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Eight citizen engagement ideas to help enhance your place brand strategy

For your place brand strategy to be successful, citizen engagement should be a continuous and integral focus in your strategic decision-making. A place is its people – and engaging your community is essential to ensuring that your residents see themselves reflected in your strategy. On top of engaging with your citizens before launching a new place brand strategy, it is crucial that this relationship is continued throughout your place branding journey to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of your strategy.

We asked our Expert Partners why they believe cities, regions, and nations should adopt a more strategic and integrated approach to citizen engagement and what their top piece of advice is for places looking to take this to the next level.

Define clear goals before you begin engaging with your citizens

Achieving citizen engagement is not a one-off approach, but a process that requires strategic thinking to enable meaningful results for the community and foster

collaboration, trust, and resilience. It starts by defining clear goals, and then thinking about how citizen engagement can help cities, regions and nations achieve them. Such an approach requires collecting input from different perspectives, and particularly by those community groups, businesses and other organisations who are affected by new strategies. Next steps involve using a variety of engagement methods (e.g. hall meetings, surveys), communicating clearly and transparently while being open to feedback and suggestions, and continuously evaluating and adjusting the process.

Dr. Pantazis Pastras, Senior Research Analyst, [TOPOSOPHY](#)

Incorporate citizen participation at every stage, not just during the initial stages of your place brand journey

Citizen engagement is usually a regular element of tourism master plans and destination development strategies, especially in the work we do. However, when the projects are complete and the DMO takes over implementation, the engagement generally ends. This shouldn't be the case, but is unfortunately a by-product of DMOs deadeye focus on out-of-town guests. If there is one thing that COVID has taught us, it's that DMOs must balance their out-of-town focus with their engagement of residents and local stakeholders, because locals really do care about the destination and are more than willing to be part of the ongoing process. As such, bringing them back into the strategy effort to help guide and facilitate implementation is a great way to get things done and keep citizens engaged.

Richard Cutting-Miller, Vice President, Tourism Strategy, [CSL International](#)

Seek out diverse perspectives

Destinations should always be engaging the public as they create and adjust strategies for economic and tourism development. In nearly all of the strategic destination plans we conduct, both a resident sentiment survey and a visitor survey are part of the process. As the most important stakeholders in the success of a community, residents from all walks of life, representing diverse neighbourhoods and interest groups, should be engaged to participate in these processes. Often, the results suggest a forward-thinking populace ready to see leaders tackle new ideas, yet also many who caution about how to manage current challenges, such as over-tourism and traffic.

Understanding diverse perspectives allows for a strategy that creates equitable approaches for diverse audiences and achieves the overarching goals of the place.

Rob Hunden, President & CEO, [Hunden Strategic Partners](#)

Think outside of the box to connect with a wide variety of individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives in your community

To develop authentic brands, places need to engage the local population in deep and meaningful ways. They need to go beyond the “usual suspects” of power players and seek to hear from diverse voices of different ages, races and backgrounds. Meet residents on their own turf and where they feel comfortable, will speak candidly and can be heard – whether it’s at a neighbourhood gathering spot, community centre or a church basement. Sticking just to boardrooms will not yield the true DNA of a place brand. All the strands must be teased out and woven together.

Dariel Y. Curren, Executive Vice President, [Development Counsellors International](#)

Effective citizen engagement goes beyond looking at the data - ask yourself, how are you weighting different viewpoints?

Too often civic leaders want to check the box on engagement and then have the data tell us all the answers. The reality is that effective public engagement isn’t that simple. Public engagement should be about surfacing viewpoints - it's not about voting. The hard work then starts with what you do with those many different viewpoints. You don’t simply tally up the viewpoint with the most responses. Effective leadership isn’t simply a majority-wins approach to decision-making. One person that you engage with may represent thousands that you haven’t reached.

Ryan Short, Co-Founder, [CivicBrand](#)

Leverage passionate members of your community to represent and champion your place

Too often people in a place are engaged in an ad hoc way. Stakeholder engagement must run like a golden thread through everything a place does, creating advocates and champions. This is the route to widening place-leadership, activating collaboration, and producing an empowered place salesforce; acknowledged ingredients for a successful destination. This requires mechanisms such as place-leadership groups and ambassador programmes to be initiated and stakeholders to be given the means to relay their place's story unleashing their passion, talent, skills, contacts and credibility to deliver true additionality through their insight, energy and dynamism; putting the pizzazz into any place!

John Till, Director, [thinkingplace](#)

Measure existing local perceptions of your place and use this data to direct your strategy

Citizens can be fantastic co-creators and ambassadors but like with any other stakeholders – it is best to start with understanding their perceptions of the place brand. In our research, we always compare the views from home with the external ones.

Whenever the citizens' perceptions are below your aspirations for the place brand, consider what policy steps can be taken to improve them, so as not to undermine the external perceptions of the place. Without their support, no brand values and no marketing messaging will sound truthful.

And whenever citizens' perceptions exceed the views held by external stakeholders, think of creative ways to leverage your citizens' trust to tell your story to others. It can be easy to execute, cost-effective, and most importantly – impactful.

Konrad Jagodzinski, Place Branding Director, [Brand Finance](#)

Data suggests how excluded residents feel in how tourism is developed and managed – find practical solutions to engage them throughout your strategy

For decades, many tourism organisations and their industry partners have taken local community support for granted. According to our [major global study on community engagement](#) alongside our partners, Coraggio Group and Group NAO, more than 75% of DMOs agree that their local residents feel excluded in how tourism is developed and managed, and less than 80% of DMOs have not developed any key performance indicators to report progress on community engagement. [You can find a short summary of the study, "Time for DMOcracy," with links to the reports and resources in this blog here](#), but a few foundational recommendations that emerged include:

- Invest in understanding what your community really thinks about tourism.
- Build your destination management plan with the community at its core.
- Include community voices in your formal and informal governance and consultation.
- Be involved in finding solutions to practical problems.

Chris Adams, Head of Research & Insights, [Miles Partnership](#)