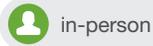




Meeting-in-a-Box



in-person



low-cost

OVERVIEW:

The meeting-in-a-box provides a format for the public, stakeholders, communities, and other interested parties to gather at a convenient time and location to discuss proposed transportation issues, plans and projects in small group meetings. Agencies provide a conversation kit with discussion questions about projects or plans for the participants in each group to consider. The kit may also include worksheets, feedback questionnaires, and directions for recording and returning responses. Agencies recruit community volunteers to serve as hosts for gatherings of 6-10 people. The meetings take place in convenient locations such as over coffee, a restaurant meal or a potluck as each host prefers. Specialized vendors and software platforms are available to help manage the logistics of a meeting-in-a-box initiative, or agencies may handle the logistics in-house.

BEST SUITED FOR:

Planning and Visioning

CASE STUDY:

Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), Regional Plan

ARC used meetings-in-a-box to gather input for their regional plan, which covered 20 counties with a wide variety of urban and rural environments, and diverse transportation needs. ARC chose a meetings-in-a-box approach because this method is particularly effective to reach millennials, a demographic with which ARC was striving to increase engagement. ARC had previously formed a Millennial Advisory Panel with 150 members; to launch their Civic Dinners program, they recruited 35 members of the panel to serve as hosts.

ARC gave each host a choice of discussion topics, which included mobility, livability, and prosperity. They provided three questions on the chosen topic, printed on cards to be placed at each seat. For the mobility topic, ARC selected questions to help identify the high-level values that should guide the direction of transportation in the region. Participants began by sharing a personal experience with transportation. Next they discussed possible solutions to transportation challenges, and ways of improving mobility for all. ARC provided each host with a guide customized to the chosen topic, with tips for facilitating the conversation and recording key themes, which the hosts summarized in an online survey. ARC prepared a summary report of the key insights from across all 35 dinners, with corresponding recommendations for the regional plan. Recommendations for mobility included a variety of transit infrastructure and service improvements, measures to increase walkability, and improved guidance for newcomers on how to use the transit system. This effort initially engaged 311 participants, and was then expanded beyond millennials to include the general public. To date, over 100 hosts have engaged more than 1,000 participants in Civic Dinners, and ARC continues to offer this form of engagement on an ongoing basis.





CASE STUDY:

North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), Regional Transportation Plan

NJTPA used meetings-in-a-box as one method to obtain feedback for their long-range transportation plan. Like ARC, they targeted millennials, using the tagline “Set the Table.” Working with a university partner, NJTPA recruited hosts via social media, existing networks, flyers, and news outlets. Interested persons could apply online, and qualified applicants received a follow-up email and phone call. Hosts attended a meet-and-greet to learn more about the initiative and their role. NJTPA provided each host with a small box packed with snacks, “food for thought” cards with background information on the region, and game-style “conversation cards” to elicit feedback on the seven themes of the long-range plan (Great Places, Safety, Resiliency, Getting Around, Technology, Environment, and Economy). Over a six-week period 20 hosts engaged over 200 people through this form of outreach. Participants at each gathering decided as a group what responses they wanted to share with NJTPA and recorded them on a feedback form. The input helped confirm what NJTPA was hearing from other forms of outreach, including the desire for more bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and concerns about safety.

Snapshot



Advantages

- Adds a social dimension to meetings, increasing their appeal
- Helps obtain new perspectives by attracting participants who have not previously attended meetings
- Provides rich feedback and identification of key themes to inform plans
- Scalable, flexible for any agency size
- Volunteer hosts serve as ambassadors, instead of transportation agency staff, providing cost savings due to minimal staff time devoted to facilitation of meetings



Disadvantages

- Participants are self-selected and may not be representative of the overall population
- Not suitable for discussion of technical materials such as detailed project alternatives
- Quality of reporting may vary



Resources Required

- Staff time to organize, produce materials, publicize, and analyze results
- Cost of printing materials



Outcomes

- Expect 50-200 participants or more (about 6-10 per host)
- Key themes and suggestions for consideration in a plan
- Newly engaged stakeholders may stay involved for future efforts



Tips for Success

- Define the target audience(s) and goals for this method of engagement
- Create a short set of discussion questions that all groups will use
- Provide a guide for hosts and a standardized format for recording and providing the group’s feedback
- Hold an orientation meeting or conference call for hosts
- Publicize the opportunity, using appropriate channels for the target audience(s)

