

Public Involvement Can Help Build a Better Community or Better Business

By Rick Kaneen

Both companies and governments have understood for years the value of involving the public when they are planning infrastructure projects or creating public policy. Citizens have good ideas and many are quite willing to express them, especially about decisions that impact our environment or the quality of life in our community.

Today more and more businesses are using the power of public involvement when making decisions about their operations and products.

Public involvement can be used to create collective visions. The best public involvement, as practiced by our governments, private companies, and non-profits, does just that. The process finds common threads of agreement among people that can be combined into a vision that incorporates many points of view. The result is the best solution for the greater community. It becomes a guide to change that a majority of people can agree on.

The public involvement process can be applied in almost any scenario where change is necessary or desired. For example, a small business can involve its customers and potential customers in making decisions about days and hours of operation, inventory options, or what services to make available. Major corporations do this with facilitated focus groups carefully selected to represent the target audience. Smaller businesses can do it using public involvement techniques. To gain the most from involving your customers in decisions, try these guidelines.

- Actively seek out your customers and potential customers. You want to understand what they all think, whether they are regular customers or not. Use your communication tools to go to them with your questions. Don't wait for them to come to you.
- Start early. No one wants to be brought into a decision making process late in the game when key decisions have already been made. Even if the process has not proceeded far, be careful of creating the perception that asking your customers what they think was an afterthought.
- Remember that we all process information in different ways. Use a variety of approaches to connect and engage with your public. Consider all the communications tools available and use several that will reach all segments of your target audience.
- Be inclusive — don't avoid listening to a segment of your target audience. All input is valuable. You might get some very important input from people who have never used your business.
- Actively listen, record and learn. When people give feedback, listen to it and document it. You should see a pattern of common themes, concerns, ideas and questions emerge.
- Let your target audience know that you took their advice. As the decision is being made or some time soon thereafter, find ways of letting people know that you heard their input and based your decisions on it.

Involving customers in your decisions will not only help you make good decisions for your business, but will also put you in a position to tell customers that you are doing what they suggested. The combination of the two will strengthen your relationships with your customers, help you do a better job for them, and increase customer loyalty. Remember when New York Mayor Ed Koch used to walk the streets of Manhattan and yell out, "How am I doin'?" to his constituents? You can proceed similarly because you'll receive valuable results from simply asking your customers or clients "what do you think?"



Rick Kaneen, MFA, is a native Tucsonan who has been a partner in Kaneen Advertising & Public Relations, Inc. since it's founding in 1980. He has worked on numerous public and private sector communications projects, including development, environmental, water, public infrastructure, industrial, commercial and retail.

Kaneen Advertising & Public Relations, Inc.
110 South Church Ave.
Suite 3350
Tucson, AZ 85701
520-885-9009
rick@kaneenpr.com