

#NameOurShipSomethingNiceOrDon'tNameItAtAll

By Susan Wenzlick

If you've read my last two or three blog posts, you'll have caught on to my love for collaboration. Let the world be part of your planning process, whether it's for a downtown improvement, museum exhibit, or music series. In the last post I talked about Creators, Commentators and Consumers – three levels of participation by community members. This week, I'm throwing out some collaborative processes. However, as I mentioned in the last post, it's important to strike a balance between control and welcoming public input. Bottom line: be clear about the goals of your collaboration. Then think of the craziest possible outcome, and plan for that.

You may have seen the story about the British Natural Environment Resource Council's (NERC) online #NameOurShip poll to solicit names for its new \$300 million royal research vessel. Fortunately, no one promised that the public favorite would be the selected name, because the public favorite, with more than 124,000 votes (more than three times the second favorite), is... Wait for it... RRS Boaty McBoatface. The Guardian said the name sounded like it was created by "a five-year-old who has drunk three cartons of Capri-Sun." The NERC has announced that it will review all the nominations, but that Boaty McBoatface is not likely to be selected, despite overwhelming public support.

The NERC's goal for this collaboration was not completely clear in its [press release](#). There's some squishy language about making the British public part of the shipbuilding project. They wanted people to feel some ownership and get excited about the boat's science mission. Was the public naming contest the best way to reach that goal?

The NERC used a totally open process. No control, no filters, and the outcome speaks for itself.

There is another way to solicit public input, albeit with a lot more controls. A Collaboration Lite method applied to the NERC project would have been to take some number of names selected by NERC and put those out for the public vote. In this #NameOurShip poll, the names selected by NERC would have fit within a theme of uplifting and environmentally-appropriate names for such a serious vessel. And they would have been deadly boring, and the poll would have gotten 17 responses and no news coverage. Who wants to participate in a project where the outcome has been essentially pre-selected? Collaboration Lite gives extremely limited authority to participants, and doesn't inspire much ownership.

Then there are ways to get input from a smaller subset of the population. A stakeholders process uses hand-selected experts in an advisory group to set a direction. For example, the NERC could have chosen a panel of representatives from environmental organizations and universities to select the new boat name. Dollars to donuts, NERC would not have chosen collaborators who were likely to nominate the RRS Boaty McBoatface even after three Capri Suns. This approach to collaboration is not about building broad community relationships, though it may strengthen relationships with stakeholders. It's not about releasing authority; it's

about surrounding yourself with people who are likely to reinforce what you've already decided, or maybe come up with a few creative ideas that aren't too far outside the status quo, and unlikely to (ahem) rock the boat.

This is not to say the stakeholders method is necessarily a bad thing. For solutions to a technical or policy problem, input from the stakeholders is valuable. The checkout lady at the grocery store may have an opinion about air traffic control, but that doesn't mean she's qualified to be at the table making policy about it.

The Best. Collaboration. Ever., which I wrote about in the last post, balanced exhibit control by the Portland Art Museum and its hand-selected collaborators, with a release of control for additional programming to pretty much anyone who wanted to spend the time and effort to create, comment, or consume. The Portland Art Museum used a stakeholders process to create content and programming for its China Design Now exhibit. It also encouraged community organizations, educators, and businesses to create complementary programming, but it didn't dictate content, only theme. The museum engaged bloggers and local print and social media to provide different perspectives, but again didn't control the content. The museum decided what it needed to control, and what it was willing to let go of.

Another method involves releasing significant control to collaborators, to the point of letting them run the show while the organizers are essentially facilitators. Another museum world example is the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, where members of the city's Asian communities can propose and organize exhibits with guidance from, but not under the control of, the museum. Exhibits are primarily driven by the community's interests. This is not completely unheard of in a community context; [Cadillac's sound garden](#) is the result of an idea hatched, planned, and implemented by a local musician with the support of, but limited control by, the city of Cadillac. Garden clubs beautify public spaces without being controlled by city leadership.

Did NERC successfully accomplish its goal of getting the public engaged with its shipbuilding project? Does the outcome and NERC's reaction to it suggest that it didn't anticipate the public would embrace a dorky name? Was this a major miscalculation of the potential media fallout from a name NERC clearly considers inappropriate? They had to know they'd get some crazy names, and that potentially one like Boaty McBoatface or Lady Gaga could be the favorite, and that it would generate a ton more press than a dull name like the RRS Margaret Thatcher. Maybe they actually hoped for the press coverage a dorky name would generate, and are happy as clams to have the notoriety.

The problem is, the notoriety doesn't build public engagement with the project, only with the name. When you open up the suggestion box, but you don't like the outcome and you say, well, we're still going to choose a name we like regardless of the public poll results, the participants haven't been given any meaningful level of authority. The whole process is nothing more than a token feel-good, low-budget PR project. You could even say it doesn't hold water. (sorry)

The takeaway with all these methods of collaborating is that when you invite the public in, you never know what you're gonna get. If you don't give the participants any commitment that their input will make a difference, it becomes clear that they have no real authority, and they'll lose interest. So while NERC got a lot of international press, in the end, the public's interest in the boat project may well disappear when the press loses interest in Boaty McBoatface. And NERC comes out smelling like fish guts when it doesn't take ownership of a process it created because it doesn't like the results.

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