

Civic Organizing Through Questions

A Model for Inclusive Engagement

by Cesar McDowell and Vanessa Otero

One of the main problems with U.S. democracy is that the public doesn't see it as their primary business. Although many organizations focus on public engagement, it's usually around issues that have already been defined. Initiatives to broaden public participation have one defining limitation: the number of people who can be involved. That is why most organizing efforts select and define a small group to represent a large variety of interests, demographics, and positions.

What is needed are approaches that have the primary purpose of helping all members of the public to learn from one another, amplify their collective voice, and define the agenda and the future they want. Nowhere is this more needed than in poor, minority, or marginalized communities.

The Power of Questions

A Chicago-based nonprofit called Engage The Power (eTp) has designed what it calls the Question Campaign. The goal is to create an environment in which everyone has an opportunity to raise the questions that they believe are the most pressing for their neighborhood, community, city, state, nation—or world. Using questions is not a new strategy. Indeed, many efforts to support civic engagement have employed question solicitation. What makes the Question Campaign unique is that it allows all members of the public to participate in defining the critical issues instead of merely responding to selections made by others.

Germany

The first implementation of the Question Campaign was in 2006 in Berlin. More than 25,000 questions on any topic that

interested the questioner were generated from an online site. In September, 115 people, selected by the public, convened in a Berlin square around the largest round table ever built, the Table of Free Voices. They were there to respond to the top 100 questions,

chosen by people from around the world. The 600 hours of video answers were subsequently posted online. The purpose was to demonstrate the power of questions to facilitate broad-based, global public engagement.



Why are there so many service initiatives in the North End that fail its constituents? - North End Resident

What's Your Question? Donate Your Question. Call or text 413.384.9941 or go to www.elpuntonorste.com





Springfield's North End

In January 2011, eTp began working with the North End community in Springfield—the third-largest city in Massachusetts—to design a Question Campaign that would work at the neighborhood level. The predominately Puerto Rican North End, one of 17 neighborhoods in Springfield, has 10,000 residents and two of the poorest census tracts in Massachusetts. It is bordered by the Connecticut River, Springfield's downtown, and an industrial area. Construction of Interstate 91 in 1961 split the neighborhood, so today there is a west side known as Plainfield (or Brightwood) and an east side called Memorial Square.

In 1996, four community-based

Although many groups focus on public engagement, it's usually around issues that have previously been defined.

organizations collaborated to form the North End Outreach Network (NEON), an innovative approach to community health. Over the years, the network grew concerned that residents were not engaging in civic life. In 2010, NEON changed its mission from service provision to community

organizing and renamed itself the North End *Organizing* Network.

For NEON activists, the Question Campaign had the potential to increase resident participation in organizing efforts and to develop local leadership. NEON saw the Question Campaign as giving a voice to those who were generally underrepresented, the real community experts. If the North End was going to become a place of continuing positive improvements, change would need to be started in the community by the community.

Designing for the Margins

In early 2011, NEON, eTp, and two community partners spent several months designing a Question Campaign that would work at the scale of the neighborhood. The effort was based on *designing for the margins*, an approach that begins with the express intent to include the population that is most marginalized. A neighborhood-scale campaign needs to be informed by three issues affecting participation:

- access to technologies that enable the broadest possible participation;
- the use of *place* to create the familiarity required for gaining trust; and
- the need for a symbolic language that can represent every community member.

First, eTp addressed the issue of access by communicating primarily through cell phones, radio call-ins, and writing on cards, with web-based tools only secondary.

As a Pew study on communication has shown, the North End has considerably more cellular phone use than computer use.¹ So eTp designed a system to enable participation through mobile phones. For web-based tools, open-source platforms were chosen to lower the costs.

Second, because collaboration between formal organizations and informal networks is critical, the campaign moved from a purely virtual strategy to one that was more place-based. That led to engagement with numerous North End organizations, which then agreed to bring their constituents and their networks into the campaign. Each organization committed to putting into their annual agendas the top questions that related specifically to their missions. Having more than 20 organizations agree to take on publicly generated priorities represents a model of citizenship based on human relations.

The last step is getting the right symbolism. In today's society, we're bombarded with images that serve as symbols of what is valued. Those who live at the margins often find that such images portray them in a disempowering, rather than in an affirming, manner.²

To counter society's dominant symbols, the Question Campaign came up with ads featuring evocative images and community-generated questions—to be displayed in storefronts, as bus wrap, on billboards, and in newspapers. Videos show the questioners asking their questions in relevant settings. Local artists created question ads and partnered with the local PBS station's youth-training program to produce the ads and videos. The public could see itself at the active center of society, instead of at the margins, feeling passive or disempowered.

In April, 250-plus residents showed up for the campaign launch and donated 200-plus questions. Next, NEON worked with media outlets to display as many questions as possible and to inspire residents to ask more. As questions came in, NEON brought together people with similar questions to discuss how their experience led them to that issue. Question donors engaged with appropriate service providers on how to create solutions. Over two months, open public meetings were conducted to sort through the questions and to generate a final slate for a public vote. On June 15, the North End held a closing event in which residents chose the top five questions for the community to

work on over the next year. (See “Questions Residents Are Asking.”)

Through the campaign, NEON expects that

- residents will feel empowered by being able to develop the solutions they desire for the North End;
- there will be higher rates of community involvement, which will positively impact the health and life of the residents;
- at least 1,000 questions will be collected from the community; and
- at the conclusion of the campaign, residents will be actively engaged in seeking the changes they’ve identified, and NEON will have a framework to continue launching community-identified campaigns.

In the three years that eTp has been developing, testing, and refining the Question Campaign, it has found the initiative to be an effective means for helping people from all walks of life to raise their questions to the world. Gradually, a modern infrastructure is emerging for the global public to ask questions, get information

from one place, and share it with people next door, across the street, in different neighborhoods, states, regions, and on the other side of the world.

Cesar McDowell is director of *Engage The Power* and professor of the practice of community development at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. **Vanessa Otero** is director of the North End Campus Coalition.

Endnotes

¹ *Pew Internet and American Life Survey* (May 2008), <http://www.pewinternet.org>.

² See Stephanie Greco Larson, *Media and Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and C. Cort, *A Long Way to Go: Minorities and the Media* (New York: Pyramid, 1986).

► This Communities & Banking article is copyrighted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Bank or the Federal Reserve System. Copies of articles may be downloaded without cost at www.bos.frb.org/commdev/c&b/index.htm.

Questions Residents Are Asking

Residents of Springfield’s North End are asking questions as a first step to getting answers that can strengthen their community. No parameters are imposed. Organizers want to know what is uppermost in people’s minds. Here are some examples.

Why has the love for our people died?

What can we do together to create a better future for our children?

Why aren’t there more consequences for people who abuse or violate children?

¿Cómo se les puede ayudar a las personas desempleadas a conseguir trabajo aún si no saben inglés?

How can we help the unemployed find jobs even if they do not speak English?

How can we increase the amount of fresh, affordable, locally grown produce in the North End?

¿Cómo podemos aumentar la cantidad de comidas frescas, de precios accesibles, y cultivadas localmente en el North End?

Why are three out of the four North End schools level 4?

¿Por qué 3 de las 4 escuelas en el North End están en el nivel 4?

How can we realize the greatness of youth and give them the power to lead?

Why can’t we use vacant homes to help the homeless?