Balancing Virtual Engagement
and Measurable Results

The rapid adoption of virtual engagement technology has closed wide communication gaps, but not without creating its own unique challenges.

Now, public engagement professionals are asking, "How can we stay connected while also remaining coordinated?" Their answer lies in a targeted focus on data management and best practices in a virtual world.

3D rooms, virtual reality, CGI flyovers, virtual public meetings, and more have brought the opportunity to participate in the public engagement process to millions of new stakeholders. In addition to the sheer increase in participation, environmental justice and equity have risen to the top of the conversation, bringing a flexibility to the process that allows communities to participate at a scale never seen before.

As government organizations added unique ways to reach and engage residents in 2020, matching every new tactic with a different tool ultimately created *more work and less* **efficiency.** Government staff were forced to piece together a puzzle of engagement each time they wanted to see the big picture of their public engagement efforts.

3D rooms

Virtual reality

CGI flyovers

Virtual public meetings

220% increase in attendance

The average attendance of meetings hosted within PublicInput.com **increased from 38 to 87,** or 220%, pre vs. post-COVID.

Although 2020 brought forth a wave of technology adoption for public engagement and community outreach, three critical hurdles remain:

1 Reporting on the reach and equity of public involvement requires the labor-intensive process of compiling input from the multiple, siloed platforms used to capture it.

2 Aggregating and coding qualitative responses involves constructing spreadsheets and manual tagging, followed by graphics coordination to convey findings.

3 Managing formal comment and response periods is dependent on personal organization and puts compliance at risk by leaving large gaps where communication can be lost.

Additionally, with a renewed focus on rectifying systemic racial injustice and the need for greater equity among Environmental Justice communities in America, 2020 brought to light several uncomfortable truths in the assumptions of government agencies and staff.

1. Virtual solutions can be inaccessible to underrepresented groups including Linguistically Isolated residents, communities with limited access to broadband, and adults over 65.

2. The avalanche of online formats designed to emulate lived experience (such as 3D rooms) can even further disconnect public input data and analysis.

3. The reliance on online-only tools has put efforts at risk of the inherent bias resulting from surveying through limited communication channels.[1]

The Takeaway: **Familiar, traditional approaches remain incumbent.**
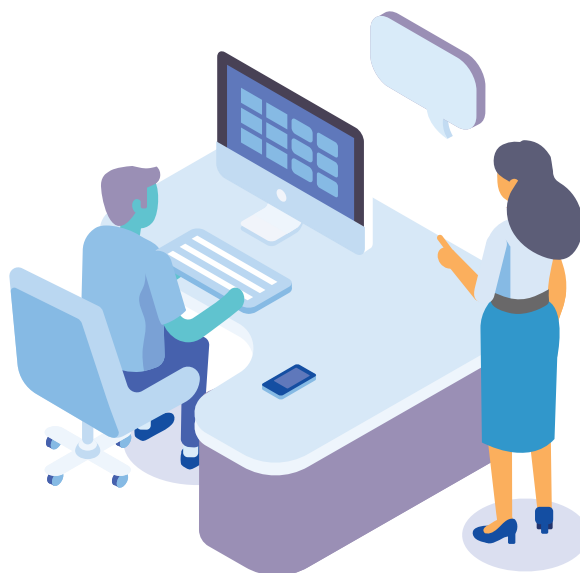
[1] Journal of Official Statistics (2005)

A common, yet misguided, assumption about public participation remains that *more participation* equals *representative participation.*

However, by embracing the importance of Mixed Mode surveying, government agencies are combating the status quo in favor of measurable equity. Research has shown that using multiple tactics is a best practice for reaching underrepresented groups and gathering more representative feedback.

The decline of response rates in telephone surveying years ago hinted at a much broader representation problem. Similarly, if we focus too much on collecting input via online survey, emails, or Zoom, we are still likely to yield a high degree of selection bias. Today, **participation numbers are dramatically higher thanks to online tactics**, but without a variety of tools, a focus on Environmental Justice groups, and a plan for defining measurable success, even large response sets follow a similar trend of limited tactics producing inequitable results.

In 2005, researchers recognized that conducting outreach and surveying using limited communication channels almost *guaranteed biased results.*[1]

1 Journal of Official Statistics (2005)

How are agencies ensuring measurable results from virtual engagement?

To answer, governments first need to ask themselves several questions:

What is the user experience for virtual tactics?

