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Whose outcomes – Government or the community? Towards more meaningful, informed and effective public consultation through deliberative democracy

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Introduction

The topic I was given focuses on the processes Government agencies employ to consult with their communities of interest in order to develop well-grounded policy. I assume this is either because someone has made the observation that more agencies are consulting, more frequently, and/or that people are seeking to be more engaged in the policy development process.

Of course, I only talk on this topic from my own personal perspective. It may be a relatively narrow perspective, although I don't think so because our organisation's client base is dominated by public sector organisations and in the 15 years or so that our company has been operating in Wellington, I believe we've had more than enough opportunity to engage in public-consultation style projects with our clients.

To begin with, I'd like to make two observations:

1. First of all, I'm not necessarily sure that people are actively looking to be more engaged in public consultation processes, or that they have the means to do so.
2. Secondly and based on my experience, the performance of the public sector in terms of public consultation is relatively mixed. However, public sector agencies could learn a lot from the market research industry about making their consultation processes more inclusive and representative and, therefore, more grounded.

Let me now take each one of these in turn.



Are people really that interested in engaging in public consultation processes?

As I have stated, the short answer to this question is “I do not necessarily think so”!

Some people say that as a result of the recent changes to our political system, and MMP in particular and the dual vote that we now all have, people have a greater opportunity to shape the future. Technically, this might be true, but I don't see any evidence of greater numbers of people taking advantage of this and, by definition, actively participating and contributing in the public consultation processes.

In fact, the evidence I have suggests that people are possibly either less engaged, disenfranchised in the extreme by a system that they have little or no faith in, or they are continuing as they always had, in the time-pressured world that we live in, to focus on themselves and their immediate family.

In fact, when we do our regular monthly polling on the issues or concerns that New Zealanders have, we find that the most frequently mentioned issues are those that are the closest and dearest to their hearts: the education of their children and their general health.

In comparison, issues of a more worldly, or even national importance, are more likely than not to be significantly down the list.

So what I am really saying is that, unless an issue is truly riveting and close to the heart, the average New Zealander will not be engaged or remotely interested in making a submission in a public consultation process. As an example, some of the consultation processes aimed at the general public in which we have been peripherally involved in recent years, have returned no more than 100 to 200 submissions! Therefore, depending on your subject topic, this means that if you genuinely want the public's feedback and input, you may have to work very hard to get it.

With this number of submissions in mind, there is a further and potentially more important issue to consider, relating to the methodologies that are being used to enable people to become engaged and make a contribution. For the most part, to be engaged and make a contribution, people feel they need to be knowledgeable about the topic in question and secondly, be prepared to write (often using a template that has been prepared for them to use for this purpose).

We know that these two things are a turn-off for many people. In fact, some people would prefer to be invited to talk in community meetings or hui for example. But, once again, there is an issue here in that the time and place of these meetings do not necessarily suit everyone, so these tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive. Plus, in the meetings I have attended, it's only the vocal minority that appear to be heard.

Furthermore, all of this assumes that appropriate methodologies have been used to promote the consultations. Placing advertisements in newspapers, and particularly in the classified sections, while cost-effective, will most probably not make everyone who has a worthwhile submission to make, aware of the fact that there is a consultation process. Similarly, placing an advertisement on your website assumes that everyone is regularly visiting your site.



Of real concern, is what the research is telling us about who is not being engaged and encouraged to become involved in these consultation processes. There is clear evidence to suggest that the less interested in participating and contributing (for possibly quite different reasons) are:

- ◆ The young (i.e. under 25), who are of course our future, and
- ◆ Those groups who are sometimes described as 'priority groups' by public sector agencies, by virtue of their health, education and/or socio-economic status - which is quite ironic, given the fact that these are the very groups that public policy is often trying to deliver essential services to.

In fact, the evidence suggests that the extent to which these groups are participating and contributing is trending downwards. Time and time again, they tell us that they feel:

- ◆ Their opinion doesn't count.
- ◆ Nobody listens to them.
- ◆ And, if they do, they do so in a condescending and 'we know better' way.

With regard to young people in particular, some people have put forward the view that technology has enabled a greater number of people to participate in public consultation processes. I think this view has something to do with the internet, or cell phones and texting, but once again, we have no evidence of this. It is true that these technologies have enhanced people's ability to communicate in this modern and frenetic world, including the very groups identified earlier as being 'priority groups', but we have no evidence to suggest that they have, in turn, lead them to become more involved in public consultation processes.



Table 1: Important issues (by gender)

Now thinking generally, what particular topics or issues would you say are of the most importance to you at the moment?

	Dec 2006	May 2007	Nov 2007	Male	Female
Base =	502	499	500	223	277
	%	%	%	%	%
Children's education/education	18	21	17	13	20
Issues relating to children in general	7	8	7	3	10
Job-related issues	9	6	5	4	6
Personal financial issues	13	10	12	14	10
The cost of living	6	13	7	7	7
Personal health issues or health system	25	26	23	19	28
Relationship issues	4	1	5	2	7
Crime-related issues	15	10	20	18	21
The environment	5	8	6	6	6
Sports	2	1	1	2	1
Global warming	4	5	5	4	5
Housing costs'	2	6	3	3	3
Terrorism/Tuhoe raids	0	0	5	6	5
Tax or superannuation	5	7	2	2	2
Government or economic issues	9	10	8	11	5
Other	28	19	15	16	14
None	6	6	6	5	7
Don't know	3	3	7	9	6

Note: Total may exceed 100% because of multiple response.

What can public sector agencies learn from the market research industry?

In a perfect world, Government agencies would be undertaking public consultation processes which are:

- ◆ Inclusive.
- ◆ Representative.
- ◆ And timely.

As I explained earlier, more often than not, the processes being adopted are exclusive rather than inclusive, not completely representative, and not necessarily timely. It is not the time or place to go into the reasons for this here. What I do want to do instead is suggest a way of overcoming these problems.



In our industry, the research industry, there are basically three factors that need to be in sync. for there to be a well-grounded evidence base. The absence of these factors results in bias which can, of course, be catastrophic, given the business decisions hanging off the research:

- ◆ The first factor or form of bias is called 'sampling bias' and this results when the sample that is selected for interviewing has not been selected representatively. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to work out that this will result in a view of the world that is warped.
- ◆ The second form of bias is called 'non-response bias' and this basically results when, despite the very best selection or sampling processes, the people who agree to be interviewed (participate) are not a good cross-section of the population at large. This will also result in a view of the world that is warped.
- ◆ The third form of bias is referred to as 'non-sampling bias' and this basically results from human error when, for example, we make it difficult for people to respond through poor questionnaire design, poor interviewing technique, etc.

Given that the market research industry in New Zealand has played an important role for at least the last 30-40 years, it is safe to say that it has developed fairly well-honed techniques to minimise these forms of bias. While the public sector is a good client of the industry, particularly when it comes to opinion and other forms of social research, I believe there would be some merit in more public sector agencies using research practitioners to help them with their public consultation processes. This would include:

- ◆ The design of consultation feedback forms.
- ◆ Advice in terms of how to promote public consultations.
- ◆ Assistance to manage public consultation processes, including their analysis and reporting.
- ◆ And even using qualitative and survey techniques to get the best possible representative view from the community of interest.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it will be fairly obvious to you now that I do not believe the processes government agencies employ to consult with their communities of interest in order to develop well-grounded policy are optimal, but the tools are available to make some progress to improve the situation.

Thanks for your attention. I'd be happy to take questions.