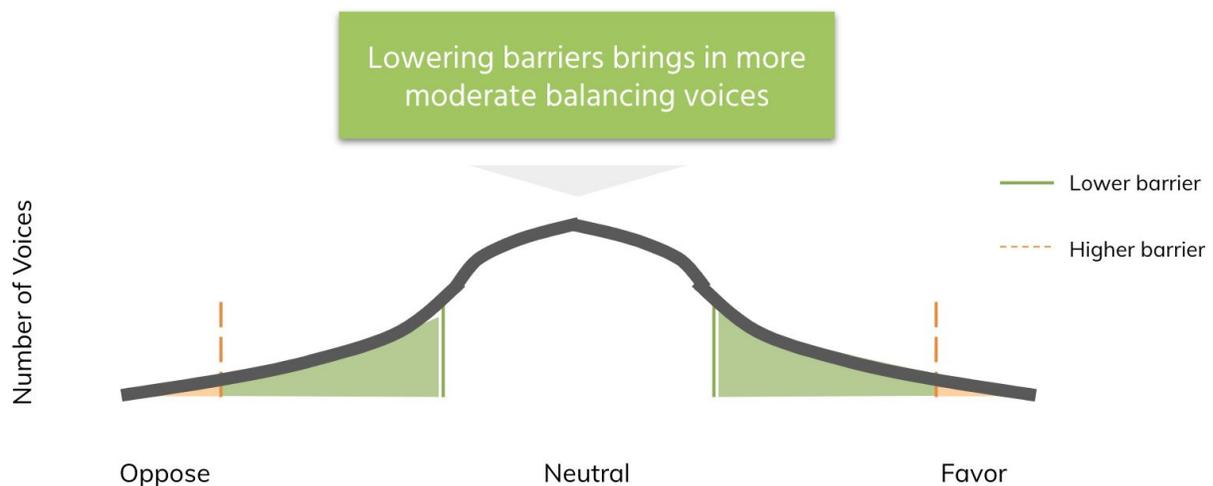


Obtaining Constructive Resident Input- Yes, It's Possible!

Imagine a world where we could hear from not just the vocal few who seem to relish the opportunity to engage the city, but our average citizens, those who are busy with families and jobs but who don't normally have the time to attend city council meetings; where cities can get constructive input data from these residents to make decisions that benefit the whole community and shape public policy; where staff time could be saved by using data gathered from a wide spectrum of residents to improve the delivery of services. While this may sound like a dream, with technology it is becoming reality for cities around the country.

Busting the myths of civic engagement.

Myth #1- Lowering barriers to participation only means more extreme voices.

