

Open House

What it is

An open house is a buffet-style meeting where guests can drop in at any time and talk one-on-one with representatives at various booths or stations. It is an informal setting in which people can get information about a specific plan or project. Open houses have no set, formal agenda. Unlike a typical public meeting, no formal discussions or presentations take place, and there are no audience seats. Instead, people get information informally and at their own pace from various exhibits. Perhaps most importantly, attendees are encouraged to offer their opinions, comments, and preferences to staff (either orally or in writing). Usually there are different stations/tables/kiosks, each of which offers information about a single aspect of a project.

Why it Works

The casual format of an open house allows for more direct connection with attendees, which in turn allows them to feel more comfortable offering their input than they would in a formal setting with many people. Also, by breaking projects and plans (which can be extremely complex and detailed) into its component parts, participants can focus on the specific aspects that are most important or interesting to them. This also allows an agency to determine which parts of the project or plan are of most interest to the public, as more people will gravitate and provide feedback at those stations/tables/kiosks. Further, whereas public meetings usually occur only once and for a short period of time, open houses can take place over the course of an entire day or even an entire weekend, giving interested members of the community more flexibility to attend.

Open houses are a great opportunity for members of the public to talk with experts about plans and provide their input.



When to Use It

Open houses are ideal for communicating issues surrounding complex, large-scale, multi-faceted plans to the public. They are also an effective strategy for collecting feedback about those plans, both general and specific, from participants. The interactive nature of an open house lends itself to plans that are in the progress of being developed and input is genuinely needed (as opposed to plans that are already nearly finalized and simple communication or public affirmation is the objective of the event).

Examples

[Neighborhood Main Streets Projects – Milwaukie, OR](#)

[African American History Project – San Francisco, CA](#)

[30% Design Plan for Broadway Improvement Project](#)

Resources

[Information on Open Houses/Open Forum Hearings from NCDOT](#)

[Participatory Practices Manual from the International Centre for Municipal Development](#)

Audience

The intended audience for an open house depends on the scale of the project/plans being exhibited. Presuming the scale is fairly local (neighborhood/municipality/small region), it is imperative to attract local community members to the event. Since the underlying intention is to solicit feedback, organizers should actively encourage attendance of those who will be impacted by the project/plans (business and property owners, local residents, etc.).

Estimated Level of Effort

The major effort required for hosting an open house is related to developing and coordinating individual exhibits so that each is unique and meaningful to attendees. High turn-out is important for receiving quality feedback, so open houses for projects/plans that are not particularly controversial may need to focus more intensely on advertising and recruiting attendees.

Cost Considerations

The major costs associated with hosting an open house include renting a space (if one is not already available to the agency), advertising the event, developing materials for exhibits (such as posters and other visuals, informational hand-outs, etc.), and potentially providing refreshments for attendees. Overall, the expenses should be relatively minimal.

