

Community engagement

To Engage or Consult? That is the question!

The bard William Shakespeare asked the question, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet". This quote and the fate of the star crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, would be known to avid readers and librarians. I wonder what Mr Shakespeare would make of the quiet little tussle going on over the two words, 'consultation' and 'engagement'. Let's hope he would not be contemplating a tragedy.

Let me add the words 'customer service' into the mix. I find that when I introduce the topic of community engagement to library service staff, they tell me they engage with the public on a daily basis. Libraries are celebrated throughout communities for the service they provide. However, is what they do on a daily basis community engagement? Or is it customer service? This article will give definition to the words 'engagement' and 'consultation' and explore the difference between community engagement and customer service in a library setting.

Founded in 1990, The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) responds to rising global interest in public participation and promotes the values and best practices associated with involving the public in government and industry decisions affecting their lives. In Australia we use the words 'public participation' and 'community engagement'

interchangeably. This will be necessary until we find an approach that satisfies both the decision makers and the community. The IAP2 model of community engagement is an approach designed to provide that satisfaction.

The model presents choices through the use of a *Spectrum of Public Participation* (IAP2, 2006)¹ which introduces a variety of levels to define the role of communities in decision making. The levels include informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. The *Spectrum* and more information on IAP2 can be found at <http://www.iap2.org>

The term 'engagement' (participation) is not an attempt to replace or re-badge the term 'consultation'. Instead it identifies consultation as one of five levels of engagement available to meet the expectations the community has for its role in decision making. Consultation has been used as a general term to describe how local councils approach communities about decisions that affect them. This general use has the potential to create unrealistic expectations and confusion. Most commonly, communities become disengaged when they are asked to provide input on a decision that has already been determined. If a decision has been made, the community needs to be *informed* about how and why it was made and not have raised expectations that they are being consulted for their input on a final decision. There will always be times when councils must make decisions without input from communities as part of their governance role. There will be other times when it will be relevant to increase the public impact on a decision by working at the more participatory levels of involve, collaborate or empower.

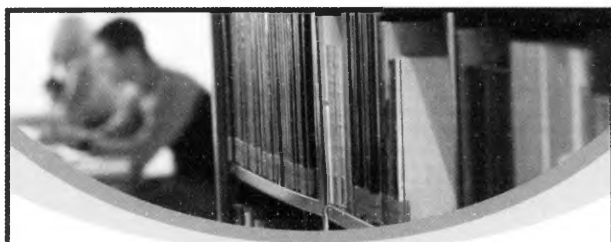
As a rule, community engagement is organisation driven, with the public reacting or responding depending on whether their expectations are met. On the other hand, organisations provide services to their customers, with customer service levels driven by public reaction and demands. Customer service is an outcome of decisions that have already been made, whereas, community engagement is a resource that will support the public and librarians to determine the shape of customer service.

It would be a tragedy if we get caught up in the words and lose sight of the value in a shared understanding that comes out of people coming together in decision making.

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1. International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

Examples of South Australian Local Government community engagement initiatives Community Engagement Showcase available at www.lga.sa.gov.au



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