Engaging Questions

for Public Engagement

Second Edition

bangthetable®

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A word from the authors

Writing engaging questions is one of the most important aspects of conducting an effective consultation process. It is the essential ingredient for allowing your community to co-design solutions with you and to provide meaningful input towards your projects.

Without accessible and engaging questions, you can negatively impact your consultation practices and miss valuable community input from the broadest range of voices possible.

In this booklet, you will find a range of question types that are commonly used in community (or, public, if you prefer) engagement. By looking at how each of the sample questions could be re-written to be more engaging, this guide is a thinking tool to support effective question writing. The examples given here are not necessarily mutually exclusive or mutually compatible — indeed, some are clearly incompatible. They are provided as a provocation to get you thinking more deeply about what it is that you really want your community to contribute.

Use this guide as a resource for ideas, checking your question writing style, or discovering how to make your inquiry more accessible for your community. Remember, before you can decide on which questions to ask your community, it is essential that you have created a clear and concise project plan and defined your engagement goals. Without having a clear understanding of what you are trying to achieve, it will be hard to frame your questions to get the information you require.

Which question style is right for your organization, your project, and your community?

The Bang the Table team

Be clear

Write your questions in plain English.

The shorthand language of your workplace is not appropriate for discussions with the general public.

Bureaucratese and jargon should be culled from public conversations.

INSTEAD OF:

"What built form, freeboard, FSR, and site coverage should be permitted within the LEP?"

CONSIDER:

"What rules do you think should be put in place to control the types of houses that can be built in your suburb?"

Be open

Ask open questions.

Open questions put the onus on the participant to respond creatively.

"Do you agree with an increase in Council rates?"

CONSIDER:

"How would you solve the problem of the growing gap between our forecast income and costs?"

Dig deeper

Ask for a rationale behind the opinion.

Often the reasons behind the response are more telling and more useful than the response itself. The rationale can reveal unspoken beliefs and values (sometimes erroneous, sometimes not).

INSTEAD OF:

"Which option do you prefer?"

CONSIDER:

"What is it about your preferred solution that makes it the best option from your perspective?"

Be specific

Ask about specific, concrete elements of your project.

Generic questions about broad plans, programs, and policies anticipate too much knowledge and enthusiasm on the part of the participant. It is your responsibility to reveal the changes you propose rather than expecting your audience to dig for them.

INSTEAD OF:

"Do you have any comments about the draft Community Services Plan?"

CONSIDER:

"How will the proposed changes to the operating hours of the childcare center affect you?"

Be targeted

Direct questions to specific identifiable audiences.

Generic questions to the widest possible audience may seem like the best way to be inclusive. Unfortunately, when it is not obvious to the community how a particular group will be affected by a change, a generic question can end up targeting no one, with the result that no one joins the conversation.

INSTEAD OF:

"How will the proposed timetable changes affect you?"

CONSIDER:

"As an outer-suburbs commuter, how will the proposed new rail services affect you?"

Be spacial

Ask questions about specific places.

Many people have a strong affiliation with their suburb, town, village, hamlet, favorite park, playground, beach, etc. It is much easier to motivate involvement in a discussion if the question can be given a "place" focus.

INSTEAD OF:

"How do you feel about four-story development around railway stations?"

CONSIDER:

"How will four-story townhouses around your local railway station affect you?"

Motivate involvement

Use the active voice to motivate involvement.

The passive voice is all too common in public sector report writing and this often spills over into the online environment. The active voice motivates contribution much like a good call-to-action in an advertisement.

INSTEAD OF:

"How might we better manage the potential for conflict between pet owners and others?"

CONSIDER:

"What would you do to reduce the conflict between dog walkers and people who are scared of dogs?"

Be brief

Keep your questions short and to the point.

Verbosity is also all too common in public sector writing. The web does not permit such laziness. Pith is a necessity, not a luxury.

"On 5/12/2012, Council passed resolution number 56748 seeking community input regarding the draft planning provisions for the redevelopment of the foreshore parkland."