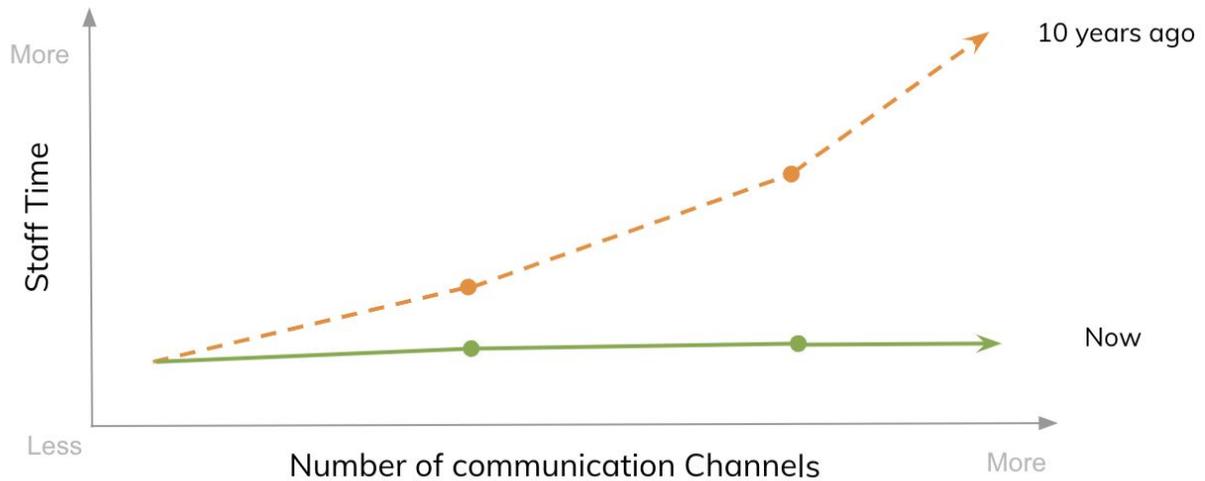


A city council meeting full of residents generally is not the result of healthy civic engagement, but a hot topic that has brought out disgruntled residents. What if you could find a way to fill the room with people who are interested in expressing their opinion on a topic, but are not unhappy? Technology allows you to do just that, filling a virtual space with residents who are unable to attend a meeting in person but who want to give input on a topic.

How does it work? Cities post questions and helpful supporting information to a survey platform to get input. The community then shares the questions through various communication channels including social media, newsletters, websites, and more, directing them back to the survey platform. Cities get real citizen sentiment data to make decisions, and staff time is saved by having all of the information in one place. Because it's online and accessible 24/7, residents

appreciate being able to give input when convenient for them, leading to increased participation rates and a more representative pool of respondents.

Myth #2- Using more communication channels means more staff time



Good civic engagement doesn't have to depend on managing multiple channels if one channel is provided that is easy, accessible, and can unify other channels where residents already are. We have found that average citizens want to give input. They just don't want to engage in the negative social media environment where simply voicing an opinion can lead to blistering personal attacks. In today's busy world, they don't have time to come to board meetings or public hearings. Technology has given us the ability to get input using digital tools, and communities have found that they don't get more extreme voices, but a more representative balance of what their community thinks as more voices join the discussion. You can use multiple channels, but use them in a way that maximizes their strengths. Facebook and email are not designed to receive constructive input from a broad base, so don't use it for that. Use those channels for outward communication and, when you need input, find a single reliable source that will serve as a consistent and safe place for staff and residents.

How can you successfully engage your community?

Communication is key. You need to use many outreach channels to meet people where they are, and provide links and relevant background materials to they can learn more before providing input. Minimize inbound channels, instead directing residents to a single channel, ideally one that creates a constructive, civil environment where residents feel comfortable expressing ideas and staff can be confident the input received is reliable and actionable. And be sure to let your residents know how you will be using their input to make your community better.

Get everyone on board. Your staff and department heads are wonderful resources as they have great outreach channels and their combined effort can get you further into the community, faster. They can also focus outreach efforts to ensure that your communications find those interested parties in the community who want to give input. Community partners such as school districts, sports leagues, Chambers of Commerce, employers, homeowners associations, veteran service organizations and others can help to bring visibility to your efforts and drive residents to the incoming communication channel.

Engage consistently. Engage more frequently, but with shorter questions and surveys. Survey fatigue and disengagement is often the result of long surveys, not quick polls that require minimal time. Attract them to your new communication channel with something important to the community, but something easy to understand. With proper context, service delivery satisfaction questions can be a great way to build expectations about how the city will engage with residents and what they will do with results. As you grow your audience and culture of engagement, you will be able to get input on more complicated issues and hot topics.

Bring it all together. Imagine your community experiences a weather event such as a snowstorm. Now imagine that you reach out to them to provide a snapshot of how the city responded with their snow and ice removal efforts. An analysis of the data at an aggregate level shows the community overall has rated the response as between good and very good. But now imagine that respondents have shared their district and you discover that while most of the community rated the response as very good, two areas rated the response as poor. How does that change the way you look at the data? How does that change your response? And how might the city improve service delivery and resident satisfaction rates if they continually track the data, not just gathering it every three years through the Resident Satisfaction Survey?

The scenarios we've imagined in this article are reality for many communities, with the examples being drawn from our actual customer experiences and feedback. Good civic engagement is the result of engaging residents in a way that is easy for them to participate in a meaningful way. While often the vocal few are not representative of the community, other times they may be indicative of an issue that is impacting just a small, but important subsection. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to tell the difference?

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