

Promoting Online Public Engagement & Increasing Civic Engagement

by Peng Gao

Under the supervision of Kathy Weaver and Andrea Wiggins

INFM737 Information Management Capstone Experience
The University of Maryland – College Park
Spring, 2016



PALS - Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability
An initiative of the National Center for Smart Growth

Gerrit Knaap, NCSG Executive Director
Uri Avin, PALS Director

Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Challenges.....	3
Methodology.....	4
Recommendations.....	4
Conclusions.....	7
References.....	7



Executive Summary

To increase public engagement in Howard County and the Columbia Association, this report provides strategies for online and in-person engagement activities and programs. It suggests that both organizations continue to develop strong technology infrastructure, such as optimizing Wi-Fi services, maximizing the OpenHoward Data Portal's effectiveness, and investing in mobile website design. Both groups can use virtual meetings, streaming TV, and social media to interact with residents. To include the entire population in the decision-making process, the County can design programs specific to various age and ethnic groups. These strategies are intended to assist the County government in collecting residents' feedback more efficiently and effectively, which will help build a stronger community and make Howard County a better place to live.

Introduction

Civic participation enables the County to determine community needs and where efforts should be focused. Residents can get involved in the community life in both online and in-person formats. In this digital age, online options have become more and more popular among younger people. Creating or updating online engagement requires advanced technology. As one of the highest median household income counties of any in the U.S., Howard has the financial capacity to implement new methods to get citizens involved. This comprehensive report aims to provide specific recommendations for both the County and the Columbia Association (CA) to improve civic engagement.

At the beginning of the project, the County and the CA provided ten specific topics regarding civic engagement. After conducting small team studies on each topic, they were summarized into two higher-level challenges: the challenges of online public engagement and the challenges of in-person public engagement.

An increasingly diverse population makes it more challenging for the County and the CA to improve civic engagement. More than 39 percent of County residents and 44 percent of CA residents belong to minority groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Government outreach can be considered successful only if diverse communities can be engaged as partners. Better community sustainability can be achieved when all stakeholders actively participate in the decision-making process. For this reason, members of all demographics should be involved in the County's decision-making processes. Further opportunities come from the County's rapid economic growth, which also creates opportunities to improve public engagement using both advanced technologies and traditional community services.

Challenges

Online Public Engagement

Online communication is increasingly popular. Establishing a reliable communication platform is vital for the efficient functioning of any organization. Governments today are trying to overcome the challenges of communicating more efficiently and effectively.

Keeping budgetary constraints in mind, specific issues include integrating emerging technologies and improving the communication experiences along with maximizing the benefits. Keeping up with the burgeoning rate of change has become a challenge. It is valuable to periodically analyze and evaluate the current modes of communication and look for new ways to improve citizen engagement.

Both the County and the CA use online communication, such as streaming TV and e-newsletters, to connect with their residents. A significant problem for the government is keeping up with the residents' preferences for new modes of communication. In addition, with a growing ethnic population, government outreach can be considered successful only if diverse communities can be engaged as partners; and the same applies to different age groups.

In-person Engagement

The most common in-person engagement format for local government is public meetings, which are a great way to gain community feedback. But these meetings are often held in the evenings, when parents typically have to pick up their kids, make dinner for their family, or tend to other obligations. These formats can also be unfavorable for those who do not like the environment of a formal meeting.

To reach residents with evening obligations and those who prefer flexible or informal meetings, alternative methods of conducting public meetings should be considered. According to information on the County and CA's current practices, in combination with comparable intelligence collected from other U.S. counties, we recommend trying new strategies to entice residents to participate. For example, holding meetings in unconventional settings like restaurants and parks may appeal to different demographics. These settings allow meetings to have an easygoing feel and will give County government representatives the chance to go directly into the community.

Methodology

In this research, we used several approaches to collect and analyze data. To find strategies to increase civic engagement for both the County and the CA, ten student teams from the University of Maryland completed a literature review, site visits, interviews, conference calls, surveys, and user feedback. For report synthesis, the approaches included document analysis, competitive intelligence, and qualitative content analysis.

Recommendations

Online Public Engagement

Technology supports communication between residents and the government. To improve public engagement with the County's entire demographic, advanced technology is required. According to our study, the County and the CA have established a strong technological environment to support civic engagement. Two great examples are the Wi-Fi network in Ellicott City and the OpenHoward open data portal, but each still face challenges.

The Howard County government established a free Wi-Fi network, FreeHoCoGovWiFi, on Main Street in Ellicott City in 2015. A survey of Main Street visitors produced a lot of interesting insights. Because most of the people surveyed were not aware of the free Wi-Fi, the speed available to each user is not a clear indicator of expansion needs or sufficiency of the current network plan and coverage. More effort should first be put into advertising the free Wi-Fi service. Banners and placards should be put up on shop windows to advertise the service. There should be increased focus on print-based conventional advertising, rather than social media advertising, as place-based visual materials would be most effective for reaching the target users. Another suggestion is to extend Wi-Fi to public parks, specifically Centennial Park. Use of existing cell towers located within Howard County could prove beneficial to expand Wi-Fi in prime recreation spots such as the Columbia Swim Center on Cross Fox Lane, which, incidentally, is near Wilde Lake Village Center, targeted as the next place to receive Wi-Fi access by Howard County government.

