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Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR
Strategizing and Executing The Town Hall Meeting During A Time of Crisis

By Douglas J. Swanson

It is not uncommon for politicians, government administrators and law-enforcement officials to suggest the use of a town hall meeting to deal with a community-wide crisis incident. Gatherings of this type can foster a spirit of transparency and openness that’s important when dealing with a crisis. However, if not carried out appropriately, the town hall meeting can actually generate controversy and make the crisis situation much more difficult to resolve.

For centuries, communities in Europe have used the town hall meeting format to engage community discussion and make decisions on important issues. Town hall meetings were common in the American colonies, and such meetings are still used today to allow residents to participate in the establishment of municipal budgets and the election of governmental representatives. In recent years, the term “town hall meeting” has been used to refer to gatherings where issues are discussed but no vote is taken.

Civic journalism-focused media entities often collaborate with a nonprofit (such as the League of Women Voters) to sponsor what is referred to as a “town hall meeting” to facilitate political debate.

When citizens face a community-wide crisis, a town hall meeting can be organized to bring people together for a presentation of information and a discussion of the issues. This is particularly important in cases where facts are unclear or in dispute. The challenge, of course, is bringing about a town hall meeting that is both carefully structured, to keep things under control, and able to offer the appearance of minimal structure, so citizens feel empowered.

In many ways, the public relations practitioner will find the town hall meeting that addresses a community crisis to be the real-life equivalent of social media. In other words, in social media (such as with corporate blogs, Facebook pages, etc.), the PR practitioner wants to moderate, but from the background and with a light touch. The forum needs to look like a real forum. When dissenting blog posts or uncomplimentary comments on Facebook are edited or deleted by the social media host, participants in the social media forum quickly perceive that the forum is not so freewheeling, and not nearly so social.

The same can be said for a town hall meeting. When it’s run with a heavy-handed approach, participants can perceive the meeting as having a “corporate agenda” from the outset. At the same time, though, a town hall meeting that’s engaged without any focus or direction can have very unpleasant outcomes.
The Successful Town Hall Meeting: Seven Questions to Ask and Answer to Help Strategize and Execute a Winning Town Hall Meeting

Every PR professional should have a "what to do" crisis checklist. Here are some traditional and out-of-the-box recommendations for what to include in the list:

1. **What Can Be Resolved, and What Can't?**
   No community meeting can resolve all issues (and, indeed, as the example here has shown, some town hall meetings can't resolve any issues). What do you hope to accomplish? How do you know it's accomplishable? Of course, lots of research here is needed, so that you understand as clearly as possible the community, the issue stakeholders, the culture and the myriad of other variables that will give you the best guess as to what you can accomplish through the meeting—and what you can't.

2. **What Organizational/Presentational Structure Works Best?**
   Are the issues you plan to deal with best addressed through a lecture format or a panel of experts? Or a series of breakout sessions led by community stakeholders? Or some other structure that gives involved publics their best chance to learn, discuss and express their opinions? Again, more research is needed. Perhaps first you need to assemble some community focus groups and gather information about what information people need, what opinions they have and how they'd feel most comfortable expressing those opinions. In any case, don't set yourself up for failure by structuring a meeting that clearly won't work with the issues you have or the people you need to engage in discussion.

3. **What Venue Fits With The Issues and The Discussion?**
   The venue you plan to use for the meeting is as important as its presentational structure. In the La Crosse, Wisconsin example, the venue was a local high school auditorium. While it was a good place to assemble a lot of people, putting several hundred people in a large room with poor acoustics and a marginal public address system resulted in shouting, not discussion. Broadcasting the event live on prime-time television magnified the problems with the venue. You may find that any one venue in your community is insufficient to host a meeting of this type. That, in turn, may take you back to the conclusion that several small meetings over a period of days would work more effectively than one large meeting. It depends. What does your research tell you?

4. **What Authorities Need to Be Present, and in What Way?**
   It would seem reasonable that most community crisis events would need to be addressed at some level by experts present at the town hall. Who should you recruit? Will the community recognize their expertise? What will the experts say, and how will they say it? Will the experts disagree on some points, and if disagreement at some level acceptable? The goal of including experts in a community discussion is likely to be the reframing of differing perspectives, so that some level of consensus can be reached. How will your experts make that happen in this instance?

