Citizen Engagement Strategies for Local Governments
Citizens are not customers.

While a “customer is always right” attitude may prevail in the private sector, the public sector requires more dialogue and easy access to communication to create a thriving and robust community.

Over the last couple decades, citizens began to be treated as customers, and eventually they began to act as such. This shift created an increasing “us” and “them” mentality when it comes to local governments and their constituents.

Local governments need to begin to treat citizens as an active part of their community with decision-making influence. In order to reverse this mind frame, state and local governments must invest in citizen engagement as an ongoing part of their strategy.

Citizen engagement and participation are crucial to receive community buy-in and incorporate citizen voices in the decision-making process (Gigler, World Bank Blog). As governments decide where to spend their budget, incorporating citizen’s opinions not only ensures community buy-in, but also keeps citizens as active participants in their community.
Obstacles in encouraging citizen engagement

While online communication has unlocked accessibility to a new pool of citizens, Pew reports varying levels of citizen participation based on education, income, and geography, race, age, and gender.

With disparate citizen participation, it remains up to local officials to encourage more diverse participation and engagement.

In addition to a lack of diverse citizen participation, the emphasis on in-person meetings only further exacerbates a "we-them" mentality which frequently plagues the tone for city council meetings and public hearings.

Incorporating citizen opinion needs to occur outside of a council or planning commission meeting and needs to be folded into the fabric of how local government operates.

Source: The Current State of Civic Engagement in America

The benefits in fostering citizen engagement

State and local governments need to prioritize a slew of areas including aging infrastructure, homelessness, natural disasters, crisis management, and today, even pandemics. With so many areas of improvement and development, it’s increasingly important that the local government provides a return on investment before spending resources on projects.

As a part of the prioritization, citizens should be involved in the decision-making process which can be done through citizen participation programs. With active involvement in deciding what is most important, citizens can help inform what the community wants and can be more responsive to community needs.

By encouraging inclusive participation, local governments can be more responsive to citizen needs, encourage greater buy-in with fewer backlashes, and find more creative ideas and solutions (InFocus). Working closely with citizens means local governments can pose the right questions, listen, and learn from the public.

Problem solving for local issues becomes a collaborative effort rather than one party selling an idea to the next. Civic engagement is closely connected to community. When one is strong, the other can flourish as well.

How to broaden citizen engagement

Local governments should audit on their website’s functionality, as well as the means for communicating with the public. Some improvements could include:

- Citizens are not customers.
Promote a newsletter
Encourage citizens to sign up for your communications via email on your government website. Consider investing in social advertising to alert citizens of your regular communications to encourage them to have easy access to the latest updates.

Your newsletter can include the dates of upcoming events, the impact the local government is having on the community, and easy access to ask questions if need be.

Recycle content
Ensure the content your team does create is well circulated and don’t be afraid to repurpose any evergreen pieces. Changing a title and who your piece targets may expose your communications to an entirely new audience without the extra lift.

Audit your forms
Citizens should be empowered to retrieve data, submit forms, and find the status of what they’ve requested. Using tools like Zendesk Support can ensure your forms flow directly to your support queues so your agents can see citizen data all in one place.

Intuitive forms can significantly decrease frustration with the government being out of touch, while also instilling confidence that citizens are investing in modern solutions (Government Tech).

Identify advocates
Working with advocates from various neighborhood groups, councils, or individual community activists is a great way to bring in a diverse range of voices into your in-person or virtual meetings. These advocates can then directly pass along the information to their respective groups and act as a go-to source for information.

Develop a comprehensive communications strategy
Don’t wait for citizens to come to you. It’s imperative to meet your community where they are — whether that be broadcasting your initiatives or meetings via television advertisements, email, SMS, social channels, or even door-to-door.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of digital communication</th>
<th>Best uses</th>
<th>Times to avoid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>• Newsletters</td>
<td>• Urgent needs or alerts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>•Alerting the public on upcoming events</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>• Urgent needs or alerts</td>
<td>• Soliciting in-depth opinions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When your team needs an immediate yes or no response</td>
<td>• Long-form updates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social channels (Facebook,</td>
<td>• Pulse checks on current happenings</td>
<td>• Controversial announcements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twitter, LinkedIn)</td>
<td>• Elevating the impact of local programs</td>
<td>• Long-form updates</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Notifying the public 2-7 days before an event</td>
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Also consider what type of information is best distributed through which channel. While social media may be a great place to alert citizens about urgent happenings, or perhaps to get a pulse check on a relevant issue, it may not be the best place to distribute a long-form newsletter.

