Transportation Outreach Planner

Public Outreach Strategies

Telephone Techniques

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Recommended Target Groups

Education
College Education
High School Diploma
No High School Diploma

Language
Creole
Other
Spanish

Disability
Hearing Impaired
Other
Physically Challenged
Sight Impaired

Income
Low Income
Middle to Affluent

Vehicle Ownership
Non-vehicle Owner
Vehicle Owner

Race and Ethnicity
Race and Ethnicity

Age

Seniors

Working Age Adults

Youth

Strategy Class

- Innovation

Strategy Types

- Civic Engagement

Description

The telephone offers a unique form of public involvement, which allows personal contact with the user. It can be utilized to disseminate information and to receive public opinions. Although telephones have long been used for community involvement, the advent of mobile telephones and other technology have created new opportunities for reaching out to the public. Telephone techniques for public involvement include: [1]

- **Auto Attendant** - a series of recordings leading to a recorded answer or the appropriate staff person
- **Cellular Phone Techniques** - a variety of methods used to communicate with the public through the use of cellular phones, including emails, voicemails, and texting (also known as short message service(SMS))
- **Electronic Town Meeting** - a telephone call-in is combined with a scheduled television program, and the results of the public calls are displayed
- **Hotline or Voice Bulletin Boards** - a staff person or recording answers questions regarding a specific subject
- **Telephone Surveys** - surveys or opinion polls administered to a sample population over the telephone using a standardized questionnaire (for information on how to conduct a telephone survey see Public Opinion Surveys).
- **Teleconferencing** - telephone or video meeting between participants in two or more locations

Special Uses

Telephone Techniques can be used to: [2]

- Conduct telephone surveys or opinion polls
- Receive and disseminate information
- Provide information in more than one language
- Provide a service that does not require special training for participants to get involved or express ideas

When to Use

Telephone Techniques, such as hotlines and surveys, can be used when an agency is getting ready to kick off a project or planning effort. They can be used to obtain public feedback and answer people's questions. These techniques also help to maintain communication with the public throughout the life of a project or planning process. They serve as an important tool in establishing community contact and facilitating access to information.

Cost

* * Moderate ($1000 to $9999)

Costs of telephone techniques depend on the extent of a program, but they tend to be on the moderate range. Simple answering devices are inexpensive but not interactive. More sophisticated answering services are more expensive and often require a dedicated staff person to manage the system. Teleconferencing costs vary, depending on the application. For modest teleconferencing efforts, it may be possible to use special providers or to purchase relatively inexpensive telephone equipment. However, one of the most inexpensive ways of communicating with people is through mobile phone devices. For a relatively low fee agencies can reach a wide audience through texting or voicemails. [6]

Low (up to $999)	*	*Disclaimer:* The cost estimates provided are intended to be a
Moderate ($1,000 to $9,999)	* *	guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature

| High ($10,000 to $50,000) | * * * | | of the project. |
| Very High (Above $50,000) | * * * * | | |

Time
* * * Multiyear

The implementation of most telephone techniques can be accomplished within less than three months, however, the maintenance may be on-going, depending on what technique is used and its application. For example, an agency may want to have a hotline in operation for the duration of a project, or may opt to have an ongoing telephone information bureau for to answer the public's questions on all agency projects. In both cases, staff time will be needed to listen to the public's remarks, respond to any questions or issues that may arise, and archive the comments. [7]

1 to 3 months	*	*Disclaimer:* The time estimates are approximations. The
6 months to a year	* *	duration of a project may vary depending on various factors,
Multiyear	* * *	including size and budget.

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for implementing telephone techniques: [3]

- **Determine the goal that the agency is trying to achieve and identify the telephone technique that will be most effective for achieving that goal.** It is important to have a good understanding of what the agency is trying to accomplish prior to investing any time and effort in implementing any telephone applications. This will help the agency to determine the techniques that will be most effective in reaching the target audience. Below is a list of some suggested uses and the techniques that can be applied:

Obtain community feedback
- Hotlines
- Electronic Town Halls (call-in opportunities)
- Telephone Surveys

Answer frequently asked questions and address public concerns
- Hotline
- Auto Attendant
- Information Bureau

Provide updated information, promotion or alerts
- Text Messaging
- Twitter
- Voicemails
- Auto Attendant

Allow people who are in remote places or who cannot attend meetings to participate
- Teleconferencing
- Electronic Town Halls (call-in opportunities)

- **Assign a lead person who will be responsible for implementing and managing the telephone techniques.** This person will also be responsible for responding to any feedback that is received and troubleshooting any issue that may arise.

