

COMMUNITY FORUM TIPS

By Tom Silvestri

The Relevance Project

The Relevance Project recommends you take a six-step approach to organizing a Community Forum on issues of importance to your town, city, county, region or state. Moderating a civil discourse requires planning, process and purpose.

Step 1: Pick

Select your topic, location for the Forum and format well in advance. Put your topic in the form of an intriguing question so that it attracts the largest possible audience. With the lingering pandemic, you are the best judge on whether the town hall is virtual or in person. Format determines whether there's only a moderator with an audience or a moderator with guest speakers, presenters or a panel of subject matter experts. The best time durations are 30, 60 or 90 minutes, depending on the topic and size of audience.

Step 2: Invite

Start planning the Forum at least 90 days out and invite the public no later than a month before the program. Create a formal invitation; publish and distribute it. Also, think who in the expected audience would have something valuable to contribute and invite each guest personally. Diversify your audience by including school classes, especially those studying the issue. Don't be afraid to promote and do it repeatedly.

Step 3: Inform

Before the Forum, publish stories, commentaries and promotions about the program and, in tandem, about the issue or topic to be discussed. Great time for an enterprise or in-depth report right before the Community Forum. Use online products and social media to also alert potential attendees.

Step 4: Conduct

Plan how the forum will be conducted. Create clear guidelines on civility expectations. Practice. At the event, welcome the audience and explain how participation works. Moderate the program so the topic is first discussed by speakers and at a designated time invite audience questions and comments. Look to involve as many questions and comments as possible. REALLY important advice: Make sure the audio is excellent. People who can't hear what's going on tend to disrupt or leave.

Step 5: Report

Consider broadcasting the forum live on the newspaper's website. Write a news story on what people said and take pictures of the audience and everyone who spoke. Consider a follow-up editorial or commentary on potential next steps.

Step 6: Transcribe

Your news story presented the highlights. Now, transcribe the full forum so you can publish in a week or two the entire record of comments and exchanges, complete with the pictures of each speaker. Providing a full transcript can encourage more people to participate next time. It's another way to involve interested residents.

Bonus Idea: Consider involving your journalists by having them interview newsmakers, authorities or confirmed experts. It's a neat way of exploring an issue and demonstrating the talent that creates invaluable insights.

--Tom Silvestri