2. Provide Outlets for Citizen Feedback
   While it was once the primary communication channel, using phone calls to intake feedback from citizens and putting them into reports can be time-intensive. Adding a dedicated citizen engagement tool (in addition to your website) like SpeakUp or eComment can save valuable time and resources.

3. Be as Timely as Possible
   It’s one thing to promptly post meeting and agendas prior to your public meeting, but how quickly is your organization following up with meeting minutes and follow-up items? Connect with citizens within 24 hours to ensure they are informed about decisions or issues that are relevant to them.

4. Broadcast Meetings in Real Time
   While attending public meetings in person may not be an option, broadcasting meetings in real time can help increase engagement from citizens. Webcast your meeting so that people can participate in real time (and engage with you on social media), and consider recording public meetings and posting them on demand-on your website.

5. Connect the Dots
   Think of the public meeting process as an engagement funnel — first seek to connect with posts on multiple platforms, engage citizens with an opportunity to provide feedback easily, follow up with relevant information in a timely way and make sure people have a way to go back and revisit the contents of your public meeting.
ABOUT GRANICUS

Granicus provides technology that empowers government organizations to create better lives for the people they serve. By offering the industry’s leading cloud-based solutions for communications, meeting and agenda management, and digital services to over 3,000 public sector organizations, Granicus helps turn government missions into quantifiable realities. Granicus products connect over 150 million people, creating a powerful network to enhance citizen engagement. By optimizing decision-making processes, Granicus strives to help government see better outcomes and a greater impact for the citizens they serve.

For more information on Granicus, visit www.granicus.com.
To schedule a consultation, email us at info@granicus.com.