

Entertaining and instructional, a community forum educates through involvement. One of the great advantages of a forum is that it allows participants to explain their own views and, at the same time, learn to understand each other's differences. Use this face-to-face technique to build deeper awareness of your message or issue, gain a better understanding of your stakeholders' viewpoints and build the foundations of a broader and stronger coalition.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 12:

Utilizing Community Forums to Deliver Your Message

BY

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The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the word “forum” as a public meeting or assembly for open discussion. Community forums seek to disseminate and gather information directly to or from community members. They offer an excellent opportunity for stakeholders and other interested parties to raise concerns and become involved in developing strategies.

Why hold a community forum? It is a great way to raise awareness in your community and to get people involved in an issue. It can provide an opportunity for you and your constituents to join forces. People can only support your efforts if they understand the issue, understands what needs to be changed and feel that they can make a difference. Be aware, however, many community members may be distrustful at first because they don't think anything will happen or they are worried their comments will be used against them. So start by building trust and cooperation to give people ample opportunities to voice their concerns and listen to them by using a community forum.

Know Your Audience

As with any public outreach effort, it is important that you know your audience. One way to accomplish this is by conducting a community assessment. A community assessment is an exercise where you gather information on the current concerns of your stakeholder groups. The information comes from many sources and is elicited by many techniques, including interviews, focus groups and scanning demographic data collected by local agencies. Begin by assembling and comparing information already collected by your or other similar agencies. Depending on the amount and quality of data already available, you may also want to collect fresh information through interviews and focus groups.

Forum Types

Once you have characterized and understood your stakeholders concerns and information needs, you can decide on which type of forum will be most suitable. For each, use a strong moderator to keep things on track. A community forum should last about an hour (not longer than an hour-and-a-half) -- long enough to educate your audience and short enough to keep their attention. You should also have a timekeeper, to help keep the forum on time.

There are four general types of forums.

Town Hall Meeting

Two or three speakers raise key issues. Prepared responses follow from other speakers. The audience then comments and asks questions. Speakers answer questions and make closing remarks. A moderator moves the discussion along.

Panel Conversation

Two to four speakers talk casually with the audience. The moderator encourages debate among panelists and audience.

Presentation & Panel

One or more speakers raise key issues. Three or more panel members offer their special perspectives and question the speakers. Then the floor is opened to the audience. The speakers make closing remarks. Keep the number of speakers and panelists manageable to give each speaker enough time to make remarks and have ample time to answer questions from the panel and audience within the hour to hour-and-a-half time limit.

Talk Show

A strong facilitator briefly questions two or three panelists and then opens discussion to the audience.

Planning is Key

Set clear goals for what you want to achieve. Make your arrangements early! Because there is a lot to do to make a community forum a success, you should start planning the event at least six to eight weeks in advance. Keep these tips in mind.

Develop a detailed plan for the structure of the forum. The more organized you are, the more likely that the forum will be successful and that many people will attend. Make a list of all the questions you must answer to make your forum a success. Some of these questions include the following:

- ◆ When, where and at what time will the forum occur?
- ◆ How long should it last?
- ◆ How many people will speak and who are they?
- ◆ Who will moderate?
- ◆ Who will sponsor the event?
- ◆ Who will keep time?
- ◆ How much time will you allocate for questions from the audience?
- ◆ How will you publicize the event?
- ◆ How many organizations will be invited and how will the invitations go out?
- ◆ What printed resources will be available for participants to take home?
- ◆ How will you notify media about the event?

Choose a tempting forum title. Draw your intended audience in. Make the title interesting and intriguing yet descriptive.

Select dynamic speakers! Good speakers will help ensure that the forum is effective in getting your message across. Seek out speakers who have done progressive work on your initiative or issue, are knowledgeable about the subject, have the power to influence or change policy and will inspire participants to take action. Look inside your organization and any other group that is supportive of your issue. Possibilities for speakers include:

- ◆ The president or policy director of a supportive organization
- ◆ Speakers from supportive organizations
- ◆ Policy makers, including members of your organization's board of directors, city or county council members and/or progressive legislators.

You want a lot of people there; so invite as many potential allies as you can identify. Obtain biographical information on the speakers in advance so appropriate introductions can be made during the forum.