- **If establishing a telephone hotline or any type of answering/messaging system, the following should be applied:**
  - **Obtain a distinct telephone number.** All telephone lines that are used for public information or outreach should be separate from regular office lines. A distinct telephone number should be obtained. If possible, agencies should provide 24-hour toll-free communication access via an 800 number to ensure access.
  - **Establish an answering service that is capable of handling multiple calls at one time.** Depending on the agency's budget and the complexity of the telephone technique, it may be possible to organize a simple call-in center or a sophisticated communications center with automatic call distribution (ACD), an Intelligent Voice

Recognition (IVR) system, and integrated social media options. Special equipment is required to set up a sophisticated answering system. However, for more simple services it is possible for agencies to use an answering service. For a fee an agency can provide an answering service and manage the system remotely via an office telephone.

- **Develop a policy for ways in which agency staff should respond to calls.** The policy should include a protocol for dealing with problems that are reported and for addressing the public's questions. For example, if a problem is reported the protocol may require a formal notice to be submitted to the appropriate department that can address the issue, and for the department to respond to the person within a specific amount of time explaining how the department will address the problem.
- **Train staff on proper telephone etiquette and protocols, and provide them with a toolkit of information to answer the public's questions.** The staff that are going to be checking messages or answering public inquiries on the telephone should be trained on proper ways to answer the telephone and to address the public. Furthermore, such staff needs to receive training on the types of questions they may receive and how to obtain the information. To assist them, agencies should provide staff with a list of frequently asked questions, fact sheets, and contact information.
- **If using a hotline or a technique that allows users to leave messages, check messages frequently to ensure prompt responses.** Agencies should try to respond to people's questions or concerns within a reasonable time. Since this can be a time consuming process, agencies can instruct the public to indicate if they want a response. They can also inform callers how long it will take for someone to respond to their call.
- **Ensure that persons with hearing disabilities have access to the telephone service.** Text telephones such as TDD (Telephone Devices for the Deaf) phones can be used to aid people who have hearing disabilities.

- **If using mobile phone communication, the following should be considered:**
  - **Determine if the mobile phone technology will be used to broadcast information or to obtain feedback.** Agencies can use mobile phone technology to send alerts or information on upcoming meetings, events, and special projects. This can be done through texting, voicemails, and social media services, such as Twitter and Facebook. Agencies can also use mobile phones to obtain public feedback on projects, respond to questions regarding policy issues, or report problems.

  - **Ensure that mobile phone communication is consistent with agency policies and procedures.** The mobile phone practices for texting, voicemails, and communicating with the public should be consistent with the agency's policies for receiving and transmitting information, and should include procedures for public information requests. Employees need to be aware that emails, twitters, and other types of mobile phone communication can be considered part of the public record if conducted through an agency's official communication sites.
  - **Keep the public engaged by using mobile applications, location-based technology, scanner displays, and other mobile phone technology.** Special applications can be created to provide users with specific transportation related information or public involvement opportunities. For example, it is possible to create an application that will remind users of the next public meetings and public involvement activities. It is also possible to create interactive public displays that will engage the public. For example, agencies can place Quick Response (QR) Codes on posters or displays and encourage users to scan the symbol in order to get more information on a project, event, or program. Agencies can also use location-based technology to encourage users to report transit when they are commuting problems. In some cases, agencies have also used mobile phones to study travel behavior and travel times.
  - **Determine the type of information users are interested in receiving and segment the messages accordingly.** People should only receive information which they have expressed an interest in; otherwise they will consider the messages to be a nuisance.
  - **Keep messages brief and informative.** Whether sending a text message or a voice mail, messages should be short but impactful. This is important since text messages must be kept to 160 characters or less.
  - **Enable users to opt out of your messaging service when they desire.**

- **If using a telephone conferencing system, the following should be applied:**
  - **Agencies can use teleconferencing equipment or they can use special teleconferencing services.** These services have the ability to host numerous lines and allow participants to join in from any telephone with a dial-in number and passcode. With the use of computers, it is also possible to have video conferencing or allow users to view presentations online. This is particularly useful for training purposes.
  - **Provide materials in advance.** Participants should receive meeting materials in advance so that everyone may be able to see what is being discussed. Although these materials may be on-screen, they can be difficult to read unless a participant has a printed document for references.

