

The “Publics” in Public Involvement

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The Four Publics:

1. **“Fanatics.”** You know their telephone numbers by heart, and they know yours. They want input into everything you decide. Your issue is their main interest aside from job and family.
2. **“Attentives.”** They monitor the media on your issue carefully. Once in a while they want to attend a meeting or answer a survey. Your issue is in their top 20.
3. **“Browsers.”** They check you out in the media from time to time, but they don’t want to be bothered providing input. Your issue is on their “worry list,” but way at the bottom.
4. **“Inattentives.”** They don’t know and they don’t want to know.

Guidelines for Public Involvement:

1. Forget the inattentives. In marketing and electoral politics, they are decision-makers. In risk communication, they are not.
2. The media are critical for reaching the browsers and attentives. Fanatics check the media mostly to see how *they* were quoted.
3. The most important public is the fanatics. This is not a distortion of democracy any more than legislative lobbying is. Decisions are influenced most by those who care most.
4. The key to a good public involvement program is how easy it is for people to switch groups. In a good program, people know how to get more involved – or less involved – and feel that they, not you, control the extent of their involvement.
5. People are much less desperate to have input when it is clear that they can whenever they want. One of the signs of a good public involvement strategy is relative lack of interest in getting involved.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Stakeholders (June 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/stakeh.htm

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