Similarly, SMS can be a great place to send bits of information to your citizens. Include a call to action or a URL so they can always have easy access if they’d like to learn more.

**Establish benchmarks**
Clear goals, objectives, and measurements can define what is considered “success” for a local program or outreach. Track these metrics month over month to get a precise understanding of where your citizen engagement stands:

**In-person (or virtual) engagement**
- Average number of citizen attendance for council meetings
- Of those in attendance, how do they reflect the community as a whole

**Newsletter readership**
- The number of newsletter subscribers
- Readership of the newsletter (the number of people who open the email and click a link in the email)
- Refer to this guide for more information on email analytics

**Social media**
- Followers count on each social media account
- Engagement on social media
- Refer to this guide for more information on social benchmarks

**How technology can help boost citizen engagement**

While traditionally in-person engagement has been the rule rather than the exception in citizen engagement, this “new normal” creates new opportunities to expand into virtual engagement and add voices to the conversation.

As Labosier reflects in her piece, *Crisis as Opportunity*, “Citizens who participate in council meetings or public hearings rarely reflect the diversity of the community in terms of race, age, or opinion.” Technology can help bridge this divide.

**Create mobile-friendly events and content**
Leveraging mobile technology can bridge a digital divide and has proven to help attract younger, lower-income, or ethnically diverse residents (*Labosier, Mercatus*). Ensure your community can dial-into events on their mobile device and that your website is easily accessible on mobile.

**Host virtual events**
As with many other events, your council meetings may have already gone virtual. If this is the case, consider how you can improve your community’s attendance with more widespread advertising through different channels.

Additionally, consider the time of day in which the event is hosted. Take advantage of your community’s increased flexibility to understand what time works best for them.

**Leverage surveys**
Use surveys and feedback mechanisms to understand citizens’ concerns, initiative status, as well as citizen satisfaction. (*Mann, OpenGov*) Invest in a CSAT tool, like Zendesk Support, to encourage citizens to provide feedback in a collaborative way and understand their support experience.

**Host FAQs on your government website**
Optimize the FAQs on your government website to include recent announcements and the latest information. A knowledge center is a great place to inform residents about decisions that have been made as well as a status on how those initiatives are faring.

Departments in the *State of Tennessee* rely on Zendesk Guide to quickly update articles and see a comprehensive look at which frequently asked questions are surging. With these metrics, the departments are able to see where citizens are confused and more actively promote the relevant information.

**Consider videos and podcasts**
With so much information being disseminated throughout the web, consider investing in videos and podcasts. These new media types can engage an entirely new audience and can allow your team to go more in-depth on relevant topics and initiatives without losing the listener’s attention.

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Opportunity for local government in a “new normal”

While COVID-19 has affected all local communities, there is also an opportunity for reform as we move forward in terms of how the government communicates with citizens as well as strengthen the relationship citizens have with their local communities.

State and local governments should work on establishing trust, legitimacy, and public support through clear guidelines and making sure this information is accessible to everyone. They should also cease working on projects that aren’t instrumental to crisis management. (Labosier, Mercatus)

This is an opportunity for residents to see themselves with ownership in their communities rather than vying for services.

Why citizens aren’t customers

By investing in fostering citizen engagement and accessibility through technology, state and local governments can reconfigure their relationship with communities. By serving people as citizens rather than customers, governments can better leverage the knowledge of their communities and work towards constant improvement.

Accelerate your COVID-19 response

Government organizations rely on Zendesk to deliver the best possible citizen and employee experiences more efficiently, at any scale. Today, our FedRAMP authorized solution provides the tools for government agencies to manage COVID-19 responses, a newly remote workforce, as well as contact tracing. Our easy-to-use, secure customer service and engagement products allow teams to centralize communication, streamline workflows and analyze trends, for greater efficiency and happier constituents.

Use Zendesk to:

**Communicate effectively with citizens and employees**

When you’re fighting to keep up with threads, your response times slow down. You lose citizen trust, and potentially, their business. Our ticketing system puts email, chat, social, and voice in the same place, so your agents can focus on the conversation, not the channel.

**Build a comprehensive help center**

Organize frequently asked questions, initiative details, policies, and more, and empower citizens and agents with that information. Integrated seamlessly with Zendesk Support, Zendesk Guide is a smart knowledge base.

[Learn more](#)

Join these innovative government organizations in transforming citizen engagement

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