Where does the data live?

Are we offering continuity?

What is the user experience for virtual tactics?

A new trend, the "Digital Foyer" (or "3D room") is making waves across government agencies and consultants trying to keep up with the changing landscape of involvement tactics. These websites are some of the most impressive online formats the industry has seen in years and are fantastic options for **creating a life-like user experience for stakeholders** who have the time and capacity for in-depth exploration.

However, there are two aspects to remember when engaging a consultant to create a Digital Foyer:

Digital Foyers can be mobile-friendly and accessible, but they can also be overwhelming for less tech-savvy or time-crunched stakeholders. **Make sure these tactics are supplemented with practical options for someone on the go, like voicemail inboxes and text message surveys.**
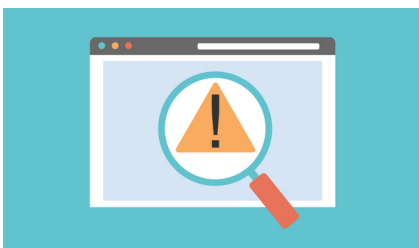
Reliance on asynchronous virtual meetings (like project websites) runs the risk of falling short of federal mandates and various agency public participation plans. **Ensure that your engagement plan is legally defensible by offering multiple and redundant formats for participation.**

THE TAKEAWAY:

Virtual engagement must go beyond hosting a video and comment form on project websites.

There is a difference between Virtual Public Meetings and Online Open Houses.

Where does the data live?

Though still loosely defined, these terms are quickly becoming commonplace.

A **Virtual Public Meeting** (or hearing) is a synchronous event requiring live streams, call-in speaker queues, registration forms, remote presentation abilities, and more.

Online Open Houses are asynchronous slideshows or embedded videos open over a period of time and generally feature an online survey or comment form to gather feedback on the proposed project.

There are several details to remember for those hosting their meetings online:

If you do not have access to a purpose-built Virtual Public Meetings platform, such as PublicInput.com, ensure that you have adequate staff bandwidth to run the meetings, as well as transcribe, attribute, store, and analyze comments coming through multiple channels during your meeting.

Online Open Houses offer a variety of formats for stakeholders to understand and respond to information. When hosting a Digital Foyer or Open House online, make sure that the tools embedded for data gathering aggregate automatically in a centralized repository to avoid wasted energy and potential for valuable feedback to go unincorporated.

This approach, facilitated outside of PublicInput, checks the box for accessibility and adheres to best practices.

"Due to the coronavirus, the Virtual Public Involvement Meeting is being hosted online and will feature interactive maps, comment forms, a survey, and a live Q/A discussion forum. If you wish to provide comments outside of the meeting, please email or call the Project Manager. The forum will use Webex Event Center and be coupled with traditional methods (email, phone and snail mail) for having the public formally submit scoping comments."
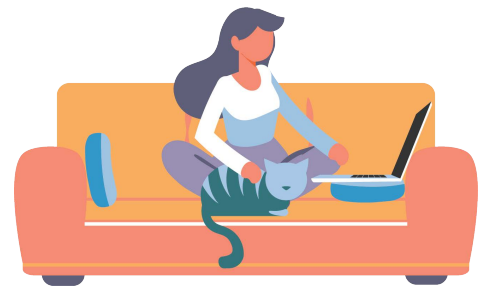
THE TAKEAWAY:

Agencies must consolidate approaches to data aggregation and analysis across projects.

Are we offering continuity?

Too often, public engagement is defined as transactional: a required element of a project with a beginning and end whose infrequent nature has the potential to undermine the trusted relationship between a government and its residents.

Government agencies all struggle to build relationships with their stakeholders, as true public input is built upon a foundation of trust that requires lasting commitment to both listening and communicating. Luckily, the technological advances government agencies and consultants have recently seen support this mission, combining a wide range of tactics to ensure equitable representation and facilitate coordinated, ongoing discussion.

THE TAKEAWAY:

Every initiative needs to build on a stronger understanding of the community.

Digital foyers, virtual public meetings, and virtual reality are here to stay and are a fantastic addition to the practice, as long as the foundation of equitable public engagement is rooted in mixed-mode outreach and long-term data continuity.

The PublicInput Platform™ is purpose-built

to provide rapid and relevant innovation, data continuity, workflow management, and accessibility to governments and their agencies.

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