

Giving Citizens Their Say

Making Consultation Matter

The Deliberation Network

Giving Citizens Their Say: *Making Consultation Matter*

By Tim Woods
The Deliberation Network
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A healthy democracy relies on the active engagement of the citizenry before, during and after an election. Evidence across Canada suggests that we're headed in the wrong direction. In the latest provincial election in Ontario only 50% of eligible voters participated. In Alberta's recent election, that number dropped to 40%, and most staggering of all, turnout in municipal elections often dips to just 25%. And opinion research shows that credibility for the system and its elected representatives is also tracking at dangerously low levels. A Leger Marketing survey found only 14% of Canadians trusted politicians, giving them a lower ranking than all other occupations surveyed in their 2006 study.¹

When the issue of governance does make headlines, the remedies most typically debated are campaign finance reform, proportional representation and third party advertising. Though worthy topics, these three options all revolve around the *process of elections* and not the *process of governing*. Election mechanics may rank highly with politicians, but citizens are more concerned with policy outcomes.

The case for involving citizens in policy development – bringing them to the table – has never been stronger. While policy experts, lobbyists and politicians are crucial to the decision process, the durability of any policy direction is fleeting without community support.

Evidence abounds that when citizens are brought together for a serious discussion about a difficult public policy issue, they will rise to the challenge with thoughtful and balanced ideas and contributions. For example, the organization America Speaks used citizen dialogue techniques to help the city of New York choose a restoration plan for 'ground zero' where the Twin Towers stood. New consultative practices such as Deliberative Polling, Foresight, Choice Work and Appreciative Inquiry offer powerful tools that enable citizens to make more constructive contributions to the policy process.

Today's citizenry arrives at the policy arena with broad perspectives and high expectations for government service.² Canada's population has never been better educated³, or more connected to the world. A 2007 OECD study ranked Canada tenth

¹ Leger Marketing, Profession Barometer, OmniCan Report, May 15, 2007.
<http://www.legermarketing.com/documents/spclm/070522ENG.pdf>

² Citizens First 3, Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, January 2003. <http://www.iccs-isac.org/eng/cf-02.htm>

³ Statistics Canada <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/81-582-XIE/2003001/highlights.htm>

with 26% of Canadians having a broadband connection. Canadian citizens are smart, worldly and armed with a sophisticated understanding of personal, community and global interests.

Progressive legislators have every reason to view this electorate as the additional bench strength they need to balance the influence of vested interests. The challenge is to stop thinking of Canadians as members of a jury, simply waiting to cast judgement at the ballot box. Instead, we need to respect citizens and their capacity to weigh competing interests, and to bring insight and creativity to public challenges. We need to welcome citizens into the policy process.

Canadians *want* the opportunity to contribute to their own future through genuine engagement strategies that offer credible opportunities to guide the public policy process. Roy Romanow heard from over 14,000 Canadians in his deliberation of Canada's health care system. Politicians at all levels of government need to seize the opportunity to harness this energy by reinvesting in consultative practices. We need to make consultation matter.

If we're looking for a practical starting point, the homepage for Sydney Australia is a good place to find inspiration. We know that choosing the content for a homepage is all identifying the site's most important messages. Sydney's homepage sends a clear message to their citizens. "*If you live in Sydney, you can contribute to public decision-making.*" Here's a snapshot of issues – highlighted under a 'Have Your Say' banner – where public input was sought in early June, 2008:

- Bourke Street Bicycle Route
- Draft Corporate Plan 2009-12i
- Draft Green Square Town Centre LEP and DCP
- Draft Green Square & Southern Areas Retail Study 2008
- Draft Planning Agreement 161 Clarence Street
- Draft Surry Hills Local Area Management
- Harris Street Revitalization
- I12 Development Applications

Each item is linked to critical elements of the decision process: research, upcoming meetings, timelines for decisions and contact information for inquiries and input. Citizens can access everything they need for informed participation in the deliberations. In short, the citizens of Sydney are *welcome* in the decision processes.

Canada, in contrast, is sadly lacking in this welcoming approach. Take a look at Table I below that contrasts Sydney, Australia with some Canadian cities. In Canada, municipal websites seem to focus on what's been decided, not what's under consideration.

Table I
A Snapshot of Municipal Web Sites, June 12, 2008

* Refer to Table 2 for specific criteria for each table element	Sydney	Winnipeg	Halifax	Victoria	Toronto
Project	Bourke Street Bicycle Route	No projects found	Vision HRM	No projects found	Waterfront Community Improvement
Link on Homepage	✓		✓ Resident's Page		✓ Resident's Page
Mandate	✓		✓		✓
Issues Being Addressed	✓		✓		✓
Process Overview	✓		✓		✓
Press Releases			✓		
Timelines	✓				✓
Meetings/Events	✓		✓		✓
Publications	✓				✓
Consultation Guides	✓				
Backgrounders	✓				✓
Submissions	✓				
Means to Participate	✓		✓		✓
Contact Information	✓		✓		✓

There's more to leading edge consultative practices than the design of a homepage of course. However, this table does provide a window into the priority some cities in Canada give to engagement techniques.

Reinventing consultative practices and legitimizing their place at the policy deliberation table is crucial to improving the health of our democratic institutions. Giving citizens their say in the policy process supports progressive and sustainable policy decisions. That, in turn, reflects well on the political process.

Table 2
Definition of Criteria Used to Evaluate Sample Municipal Websites

Table 2: Definition of Criteria Used to Evaluate Sample Municipal Websites	
Mandate	Specific information on the mandate for the consultative process
Issues being addressed	Itemization of the issues that are within the scope of the consultative process.
Process Overview	Citizens need to understand how the consultative process fits into the decision-making process
Press Releases	Provide useful information on the purpose of a consultation and any developments that might be impacting its conduct.
Timelines	Citizens need to know the timelines for the consultative process, especially deadlines for submissions and the best estimates for publication of the final report.
Meetings/Events	A calendar of upcoming events linked to the consultative process, with clear information about timing, location and format.
Publications	A critical element is the provision of background documents, including a guide to the consultation process, background research and online access to previous submissions.
Means to Participate	Citizens should be given clear guidance on how they can contribute – either by e-mail letters, submissions or as witnesses.
Contact Information	A link to secretariat services where citizen's process questions can be answered.



Dialogue & Deliberation Services for Government, Business & Community Organizations

Developing good policy is a complex challenge for both government and business. The Deliberation Network designs public engagement strategies that can yield creative, credible and effective policy directions. The days of making public policy and corporate decisions in executive isolation are gone. When organizations limit their public engagement initiatives to damage control or sterile consultation models, nothing is learned and no one is fooled.

The Deliberation Network encourages its clients, both inside and outside government, to consider the advantages that modern engagement initiatives can achieve. Scarce resources and competing economic interests are still central factors in making sound public policy. However, today, the policy environment is also shaped by environmental sustainability, social justice and competition from companies and countries around the world. Effective engagement strategies build the trust and credibility that are needed to face difficult choices and uncover new possibilities. The Deliberation Network designs and manages engagement strategies for government, corporate, union and non-government organizations.

The emerging field of dialogue and deliberation offers a wide range of engagement methodologies with proven results. For policy makers, the bar for consultation has been raised.

Contact Us:

Tim Woods, Partner	timwoods@deliberate.ca	250 388-04915	cell 250 480-6668
Lynelle Spring, Partner	lynellespring@deliberate.ca	250 388-4986	cell 250 480-6899

www.deliberate.ca