

SECTION 1: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

What is Public Engagement?

The real question is: *Does public perception really matter?* In a word, yes. Bad feelings by patrons and other members of the community not only spill over into the news media, they can influence government leaders or voters, both of whom directly affect the library's bottom line.

Your reputation can be your biggest asset or your biggest liability. Reputation is linked directly to credibility, and it works much like a bank account. Withdrawals occur every time you let your critics define you. Proactive engagement and reactive outreach, on the other hand, are like deposits, providing reputational capital to draw on in a crisis.

This toolkit provides a blueprint for developing goodwill and community support so that little problems don't become big ones. It also provides some guidelines to follow when, despite your best efforts, you do face a significant issue.

It's important to remember that no one set of guidelines will fit every scenario. A large, urban city library and a small, rural county library are very different organizations and have their own cultures. Every library is different, every community is different, every situation that arises is different.

However, the goal of public engagement is the same in every situation: to address the fears and concerns of the public, before and after they arise. Consider outreach a business need in today's contentious environment and build it into your business plan.

Public Engagement vs. Public Information

Before setting out on your public engagement journey, it's a good idea to understand what public engagement is and what it is not. Perhaps the easiest distinction to make is between public engagement and public information.

Public information is that which is "pushed" out into the community to educate others about a particular issue or event. It is a one-way process that neither requires nor expects new information to be provided in return. A good example of public information is an advertisement.

Public engagement, on the other hand, is a partnership. Successful engagement depends as much on gathering feedback as it does on communicating your message. It assumes that the library and its audiences all have a stake in the activities and issues surrounding the library and that each party can meet goals and interests by understanding those of the other party. An example of public engagement in politics is the town hall meeting, at which leaders seek input and questions about critical issues that affect the community.

While there will be times when your short-term goals can be served best through public information, long-term success in today's environment requires a constant exchange of information that only engagement can provide.

Public Engagement Principles

Public engagement is a dialogue. Its purpose is to educate the public while listening to their concerns. Public engagement should include all persons affected by library activities and provide a forum for cooperation, collaboration and, in some cases, compromise.

However, engagement should also be an ongoing practice, whether or not a major event or issue has occurred. The time for reaching out to the community is well before a crisis occurs. Even in today's contentious society, libraries can help control the tone and substance of public debate by engaging – rather than avoiding – public involvement. Quite often, you will learn about legitimate concerns and earn additional respect and support for addressing them.

The principles behind public engagement are:

- **Listening to each other.** Doctors today are counseled to communicate openly and fully with patients and to avoid the little slights – unreturned phone calls, rushed examinations, signals that they don't really care – that can sometimes lead to a malpractice suit. The same advice applies to libraries. While one small oversight or lost opportunity will not necessarily lead to opposition, many issues compounded can damage your credibility, your reputation, and your success. Most misunderstandings can be avoided simply by listening to one another.
- **Learning from each other.** Look at public engagement as an opportunity to educate others about the importance of the library, the services it provides, and the support it needs to thrive. Likewise, try to understand what drives the views with which you disagree. While you can't be expected to agree with each other all the time, it's essential that you attempt to understand one another.
- **Respecting each other.** A listening ear, common courtesies, an open mind, and a little flexibility can go a long way. Remember that even when someone is criticizing your library's policies or materials, they want what every person wants – to be acknowledged, heard, and understood.

Other basic principles will help you as individual situations arise that need focus and attention. These include:

- **Identify potential stakeholders.** Who is, or could be, affected by your actions?
- **Identify the needs and desires** of the interested and affected parties. To do this, you may have to sit down with people face to face before you act.
- **Develop trust and credibility** among stakeholders by telling the truth.
- **Solicit information and ideas** from affected stakeholders.
- **Ensure you are meeting or exceeding** all relevant local, state and federal laws and regulations, and your patrons' needs.
- **Begin early.** Don't wait until the first story hits the papers to act.
- **Be flexible.** Every issue is unique, so be ready to adapt.
- **Improve or adapt your plan** to avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential negative project impacts.