



ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES GUIDE

Over the course of the last four years, we've tried many methods for engaging communities with news and information. While there is a growing list of new, innovative digital ways to connect with people, we believe those approaches are more sustainable when paired with in-person engagement strategies. Here's a list of both our of offline and online recommendations for engagement.

1. PARTNERSHIPS

If you are serious about developing a deep conversation with a specific community, it starts with understanding and meeting the organizations, businesses, and civic outlets (libraries, community centers, government offices) that are already established in the area.

- **Get in touch** with the people and organizations that local information flows through. Examples include city council representatives, business owners, teachers, priests and ministers, parents, nonprofit heads, and more.
- **Make sure you identify** any existing or past efforts to develop news conversations in your target community. Are there hyperlocal newspapers or news websites? What about community radio stations? Seek out the people who run these outlets and learn about their methods and goals.
- **Locate community groups** that work on issues that you want to understand better. Health clinics, church-led organizations, libraries, local business alliances, community colleges, neighborhood watch groups, and community gardens are all good examples of possible partners.

Your ultimate goal is to look for ways to contribute and build off of the ongoing efforts in the community to inform residents. The more you partner, the more you'll fit in, and the more trust you will build with the community.

2. ONGOING VISIBLE PRESENCE

Once you've established some partners in the community, create opportunities for residents to start interacting with your project. Be creative in terms of how you get people's attention. Your goal is to give people an opportunity to participate—answer a question, record a story, share a news item—anything that starts a conversation that you can keep going. Remember, It always helps to play off of

existing methods of information flow unique to each community. If people pass information on the porch, find a way to share information on a porch.

FLIERS

Somewhere in every neighborhood there is a community bulletin board informing people about events, issues, and opportunities for residents. One quick and affordable way to start getting people familiar with your project is by creating simple, interesting fliers that raise people’s curiosity. Make them stand out, but also keep them simple. The goal is to get people’s attention, and give them a way to connect with you via their phone or online.



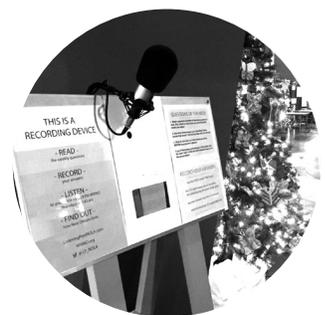
SIGNS

Public signs are another great way to get in front of community members and invite them to start participating. In New Orleans the Listening Post put up simple, provocative questions with a local phone number that people could text message or call. Before you put up a bunch of signs, observe the style and placement of other public signs in your target community. The more you can mirror what people are already used to, you can show residents that you are being observant and thinking about how best to reach them. Also, sign placement can be tricky. Ideally you can partner with private businesses and residents who are excited to host a sign on their property, where people can see it. You can also check with city officials to see what the rules are for putting signs up in public. Some places are strict about public signs, others aren’t as stringent.



PUBLIC RECORDING DEVICE

The best way to get an actual Listening Post recording device working well is to partner with a community business or organization that can host a post. You are looking for a space that is visible to foot traffic, and near an electrical outlet so you can plug the post in. Having a partner hosting a post also helps in that they can encourage people to participate.



3. EVENTS

One of the sure fire ways to build engagement in your media project is through public events. Being up in front of a live audience enables you to explain your project, present news and information, ask questions, answer questions, and share short surveys. Before your event ends make sure you give people an opportunity to share their contact information with you so you can keep the conversation going. You want to be able to reach out to participants on an ongoing basis via cell phone, social media, or email.

- **Organize your own event:** Invite the community you are interested in investing into an in-person event. Whatever the theme of your event, make sure the community has an opportunity to participate, ask questions, and be heard.
- **Partner on existing events:** Many communities have a variety of their own, long-standing regular meetings, and often are open to having guest speakers come talk about their work. Examples include neighborhood meetings, community festivals and markets, local non-profit led forums, church events, and city council hearings.
- **Topic based events:** If you're trying to better understand how a community feels about policing, keep your eyes peeled for a forum on safety and security. If you'd like to better understand food security issues in a neighborhood, see if there are any organizations holding workshops on healthy eating or home gardening.

4. OFFICE HOURS

Set up a desk somewhere visible in the community; park, business, community center, somebody's porch. Have a sign that lets people know what you're up to. Give people a chance to talk to you about what's on their mind, to ask a question, and to let you know what's happening in the neighborhood. Because your goal is to establish your presence in the community, don't feel the need to record or document what people are telling you right away. It's ok to simply listen and take notes. Before participants leave make sure you give them a chance to share their cell phone number, social media handle, or email address, so you can follow up as part of the project.

5. SMS

According to a Pew Research Center [report](#) around 95% of Americans have cell phones, and 75% now have smart phones. Mobile devices are the most reliable way to get and share information with a wide group of people right now. There are a variety of online platforms that enable group text messaging. Take a look at our [list](#) of what's out there.

SMS IS MORE PERSONAL

We noticed in our Listening Post projects in New Orleans, Macon, Georgia, and the Jersey Shore that in sending news and questions to people via text message, we were getting in front of people, and capturing their attention in a different way than the internet achieves. Project participants reported back to us that seeing a text pop up on their cell phone with news and community questions felt more personal. We rarely get non-constructive, or inflammatory responses from participants, something online media see all too often in their comment sections.

SMS QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

We generally share news and questions every other week on people's cell phones. Not everybody has a lot of data to spare, and we want people to stay part of the project, so we try not to overwhelm them with too many texts. We also try to be consistent in when we send text messages. We've found that late on Wednesday afternoon is a good time, people are half-way through their work week and more open to diverting their attention for a minute to participate in our project. We also make sure people who opt in to our projects know they can stop participating at any time by simply texting us the word 'quit

SHORT CODES HELP

If you manage to build up a sizeable text message participant list—a few hundred or more sources—try to find a messaging platform that offers a short code. Short code enables a user to send a large volume of messages instantly, instead of having them transmit slowly over the course of a day. Short codes cost a little bit more money to use, but they are worth the time you'll save.

6. SHARE WHAT PEOPLE SHARE WITH YOU

When you do begin to see some community responses to your engagement efforts, it's important to include those contributions as part of your project output. Participants need to hear or see their community contributions published, so they know their input mattered.

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We also pick a few of the responses we liked and follow up with people for interviews. More often than not participants are happy to meet up and contribute their voice to a radio program or print article. Here's an example of a participant who did an interview with our New Orleans project about being working poor.

When people share thoughts at our Listening Post recording devices, we collect the audio and include it online and in a regular radio segment. Placing community recording devices in a variety of different neighborhoods means we get a variety of voices and experiences. As a result, when we broadcast that content, it sounds representational of the community we are documenting.