CONSIDER:

"We need to fix the foreshore park. What's your solution?"

Be honest

Assume change within the question where this is honest and appropriate.

Not always, but generally you will be consulting about inevitable change. The direction of that change may be flexible to a greater or lesser degree, but change of some sort is inevitable. Use this knowledge to frame the discussion.

INSTEAD OF:

"What are important heritage issues?"

CONSIDER:

"What should we do to conserve the heritage value of the area when the old theater is demolished?"

Provide context

Provide context within the wording of the question.

Public policy discussions do not take place in a vacuum. Context is a key driver of both the need for the conversation and in channelling the direction that conversation is likely to take. Contextualizing a question is therefore a powerful way to motivate discussions in a particular direction and/or with a more or less open attitude.

INSTEAD OF:

"How do you think the old building site should be reused?"

CONSIDER:

"Given that the area is recognized internationally by several heritage protection treaties, what is the best way that the old building site can be reused for the benefit of the broadest possible community?"

Demand contemplation

Ask emotionally and cognitively complex questions.

Slowing down the response process by asking your participants to think and feel deeply about an issue before they even begin responding is highly desirable. You will unearth far more thoughtful commentary and dialogue.

INSTEAD OF:

"What activities do you think should be encouraged on the new park?"

CONSIDER:

"Given the large scale and location close to transport hubs, what opportunities do you think the return of this parkland provides for the health of the broader community beyond the immediate neighborhood?"

Promote positivity

Consider giving the question an appreciative attitude.

Appreciative inquiry is a well-used methodology in face-to-face community engagement. It can be used to great effect as a starting point to turn negative debates into constructive dialogues.

"How could the area be improved?"

CONSIDER:

"What do you feel most proud of about your suburb? What do you show visitors to the area?"

Empower

Consider whether your question might encourage your participants to take some responsibility for, or ownership of, the solution.

It is all too common in public policy conversations for community members to inadvertently refute their own power to enact change and to look to the consulting organization to provide all of the answers and solutions.

This needn't necessarily be so.

"How can we reduce the number of accidents on the main street?"

CONSIDER:

"What can you do today to reduce the conflict between drivers and pedestrians on the main street?"

Be provocative

Don't be afraid of a little controversy.

In face-to-face community consultation processes it is sometimes useful for the facilitator to throw a metaphorical bomb into the room to shake participants out of their torpor.

INSTEAD OF:

"What would you do to improve public transport in our city?"

CONSIDER:

"How would you feel about replacing all of our city's trams with bus services?"

Present scenarios

Real-world scenarios can bring complex issues to life for the general public.

Scenarios provide a mechanism for introducing nuance and deliberation into highly complex issues. We have seen them used to great effect when considering multifaceted ethical and legal matters.

INSTEAD OF:

"Do you think that the use of a weapon to threaten assault should influence sentencing decisions?"

CONSIDER:

Which of these scenarios is more threatening? A large man threatens to break a cashier's nose, or a small teenager threatens the same cashier with a blood-filled syringe?

Present options

Presentation of real alternatives can focus the conversation around plausible options.

This approach needs to be handled with care to avoid the impression (or the reality) that the community is being massaged in a particular direction. We have seen this work well when considering competing design options.

INSTEAD OF:

"What do you think park gates should look like?"

CONSIDER:

"What are your thoughts about each of the following alternative park gate designs?"

A word about the authors

This little book was first published as an infographic on the **Bang the Table blog** back in 2012 as a resource for community (or public) engagement professionals thinking specifically about writing engaging online discussion forum topics.

The Bang the Table team has worked with well over 750 organizations in five countries — Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the USA — to bring life to their online public consultations using our software, **EngagementHQ**.

If you find this booklet useful you might also want to take a look at **100 Ideas for Engaging your Community Online**, or the **Online Public Engagement Guide Book**. Both can be found via links on the homepage of our website.

If you have any feedback or suggestions for the next version of this booklet we'd love to hear from you.

The Bang the Table team