Another example of online public engagement is the County's OpenHoward open data portal, launched on May 8, 2015. We found the data portal, which is powered by Socrata, to be usable and presentable. The portal offers most of what other counties' open data portals are delivering. Howard County is moving in the right direction in making information available to citizens, but there are also potential areas for improvement. The following improvement recommendations are based on user feedback:

- Add more metadata and context information
- Regularly update datasets
- Turn on the discussion feature
- Turn on the dataset suggestion feature
- Enable notifications and subscriptions
- Add more predefined filters to datasets to enable more useful analyses
- Embed data-driven applications into the portal to demonstrate potential
- Link information in the old data portal to the new one

To maximize the Data Portal’s effectiveness, the County can also promote open datasets across digital and physical platforms enabling the portal’s audience to be its promoters. Currently there is an option to share links to datasets via Facebook and Twitter. However, the “Share via Email” option is only for users with a special “site” role; this functionality should be activated for all users.

With advanced technology, the County and the CA can also develop civic engagement via virtual meetings, email communication, streaming TV, and promotional videos. Community meetings are typically not attended by residents who are older or have young children. Virtual meetings provide enough scope to engage residents who cannot attend the meetings in-person. Live streaming, webinars, and virtual meetings that mirror public meetings can help fix this issue. When organizations are facing resource constraints, web tools like these can be very useful. Live chats and live tweets give residents the opportunity to raise concerns and get clarification immediately from County officials present at the meetings. The tools to support these strategies are readily available and reasonably priced.

In-person Public Engagement

To improve in-person public engagement, we suggest both organizations try offering workshops during meetings, selecting different meeting locations, and creating programs specifically for children, seniors, and specific ethnic groups.

Through a series of interviews and email exchanges with officials from Loudoun County, College Park, and Harford County, we learned that schools, recreational centers, restaurants, libraries, non-profit centers, homeowners associations, fire stations, churches, American Legion halls, and retail spaces are all being used as alternative meeting locations to increase community engagement. The most interesting location was a food truck event in the M Square area of College Park, which aimed to solicit input from the office workers in the area. These alternative meeting locations can be a big attraction for people who find access to County offices and community centers difficult or inconvenient. There are over one thousand food establishments, 35 middle and high

schools, and 30 park pavilions in the County that could be used as meeting places. Columbia has ten village centers and a great town center area that could be used to get feedback from locals.

In addition, we suggest the County and the CA collaborate with existing communities. Gathering people is always challenging and costly. Instead of making people come to a government meeting, HC and CA can go to the existing community to meet them. The first step is to identify where people regularly gather. Since they are already there, it is cost effective for the County to meet them at their meeting locations.

Language and cultural barriers are major obstacles for ethnic communities in accessing health care, education, or employment services. To overcome these obstacles and increase ethnic community involvement, we suggest establishing programs for teaching and translating. Recruiting a bilingual and cross-cultural person who is well connected with the ethnic community will help the County reach these residents.

It is difficult to initially identify influential community leadership. So we suggest partnering with local organizations serving ethnic communities such as a Korean church, the Asian American Center of Frederick, Asian American LEAD, and South Asian Americans Leading Together. Bilingual senior citizens in nursing homes can also be engaged; in many cultures, elders are highly respected.

Moreover, additional ESOL programs and interpreting services are recommended. In 2014, over 2,200 County students participated in ESOL programs, representing 61 different languages, primarily Spanish and Korean (HCPSS, 2015). To meet the growing demands for interpretation services, the ESOL outreach office has recruited interpreters and translators. However, more could be done. Important information such as help-books and class registration brochures should be interpreted and communicated in a number of languages. Interpreters could actively participate in orientations and other outreach programs in addition to parent-teacher conferences. Recruiting interpreters from local communities helps reduce the perception of “them and us,” which can occur among some ethnic parents (Page, Whitting, & Mclean, 2007).

Another challenge in engaging public is that “it is always the same people who participate.” Food can help solve this problem and increase public engagement across a wide variety of people (Keidan, 2008). Based on the experience of University events, those that offer free food are the ones with maximum participation. Important events organized by the County, like health awareness campaigns, or events in which the County invests a lot of interest and resources can offer free food and even focus on “healthy” options. At such events, larger public turnout should be expected, creating an additional opportunity to advertise other services offered by the County.

Conclusion

Rapid economic growth provides Howard County and the Columbia Association with the possibility to increase civic engagement using new strategies. Communicating with its citizens is a primary responsibility of the government. It is essential for the County government to understand the potential opportunities of adopting and optimizing the use of new and promising technologies.

Overall, we suggest the County and the CA continue to develop strong technology infrastructure, such as optimizing Wi-Fi services, maximizing the OpenHoward Data Portal's effectiveness, and investing in mobile website design. With solid technology support, the County and the CA can reach residents through both online and in-person media.

The government should use virtual meetings, email, streaming TV, and social media to interact with residents who might otherwise be hard to reach. To include the entire population in the decision-making process, the County can design programs specific to various age and ethnic groups and try taking programs to where people already gather. Based on the success of other U.S. counties and cities that used these practices, we expect Howard and the CA will reach the same levels of resident participation and satisfaction.

References

- (1) HCPSS. (2015, December 5). *Howard County Public School System 2014-15*. Retrieved December 17, 2015 from <http://www.hcpss.org/f/aboutus/profile.pdf>
- (2) Keidan, G. (2008). *Latino outreach strategies for civic engagement*. *National Civic Review*, 97(4), 30-38.
- (3) U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table DP03; generated by Devin Morgan; using American FactFinder; <<http://factfinder2.census.gov>>; (02 December 2015).