

# Open House

(or Open Days, Drop in Centres)

Engagement range	Inform/Consult
Difficulty level	Medium
Cost	Medium (\$1,000 to \$10,000)
When might you use it	To communicate an issue To showcase product, plan, policy To discover community issues
Number of people required to help to organise	One-three, depends on the audience size and level of complexity
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months) to Long (over six months)
Size of audience	Large (up to 30)
Issues/resources to think about	Publicity; Venue rental; Catering; Staffing; Moderator/facilitator
Innovation level	Low

## Description

Open houses provide information, a forum for understanding people's concerns and discussing issues, as well as opportunities for follow up or feedback (see Displays and Exhibits).

A relatively informal event designed to allow people to drop in and obtain information at their convenience.

Usually, the open house includes display information and presentation material complimented by printed handout materials and the presence of the sponsor's staff to meet with and answer people's questions one-on-one.

Brief presentations should also be made at regular times to inform guests.

## Objective

- To provide one venue for people to visit where they can speak to staff or members of the organisation, and obtain a variety of information about an institution, issue or proposal.

## Desired Outcome

- Those who visit during an open house will be more familiar with the venue, will know more about the operations and intention of the organisation or group that set up the open house, and may be more informed about an issue or proposal.

## Uses/Strengths

- Useful when a large number of potential stakeholders exist and the issue is of concern to the wider community. Alternatively, it can be used to target a particular group.
- Frequently used as a lead-in to another participation activity and achieves early publicity for that activity.
- Can also be used to provide feedback at the completion of a public participation exercise.
- Can fit people's personal timetables.
- Where the issue is contentious, it provides a relaxed forum where conflict is less likely to occur.
- Fosters small group and one-on-one discussions.
- Allows other team members to be drawn on to answer difficult questions.
- Meets information and interaction needs of many members of the public who are not attracted to typical public meetings.
- Builds credibility.

## Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- Attendance is difficult to predict at an open house. Therefore, it is important to advertise in a number of ways that target different sections of the community and select the location carefully.
- It is possible to move the location of the open house on a regularly scheduled basis.
- Often, the concerns of a small number of people are well articulated at this forum.
- Lower attendance may mean that fewer people are informed. You need to use other methods to reach a wider audience.
- The low-key nature of an open house may also restrict people from asking questions and participating in discussions.
- Public input can be difficult to document, and may only be reported as hearsay.
- Protesters may use the opportunity to disrupt the event.
- Usually more staff intensive than a meeting.
- May not provide the opportunity to be heard that some of the public may expect.

## Step by Step Guide

1. The five steps to a successful open house are as follows:
  - 1.1 Understand your objective and develop a work plan
  - 1.2 Schedule a place and time
  - 1.3 Advertise
  - 1.4 Develop the display and supporting materials
  - 1.5 Set up
2. Consider the target audience and your objectives to decide whether an open house is the most appropriate public participation tool for the issue being discussed.
3. Some of the considerations in developing the work plan include: the cost of the display, how to convey information on the display, how much time it will take to design and produce the display and how the display materials can be transported from place to place. Accessible location is critical in the success of the open house. Organisers should maintain a low key presence and make everyone feel welcome. They should also consider the needs of the particular audience (if there is a target group for the open house). The opening times should be flexible and change in response to the preference of the public. Comment sheets should be provided and staff should be available to answer questions and record comments.
4. The publicity of the open house is also important to its success so advertising is necessary. The location, opening times and purpose of the open house should be publicised in the media. The open house should be left open as long as possible to allow as many of the public to use the facility as possible.