- **Set the ground rules for orderly presentation of ideas.** The moderator should introduce participants in each location and review the objectives and time allotted for the meeting. Participants are urged to follow the moderator's guidance for etiquette in speaking. They should follow basic rules: speak clearly, avoid jargon, and make no extraneous sounds, such as coughing, drumming fingers, or side conversations.

- **Maintain communication with local telephone and mobile phone providers in order to obtain the latest information on new technology and applications that can be used to enhance public involvement efforts.** There are many innovations that are being introduced that are inexpensive and can enhance how agencies conduct public outreach. Agencies can work with their local telephone provides to identify what works best for them.

Recommended Target Demographics

Telephone techniques help agencies reach a broad variety of people who might not otherwise participate in transportation processes, including people with disabilities. When combined with social media, the telephone, particular mobile phones, can help agencies reach new audiences for public involvement. Indeed, cellular phone use is growing among all segments of the population. A survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that blacks and Hispanics are more likely to use their cell phones to access the internet and to obtain information.[4] Although telephone techniques provide a variety of ways to engage the public, agencies need to make special efforts to accommodate people who do not speak English and those with hearing impairments. [5]

Lessons Learned/Challenges
Below are key points to keep in mind when applying telephone techniques: [8]

- **Highly technical telephone techniques may require outside assistance from specialized agencies or firms and may be expensive.** The more elaborate and interactive the technology, the more likely that special expertise and specific programs or equipment will be needed.

- **When using recorded messages to disseminate information, some members of the public may become frustrated if they do not have an option to offer opinions or to reach a staff person**. To avoid this situation, all recorded messages should provide information on how the public may submit their comments.

- **Telephone hotlines do not allow for community residents to hear each other's comments.** Although hotlines enable the public to express their opinions or report concerns without having to attend a public meeting, they do not allow for dialogue or for exchange of ideas.

- **If using texting to communicate with the public, give the texting campaign time to build momentum.**

- **If using the telephone to obtain feedback, agencies need to develop a protocol for archiving the public feedback; as such communication is considered part of the public record.**

- **Publicize all telephone services that are provided.** Whether it is regular hotline or a mobile phone application, all telephone techniques that are used should be publicized on all agency material, including the agency website, newsletters, and any other relevant material.

Case Studies
The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority established a special telephone hotline to provide information regarding their Bike to Work Day. People who called and desired additional information had the option of leaving a message. A representative was assigned to call back with a response. The hotline made if easy for the public to obtain access to information regarding the event (http://www.metro.net/news/simple_pr/mta-has-set-special-telephone-hotline-provide-info/).[9]

The Montana Department of Transportation conducted a public involvement telephone survey as part of its Transportation Plan 21 (Trans/Plan 21). The survey provided information on the needs and preferences of residents related to the transportation system. A total of 1,222 Montana residents participated in the survey (http://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/surveys/2009_telephone_survey.pdf). [10]

The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit uses email alerts and Twitter to send messages to its users regarding transit services and to inform them of new content on the agency's website. This is part of the agency's effort to provide more interactivity and real-time information (http://www.bart.gov/news/twitter/index.aspx). [11]

Transit related mobile phone applications are widely available and growing in popularity. These applications can provide information on transit schedules, service updates and real-time bus and train locations. City-Go-Round, for example, is an application that helps people find local applications for transit, biking, walking, and driving (http://www.citygoround.org/).

For Further Information

The following sites provide information on how to organize site visits and include tips and other useful information:

- **GoToMeeting**: Is an on-line service that allows people to have telephone and video conferencing for a small monthly fee (https://www3.gotomeeting.com/en_US/m/g2mab_More2LMlp.tmpl). [10]

- **Running Head**: Mobile Communication And The Public Sphere: The study investigates how certain patterns of mobile phone use are linked to civic and political involvement (.http://www-personal.umich.edu/~parkyo/site/paper%20abstracts/mobile_civic_ICA.pdf). [11]

- **Classic Guide to Mobile Advertising:** This is a comprehensive resource of information regarding the use of mobile phones for marketing and promotions (http://www.mobilemarketer.com/cms/lib/5077.pdf).
- **Sensors and Sensitivity: Mobile Phones Provide New Ways to Gather Information, Both Manually And Automatically, Over Wide Areas**: Provides an overview of how mobile phones can be used to obtain information (http://www.economist.com/node/13725679). [12]

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