Open Policy Making 101

Joe Goldman, AmericaSpeaks
Joseph Peters, Ascentum
November 10, 2009

Is your agency an eagle or an ostrich?

Since President Obama directed the federal government to become more open and participatory, a wide variety of federal agencies – from the Department of Homeland Security to the Department of Veterans Affairs – have begun experimenting with online tools to solicit public and stakeholder participation on new policies and programs.

Online tools provide agencies with the chance to cost-effectively engage the public on all sorts of questions and topics. These online public consultations can create greater buy-in to new policies, generate innovative ideas about new programs, and leverage the time, energy and resources of the public to help agencies reach their goals. With these opportunities come real fears about losing control, which can become self-fulfilling when agencies take the wrong approach.

What should your agency do to respond to this change in how the government is interacting with the public?

One of the first steps for many organizations is to make the shift from being an ostrich to being an eagle. The ostrich organization tends to bury its head and hope that this "online consultation fad" will go away. The problem for this type of organization is that it is thinking too close to the ground. The eagle organization looks at the big picture far above the ground. It thinks strategically on where to best focus its efforts and swoops in once it has made its choice. Like it or not, the Open Government Directive has made the ostrich organization an endangered species.

10 Questions to Help You Soar

When done right, online public consultations can be very rewarding experiences that produce significant value for everyone involved. Here are ten key questions to consider while soaring in the blue skies, before you take the plunge.

1. What do you want to know?

This may seem like a simple question, but being very clear about what you want from the public is the most important thing that you can do to shape your strategy. Every choice you make about how to engage the public online should be driven by what you want to learn from them. You may have policy options to consider or you may want to brainstorm new ideas for improving your agency's efficiency or effectiveness. Understanding what you need to find out is an essential piece to designing a public input process, whether this is online or in-person.

2. What is your commitment to participants?

Being clear about how public participation will affect actual decision-making and what commitment you will make to respond to the ideas generated by participants is another essential step in defining your process. Until

you are able to clearly articulate how the public's input will be used, it will be difficult to make strategic decisions about the design of the process as well as to encourage people to participate. At a minimum, you can commit to publicly reporting the results of the dialogue to decision makers. Ideally, you will be able to communicate how the input that is generated will be used to formulate plans or decisions.

3. Who needs to participate?

Public processes are often best when they represent the diverse voices involved on an issue. Thinking about what voices need to be heard will shape decisions about when a public consultation can take place, how it should be publicized, and what kinds of tools are appropriate. Consider who will be affected by the decisions that are being made and who will need to be involved in order for everyone to agree that the process was fair. Once you have decided who will need to participate, you will then need to develop an outreach strategy to get them to the table.

4. How hot is the issue?

The level of interest in an issue will impact expectations about how many people will participate and how contentious participation may be. This in turn will shape the kinds of processes and tools that are required to ensure diverse, productive participation. Highly contentious issues that are in the public spotlight will require processes that can support intense, high volume participation. Highly technical questions may only attract experts and stakeholders unless proactive outreach strategies are pursued and the issue framed in ways that are accessible to the public.

5. What type of contribution are you looking for?

There are different types of input that can be requested of participants. You may ask the public to explore an issue, validate options, or try to reconcile trade-offs and competing interests. Different types of contributions will require different levels of support for participants. Brainstorming can require little more than a question and the right set of participants. Evaluating policy trade-offs, on the other hand, may require materials that clearly lay out the benefits and drawbacks of the options on the table. This fosters more informed and ultimately more productive participation.

6. What type of data will you collect and analyze?

Data collection and analysis need to be considered from the outset. Open-ended questions generate richer input, but they also produce much more difficult data to analyze. Take 1000 participants. If they each answer one question with 100 words, that is 100,000 words to read and analyze. Now if you had 3 or 4 questions, that each collected 100,000 words, that would be the equivalent of analyzing a novel the size of Moby Dick! Quantitative data is much easier to analyze, but you may lose valuable perspectives that are not captured by pre-determined choices. The good news is that with good process design for your public input, there are excellent quantitative and qualitative analytical software packages that can be utilized.

7. What are your timelines?

The timeframe for your public input process is a critical element of the design. If you have two weeks to design, deliver and report then you have far fewer options than if you have six months. Generally speaking, a process that is open to the general public should be live for four to six weeks to ensure adequate participation. An invitation-only process can be significantly shorter depending on the approach taken.

8. What resources are available to support the process?

Designing a consultation process, customizing online tools, recruiting participants, moderating participation, and analyzing results can all be resource intensive activities depending on the choices you make about the consultation process. It will be important to be very clear about the personnel and budget that are available before going too far in planning. Keep in mind that a process can be inexpensive and fast, inexpensive and high quality, or fast and high quality, but it seldom can be inexpensive, fast and high quality all at the same time.

9. How can participants stay involved?

Every time your organization asks stakeholders and citizens for their input, you have a unique opportunity to build a relationship that may produce ongoing value for your organization and everyone who participates. Will the process be a one-time interaction, or do you want to create the infrastructure to keep participants informed and provide them with ways to stay involved? You will need to think this through at the outset, so that you can be prepared at the conclusion of the consultation process.

10. Which online tools should you use?

This question is intentionally left until last in this list. Many organizations choose a shiny new tool and decide to use it before carefully considering their overall approach. This ends up having the software drive the process and not the objectives. There are many tools and solutions to choose from, each with unique strengths and weaknesses. The options are endless, but you need to match the tool to your strategy based on the questions you have already answered from the list above.

Eagles fly, ostriches don't

Asking for public input should be seen as an opportunity. The eagle organization will have the answers to these questions before proceeding. The golden eagle organization may also establish some principles and standards around how it asks for public input. The Open Government Directive has ushered in a new era for interacting with the public.

Remember, eagles fly, ostriches don't…

AMERICASPEAKS

Joe Goldman is the Vice President of Citizen Engagement at AmericaSpeaks.

ascentum

Joseph Peters is a Partner at Ascentum.