SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Overview
Sustained engagement in community programs can provide tremendous value. However, it is difficult to achieve: attention spans are short, participant availability ebbs and flows, interest in certain topics wanes, and sometimes efforts are so successful that continued work becomes less necessary. Nevertheless, taking steps to keep audiences excited and responsive to calls to action can be built into programs. The following best practices can be applied to a variety of community engagement efforts.

Establish a Clear Goal and Plan
When programs have a well-defined goal, program managers are able to develop a targeted strategy in support of that goal. This is important for two main reasons. First, it helps guide program managers as a program moves through different projects. As a program matures, managers will need to assess whether a new activity represents an opportunity that is meaningful and impactful, or if it may dilute their efforts. Without a clear focus, programs run the risk of pursuing a variety of projects that do not support the true goal.

Second, a clear goal and plan supports successful communication and messaging efforts. When audiences know why something is being presented to them and understand how they are expected to participate, they are more likely to engage in meaningful actions and campaigns. If participants are presented with an assortment of activities that do not have a clear connection, or that contradict their understanding of the overarching goal, the program may ultimately suffer from an unclear message and lose the support of even staunch supporters.1

Invite Collaboration
Cultivating broad ownership through collaboration is an effective way to sustain engagement. Establishing a culture of collaboration will result in stronger relationships, better projects, and greater participation in the near and long-term. Collaboration can occur naturally, but planning and structured processes, such as surveys, focus groups, and meetings can ensure that it happens.

First, collaborative relationships with stakeholders will promote information-sharing before, during, and after projects and campaigns. Engaging people in a variety of roles early on will help uncover potential challenges associated with certain approaches, and help develop solutions to those challenges.2 This approach will also be useful to managers as they design campaigns that can be customized and deployed to different audiences.3 Engaging diverse stakeholders can also help harness grassroots energy and generate deeper support in making projects successful. Finally, collaborative processes signal to participants that their feedback and insights are valuable assets to the effort, which will encourage future participation.

Present a Valuable Opportunity to the Audience
A common pitfall of sustainability programs is offering uninteresting opportunities to the audience. This can be avoided with a better understanding of the gap that exists between an audience’s expectations and reality. Knowing where this gap exists helps project managers create an opportunity that will provide value to the audience.1
Understanding what kinds of sustainability opportunities interest participants may lead to the conclusion that one size does not fit all. Some participants will be highly engaged in projects focused on waste reduction and uninterested in energy conservation campaigns, while others will appreciate the variety.

The same aspect of variability is true about messaging to audiences. For instance, some participants are drawn in by opportunities to learn more about environmental issues, while others find value primarily through rewards like financial incentives. In this way, incorporating messages that reflect what is valuable and desired by the audience will also help gain and sustain participation.

Provide Meaningful Content
Sustainability engagement programs should avoid a singular focus on simple, catchy messages and motivational incentives. Programs that balance these engagement strategies with in-depth information will reap several benefits. First, they will appeal to audiences interested in receiving sophisticated content and participating in transformative ways. By providing both introductory and detailed facts, participants can decide for themselves what level of engagement they would like, and the program and its projects remain credible and less vulnerable to green-washing criticisms. More detailed information can help generate buy-in by making the case about why there is a need to change behavior and what results from action. Additionally, providing access to experts can facilitate powerful personal connections and opportunities for dialogue that are typically not available through simple messaging campaigns. Finally, a population equipped with accurate and substantive information can even help develop new solutions.

Be Visible and Accessible
Programs that sustain engagement make effective use of communication channels and influential individuals. A well-organized communication system helps participants stay aware of opportunities, calls to action, and outcomes, and can be scaled up when needed. One way to accomplish this is through consistent communication through available channels, which will help participants always know where to find information. Promoting through less traditional avenues – such as strategically placed signs or screensavers – during specific campaigns may help “build the buzz.” Another tactic is to activate “influencers” in the target community to help spread the word, model behavior and provide an extra push to their peers to take action.

Share Results and Celebrate Success
A final and crucial element of programs that sustain engagement involves measuring results and celebrating the outcomes. Too often, engagement programs promote a call to action and behavior change but do not follow up with participants to show how their effort made a difference. This becomes a problem particularly for achievement-oriented individuals, who may lose interest in future requests.

The lack of follow up may be due to the difficulty of defining and tracking proper measurements. While tracking impacts can be challenging, establishing an achievable process for measuring and collecting metrics is important in showing progress.

Communicating the status or results of a campaign supports a program’s long-term success. When results are shared in a positive manner – whether goals were achieved or not – participants receive a form of recognition for the time and effort they volunteered. Such progress reports also provide another “touch point” for the campaign, reminding participants of the desired behavior change once more.
Endnotes