5. **Who Will Moderate, and How?**
   The town hall meeting needs to have a moderator who's friendly but focused, and organized but open to adjustments. Those on differing sides of the issue should also be able to respect this person. The moderator needs to be someone who knows how to manage a meeting, and knows how to focus on areas of agreement mutual to all parties. This way they can help move everyone forward together. You probably don't want Judge Judy (too vitriolic), or Jerry Springer, either (too willing to stand back and watch people throw chairs).
6. What Supporting Materials Can Be Offered, and in What Way?
We’ve all been in meetings where important issues are being discussed, and some key player in the process doesn’t have the agenda. It’s one thing to tolerate a person who doesn’t have a clue in a small group situation, but it’s quite another in a community meeting. Misinformed people make bad judgments, and they spread their misinformation to other people. As you plan the meeting, plan the information that will be put out in advance: what, where, when, and in what media. Use the community news media gatekeepers as your allies. Use social media to tell your story, your way. Have a thorough strategic communications plan for the days ahead of the meeting, so that you can set the stage appropriately for an engaging discussion.

7. What Happens Afterward?
Finally, keep in mind that no matter how well your town hall meeting goes, it won’t bring all dissenting community opinion to a screeching halt. There will always be issues you need to address after the meeting. How will you summarize and re-present the results of the meeting to stakeholders in the community? What media will you use to do this? How will you use the meeting as a starting point, rather than an ending point, for engagement with key publics? That’s what it’s all about.

La Crosse, Wisconsin’s “River Killer”: A Case In Point
At least 24 college-aged men have drowned in the Mississippi River near La Crosse, Wisconsin, since 1974. Six of the deaths occurred between 1997 and 2004. Some community members contend the deaths are tragic and unrelated. Others argue that a mysterious “River Killer” has committed the murders, contending that local authorities are unable or unwilling to bring the criminal to justice.

In 2004, in an effort to ease community fears, a live televised town hall meeting was initiated by the La Crosse Police Department. Despite good intentions, however, the two-hour meeting was poorly planned and executed. A rambling speech by the police chief, followed by a 25-slide PowerPoint presentation stalled the meeting at the outset. A panel of health care and behavioral experts was in place, but was not allowed to make opening statements before the microphone was turned over to the audience. Audience members ridiculed the authorities, dismissing their unstated wisdom and turning on each other to argue over whose unproven theory about the killings was most appropriate.

Although the police chief repeatedly promised a “positive plan” to engage the community, the disorganized format of the meeting precluded any opportunity for rational discussion. As the program drew to a close, a succession of citizens came forward to challenge the position of the experts through argumentative speculation. There was extensive rambling questioning of police officers’ competence, and the presentation of a litany of unworkable “solutions” to a community problem that hadn’t even been explained or put in any context by authorities.

The meeting ended without resolving any issues. Community frustration increased, and existing rumors about a supposed “River Killer” responsible for the deaths intensified. Another drowning occurred in 2006, and the community speculation renewed itself. The issue remains contentious to this day.

Engaging With The Public Using a Town Hall Meeting
In public relations, every opportunity for communication necessitates a balance of structure and content. Write a news release that’s “perfect” in its structure but inappropriate in its content—and no gatekeeper is likely to be interested in using it. Create a news release that tells the “perfect” newsworthy story but is visually
awkward or unpleasing—and the same outcome will result. The town hall meeting is no different. The event needs to have a strategically sound structure, balanced with content that’s relevant and engaging with the people who will be affected by the meeting’s outcome (see the sidebar on how to create a successful town hall meeting).

A public relations crisis situation occurs when an organization’s competence or honesty is threatened, the public learns about that threat and some or all communication about the threat is outside the organization’s control. This creates a need for information, particularly among members of the public who interact with the organization. When a crisis is addressed appropriately, organizations and their publics can resume mutually beneficial relationships that are fundamental to good public relations.

A town hall meeting is, in a sense, no different than any other communications tool. It has to be strategically planned. It needs a strategically sound structure, balanced with content that’s relevant and engaging with the people who will be affected by the meeting’s outcome. Ideally, the town hall meeting is not the place where controversy ends. Rather, it should be the starting place for positive community engagement and a new level of discussion. PRN

Douglas J. Swanson, PhD, APR, is an associate professor in the department of communications at California State University, Fullerton, where he oversees Fullerton’s student-run advertising and PR agency. An accredited public relations practitioner, Swanson worked in journalism and broadcasting for 12 years, and has taught full time since 1991.