

The Vancouver Sun, Crowdsourcing Ask the right way and you will get an answer (9.16.12)

It's been six years since Jeff Howe coined the term "crowdsourcing." He used the phrase in a 2006 article in Wired magazine to describe the growing trend of harvesting knowledge and creativity from the general public — rather than from experts, gurus and professionals.

We live in a culture that emphasizes heroes and leaders — often at the expense of our own sense of self-worth or confidence in our convictions. The concept of crowdsourcing flips that context on its head, transforming ordinary people into active participants in the creation of culture, art and even public policy. It creates a role for you and I to play, in fields that used to be exclusive to a small few.

Even private companies are beginning to see the power of crowdsourcing, reaching out to employees and customers for feedback and fresh ideas. After all, the most innovative ideas might not come from those sitting in the boardroom, but rather from those who use their products and those who sell them.

Governments also benefit from crowdsourcing when they make a conscious decision to view citizens as a valuable source of wisdom and creativity, rather than simply as a source of revenue or the occasional check mark on a ballot.

From budget planning to transit expansion to development proposals, citizens can play a major role in setting goals and priorities for our communities. But as our cities grow in size, it becomes increasingly difficult to build meaningful dialogue between municipal governments and the people they represent. If politicians truly want to engage the public, they must be prepared to allocate significant resources required for marketing and outreach. The reason for this is simple: people are busy. Not only that, but their attention is being pulled in a dozen directions. If you want to break through the clutter, then you have to be just as smart, creative and flashy as the commercial messages we encounter throughout our day on billboards and on TV.

Take, for example, the public notices governments use to invite input on proposed property developments. From coast to coast, municipalities all use the same basic design including paragraphs of legal jargon in a tiny unreadable font, with no colour or images. The end result is predictable: no one reads these notices and the public remains uninformed and disengaged.

Last year, I found myself wondering what a proper public notice might look like. If the government truly wanted to crowdsource feedback as part of the planning process, how would they go about informing local residents? I decided to crowdsource the answer. I posted a "call for submissions" on my personal blog, asking graphic designers to create a better, bolder and brighter public notice. I asked them to include colour, images, clear information, plain language, bold headings and, most importantly, a proactive request for participation.

The results were spectacular. The submissions were captivating and bold, easy to read and included encouraging phrases like “Your voice matters” or “We want to hear from you”. It was inspiring to see what was possible, and at the same time it was disappointing to realize these images were likely to live in perpetuity on my blog, while our official public notices remained the same: bland, dull and alienating.

Then, something surprising happened. A woman named Jill Brooksbank noticed the blog post and decided to take action. Brooksbank is the communications coordinator for the Village of Pemberton and she wasted no time redesigning her municipality’s official public notice, incorporating every single recommendation from the original “call for submissions.” The revised Pemberton notice has bright colours, clear bold headlines written in plain language and simple icons that explain how residents can participate. The notice template also includes two slogans at the top: “Have your Say” and “We’re Listening.” What a huge change from their old template, which had this inspiring line at the very top: “Notice is hereby given, in accordance with Section 892 of the Local Government Act, that a Public Hearing will be held”

A few months ago, I had the pleasure of travelling to Pemberton, to personally deliver the 2012 Dazzling Notice Award to Brooksbank and Pemberton mayor Jordan Sturdy. The DNA is an award given annually to the most deserving Canadian municipality for “Excellence in Government Outreach.”

As our cities grow larger, local governments have to work harder to inform residents and crowdsource the wisdom that is found in our neighbourhoods. I wonder who will receive the Dazzling Notice Award in 2013?

Dave Meslin is a Toronto-based writer and organizer trying to help foster a culture of political participation. Meslin co-edited *Local Motion: The Art of Civic Engagement*, and recently curated a political exhibit called *The Fourth Wall: Transforming City Hall*.

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