

## How To Plan A Community Forum

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**The Relevance Project**

The Relevance Project offers workshops on how newspapers and their trade associations can be THE Community Forum.

The Community Forum is an umbrella strategy to attract and connect with a growing audience. Its centerpiece action is the town hall (in Richmond, where I moderated 78 civil, civic Community forums, they were called the Public Square; [sample it here](#)).

In both the strategy and the big action, the desired result is elevating your Relevance, a key goal in any transformation or reinvention.

This month, I presented “How To Become THE Community Forum” to publishers and editors from press associations based in three states — Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa. Thanks to the associations for the invitation and to the attendees who showed up to learn —on a Friday, no less.

A frequent question from workshop participants is how to plan a town hall. I offered advice on the Zoom calls. But in this Relevant Point, I sketch in detail a planner that defines the steps that go into thinking, planning, plotting, organizing, conducting and reporting a Community Forum.

The model below assumes a town hall is conducted quarterly. It also works for an annual program.

After reviewing this approach, build your own tracker that charts required steps and results. Adjust as you see fit.

I am contemplating a separate Relevant Point on how to moderate a town hall. (Note: there's a series among the Relevant Points that reports my Public Square experience. Let me know if you'd like a shortcut to read them.)

In the meantime, here we go:

## TOWN HALL/PUBLIC SQUARE "DRILL"

Based on 4X a year (quarterly) model.

### AT THE OUTSET

Create a written plan detailing the Town Hall's role and how the initiative advances the newspaper's Mission. Place a great emphasis on the newspaper's Relevance to its community and the importance of modeling civil, civic dialogue in a divisive society battling misinformation.

INTRODUCE your initiative in a publisher or editor column.

Mention this is part of a strategy to become THE Community Forum.

REMEMBER: Planning and practice better prepares you for success. Wing it at your own risk.

A WORD TO THE WISE: Invest in technology (especially sound) that provides the best possible experience for participation and understanding.

If you are able, announce all four topics that make up the year cycle for your town halls. If you can't, at least start the planning 90 days out with firm deadlines on what to accomplish.

### 90-60 DAYS OUT

Organize the Planning Team to brainstorm, collaborate on required actions and manage details. Make sure each member has a key role/responsibility: Consider: Invitations/registration; room/technology setup; news coverage; promotions; speaker coordination; program moderator and management; guest welcome; security; afterward thank-you gestures.

Decide how often the Planning Team should meet. I suggest every other week 90 to 60 days out. Weekly 30 days out. Put these check-ins on the calendar so they don't get lost. You can always cancel them if there is no need.

Decide if you want people to register or just show up. Think security and how to avert hecklers/disruptors.

Identify the location to hold the town hall.

Plan on the town hall to be 90 minutes.

Set a date. Confirm the location.

Pick the topic (assumes you are not playing off breaking news). Write a nut or context graph on why people should care about this topic and why you are focused on it. Be strong.

Compose the topic in terms of the strongest question that will attract the biggest potential audience. (If you have trouble writing a captivating question, rethink the topic.)

Identify the format (debate, presentation, panel discussion, one main newsmaker, etc.) and guest speakers. Secure their commitment.

NOTE: Make sure you leave ample time for audience participation. There's the 30-30-30 (30 minutes for presentation; 30 minutes for moderator questions; 30 minutes for the audience); or 45-45 (45 minutes for the presentation and guest speakers; 45 minutes for the audience).

Update the timeline/tracker on what needs to get done from now until the program occurs. Make sure the planning team has the tracker with clear directions on who does what.

## 60-45 DAYS OUT

Announce the program with a news story and explain how the public can participate. Send the story to broadcast media to see if they'll also promote it.

Begin to think who would be best to supplement the guest speakers by being in the audience willing to speak. Create a list of invitees and make the effort to invite them by including a copy of the news story and promotions. (For example: In Richmond, we tried to invite college classes and professors studying the topic. Also, we tried to make sure those involved in the issue knew about the town hall and acknowledged that not everyone was a subscriber who saw our promotions.)

Create a set of promotions that can run each week to gather new signups. If you have limited audience capacity, update with the latest availability of "seats."

Schedule publication and distribution.

Consider partnering with other media.

Whenever a news story is about the topic, match it with a sidebar about the town hall.

Assign the big takeout story that will appear no later than a week before the town hall. Consider making it a special report in print and online.

Do an initial conference call or meeting with the guest speakers so they know what's expected of them. Set up the next check-in call.  
Check on the technology to be used.

#### 45-30 DAYS OUT

Set up conference call or meeting with the guest speakers to go over their roles and answer their questions. Give them enough guidance so they are comfortable with what they will provide at the town hall.

Decide how you will transcribe the program so you can publish an edited version in print and the full text online. (Note: In Richmond, we hired someone to do the transcript. It cost us about \$200.)

Check the planned special report so it will be ready.

Check on the technology to be used.

Check on the registrations to see if you have to adjust.

Create a quality welcome concept to attendees that ensures you secure their email addresses. If the town hall is done in person, consider name tags for all participants and a check-in sheet that identifies every attendee.

#### TWO WEEKS TO ONE WEEK OUT

Confirm who will cover the event. Make sure you are ready to at least get a head shot of everyone who speaks.

The moderator should have a "script" of what to say to open, run and close the program. Included should be clear ground rules on what a civil, civic discourse involves.

Check on the speakers.

Think about the best way to welcome invited guests and the public.

Always test the equipment for sound. Being able to hear clearly is critical.

#### AT THE EVENT

Have your guest speakers/subject-matter experts show up in advance to go over the room, where they will speak and any last-minute questions. Make sure their mics are working well.

Have someone besides the moderator focused on welcoming attendees as they come in. Have a plan for those who show up really early or late.

Moderator runs the program. Make sure it starts on time. Think carefully about

the opening as it enthusiastically welcomes, explains why the paper is the host, goes over the ground rules, explains the town hall's format, and thanks everyone for attending —with a reminder that this will be a civil, civic discussion.

Always use at least two microphones and have a Planning Team member ready with the ability to turn off a mic.

Record the town hall for posting online.

#### AFTER THE TOWN HALL

Post same day coverage of the event online. Fuller coverage in print.

Think through the online presentation. For example: Consider breaking up the recording into “chapters” for easier viewing. Also consider the town hall content as part of a rich archive about the news issue that was discussed. (Long term: the town hall approach has an identity as strong as the newspaper format.)

A week or two after the town hall, publish the transcript. Make sure you have the correct name and a picture of each speaker to run.

Add an editorial/commentary that examines what the public should do next based on key findings from the town hall.

Do a post-mortem with the planning team on what to improve. Consider rewarding them with a lunch/snacks for their efforts.

Announce/tease the next program.

Create a promotional ad thanking the public for attending. Publish it a few times over the next 30 days.

Consider adding a reminder with subsequent stories on the topic that it was the subject of the town hall and you can review online what was said then.

#### NEXT TOWN HALL

Restart the process. Do it again. Lessons learned will improve the next program.

ONWARD.

A Relevant Offer: Free feel to contact me if you want to further discuss. I'm open to helping you launch a Community Forum series. That would be a fun assignment.

--Tom Silvestri

