

Our Voice. Our Hamilton. Making Decisions Together.

City of Hamilton

“Despite a mutual agreement to part ways, it is important for me to recognize and acknowledge the meaningful engagement process designed for this project by Dialogue Partners... It is the plan of the City of Hamilton to take what Dialogue Partners has provided us and to implement it going forward.”

- Chris Murray, City Manager, City of Hamilton

Just a heads up: this is a case about a project that didn't go so well for us. In over 20 years of success stories, this was the one that got away. Engaging the public on emotional topics can be messy work. It's a very authentic, human process. Though this project didn't get far off the ground, and even though it was 5+ years ago, we thought it important to document what went wrong so that we can continually improve our practice of public engagement.

What happened?

Dialogue Partners was retained by the City of Hamilton to engage citizens in conversation about which City services were most important to them and their willingness to pay for each. This input would be used for City service delivery and infrastructure. After nine months of planning, in a matter of hours after launching the project to the public, the project began to go off the rails on social media. Within a month, Dialogue Partners and the City of Hamilton mutually agreed to part ways.

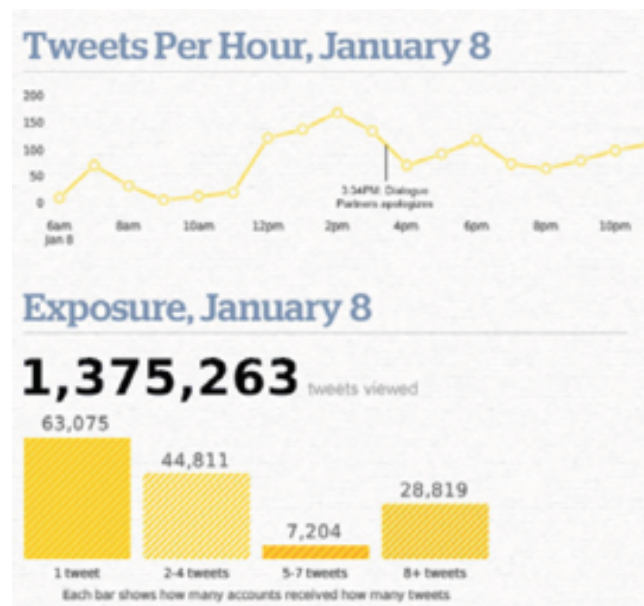
On the day of project launch, Dialogue Partners used Twitter to generate awareness about upcoming opportunities for engagement. A resident tweeted to Dialogue Partners, asking for “the continuation of voluntary pay for disabled on HSR”. Dialogue Partners replied, “What is ‘HSR’? Just so we can accurately capture your comment.” We asked this question so that we could understand what this service meant to residents, in their own words. Yet this was perceived by some Hamiltonians as a sign that we had not done our homework.

In a matter of hours, residents were calling for a local firm to be hired, before the project had even really begun. To make matters worse, this was picked up as a National media story, leaving us blindsighted by bad press. Social media comments snowballed, and a great deal of information was spread that was simply untrue. For example, an individual alleged that the project website contained

pictures of Ottawa instead of Hamilton. The woman apologized days later for her initial tweets – but by then, the echo had taken over. Another example was the (borderline amusing) claim that the Dialogue Partners team was hiding out in a hotel room in Toronto, afraid to come to Hamilton. All of this incorrect information was repeated by the Hamilton Spectator and to our horror, reverberated across the internet.

To make matters worse, two issues compounded the focus on us. First, a scheduling error resulted in community workshop being planned on a day that conflicted with another City event. Though we had cleared the date for this event with City staff, this logistical snafu added fuel to a fire that might have otherwise burned out. Second, a hacker installed malware on the project website, and this method of communication had to be shut down in order to rebuild it.

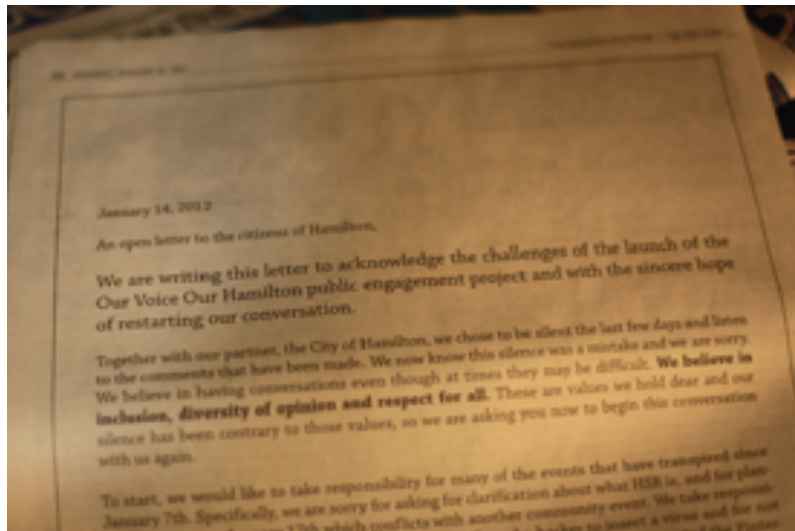
Despite the negative press, hundreds of residents did stay focused on the real issues. **In just three days, hundreds of Hamiltonians offered constructive comments in online surveys and on the project's Facebook page.** Yet by then, the damage was done. The conversation had deviated from its intention, and shifted to us instead staying where it was needed: on the City of Hamilton.



Despite challenges, online engagement with residents was through the roof!

Our biggest mistake was in our response after the project website was hacked. The City of Hamilton requested that Dialogue Partners take down the site and stay silent on social media until the City and Dialogue Partners could regroup and come up with a plan, and at the time we agreed. In the days that followed, it was a struggle to see one-sided newspaper and online articles that perpetuated false information.

We decided that silence was not golden and that we needed to speak up. We issued an apology for the series of missteps to both the citizens of Hamilton and City Council, wrote a blog post on our website, and hoped that we could set the record straight.



Dialogue Partners placed a full-page ad in the Hamilton Spectator. This picture is from blog run by Dave Heidebrecht.

Making a Difference, Despite Challenges

It is not an easy business decision to step away from a project. However, we believe we acted in the most ethical way possible: to remove ourselves from the conversation when it became about more about us than about the City of Hamilton.

In spite of the outcome, this project was successful in many ways:

- We developed a solid, meaningful engagement plan that will continue to be used for the project by the City, and implemented by staff.

- We created innovative tools such as an online game that walked participants through a day in the life of Hamiltonians and the services they come in contact with.
- We developed a mobile app that allowed people to participate on the go.
- We condensed 350 city services into a short reference booklet for participants that was easy to read and relate to.
- Online engagement was through the roof! Hundreds of Hamiltonians participated in the survey and online discussions in less than 3 days.

In the end, we learned a number of lessons about social media, crisis communications, and how to teach organizations to engage during times of outrage. Going forward, we will not be silent. We make a commitment to face obstacles head on – because when there is big emotion, there is big opportunity. It's out there, lurking, waiting to be discovered.