Contact potential speakers early, so that they can arrange their schedules and plan their presentations. This also provides you with enough time to book alternative speakers, if your first choice doesn't work out. Finally, once the details have been decided, be sure to send a letter to each presenter, confirming the details of the forum, the structure and content of their presentations, and the audio-visual resources that will be available to them.

Find a location that is easily accessible and central to your target audience. Book the location well in advance and arrange for audio-visual equipment, as needed. Consider a location and a time that will draw a natural audience, such as a school or campus building, immediately after classes, or a church or synagogue, immediately after services. The setting you choose for the forum will partially depend on the audience you wish to reach. If your audience is the community at large, then a community center or town hall meeting space may be the right location. Each location will have different regulations for use of the space. Once you decide on the ideal setting, contact the appropriate authority for that location, and follow the procedure set out for using the space.

Develop a plan to advertise the forum. Make sure that people know about your forum well in advance. Get all the forum sponsors to assist in getting the word out. Widely advertise your meeting. Hand out flyers at community events. Place flyers on the bulletin boards at community centers, religious institutions and at popular hangouts. Local newspapers and radio, and/or cable television stations may be willing to run public service announcements (PSAs) about the forum. Or you could place paid advertisements to promote your forum in local newspapers and on radio and cable television outlets.

Be prepared to respond to opponents. Expect opponents to come out of the woodwork and to be vocal. Before the forum, prepare a non-confrontational response expressing the importance of dialogue. While everyone attending the forum has a right to speak, those attending have a right to know exactly what organizations and/or position each speaker represents. It is a good idea to ask everyone before they ask a question or make a statement during the question and answer session where he/she lives and if she/he represents an organization. To open discussion after an opposing question or comment, you could say,

“It sounds like there are some different views on this issue. It is important to hear different views, so who has a different viewpoint to express?”

Do You Need a Checklist for the Big Day?

Yes! Your forum will run smoothly if all the important details are taken care of. Checklists can help you to ensure that nothing has been forgotten and that you have done every thing you can to make the event a success.

At least a week before the forum:

- ✓ Confirm that the room is still booked for the event and all necessary paperwork has been submitted.
- ✓ Confirm that all the presenters will attend and that you have all the information and equipment they will need.
- ✓ Confirm that all the audio-visual equipment, podiums, microphones, etc., have been ordered.
- ✓ Finalize any materials you plan to hand out on your issue. Make sure you have enough copies for everyone you anticipate showing up.

At least a day in advance, make sure that you have:

- ✓ Enough chairs for the number of people expected to attend as well as table, chairs, dais or podium, and props for the speakers.
- ✓ Sign-up sheets for participants so that you can contact them after the event.
- ✓ Media sign-in sheets for attending members of the press.
- ✓ Organized handouts that can be quickly distributed.

On the day of the event, make sure you:

- ✓ Arrive early to ensure that the room is properly set up.
- ✓ Assign volunteers to key locations to properly service the event.
- ✓ Place sign-in sheets and materials where people will enter the event.
- ✓ Test all audio-visual equipment to ensure that everything is in working order.

COMMUNITY FORUM EVALUATION
(Forum Title and date here)

Please take a few minutes to give us your thoughts and suggestions on this forum. Your input will be greatly appreciated.

Section I – Overall

On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest), please tell us your thoughts on the following:

1. This forum met my overall expectations. _____
2. The forum content reflected the description outlined in the forum information. _____
3. The information presented was relevant to my interest in the forum topic. _____
4. The speakers' presentations were clear and informative. _____
5. The speakers provided enough time for discussion and questions. _____
6. Overall, your reason for attending this forum could be described as:

Section II. – In Your Opinion

Please circle the appropriate answer.

1. In your opinion, this forum was:
1 – Too basic 2 – Just right 3 – Too advanced
2. In your opinion, the scope of the material presented was:
1 – Too basic 2 – Just right 3 – Too advanced
3. In your opinion, the meeting facility was:
1 – Poor 2 – Average 3 – Excellent
4. Would you like more information on the forum topic? ____ Yes ____ No
If yes, please provide your mailing address below.

Thank You!

Follow Up

Send thank you notes to the presenters for supporting the event and coming to speak. Thank, via e-mail if possible, the people who attended, reiterating what they can do to become or get more involved!

Develop an evaluation form liked this one. At the end of the forum, ask forum participants to complete it before leaving. Speakers should also be asked to complete the evaluation form.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>

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