

Listening Sessions

An Overview

Listening sessions give community members an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns about their public broadcasting station and their local communities. During listening sessions, broadcasters intentionally become the audience. They put aside expectations about what they *think* they should hear and instead focus on what citizens are actually saying. As a result, broadcasters gain precious information they might not hear in any other context; knowledge about the community that they can share inter-departmentally and use as a compass to guide station goals and services. Over time, stations that conduct ongoing listening sessions and act on the knowledge gain strong relationships with their communities.

Stations that convene listening sessions do so for many reasons:

- To gather information that informs strategic planning,
- To assess services the station provides and develop new ones,
- To gain insight about how the public perceives the station,
- To gain understanding of community values, needs and aspirations,
- To become better connected to and more rooted in the communities they serve.

There are a variety of ways to implement listening sessions. It's important to find an approach that's authentic to your station and its role in the community. With this in mind, we compiled summaries about listening initiatives conducted by four different stations as part of their station strategies. Each initiative reflects the station's situation at the time and their evolving relationship with their community.

Iowa Public Radio: The Iowa Listening Project

How did it come about?

In 2004, all university-licensed stations in Iowa merged into one statewide organization called Iowa Public Radio (IPR). IPR planned to use these combined resources to expand their service, but decided IPR couldn't move forward until they gained more knowledge about what Iowans valued and wanted from public radio and for their communities. IPR developed The Iowa Listening Project as a way to talk directly to citizens about their opinions and perceptions of the station and their communities.

How did it work?

IPR designed the project with the help of TRAC Media Services, a national public broadcasting research firm. They met with select community leaders from around the state and used the feedback to implement a variety of vehicles to reach different populations. IPR staff manned booths at the State Fair, held discussion groups in cities of various sizes, and solicited feedback through online, telephone and mail surveys. They reached more than 2,000 Iowans in a two-year period.

What were the results?

IPR integrated the feedback into its strategic plan, station mission and long-term goals. They also compiled the knowledge into a public report.

Among key findings, IPR learned that Iowans' liked how the station bettered lives and communities. In response, IPR pledged to expand its role as a community organization and make public connectedness a priority. The station also promised to continue listening and launched the Listening Project II in 2008.

To learn more, visit <http://iowapublicradio.org/listeningProject.php>

Vermont Public Television: Listening Sessions

How did it come about?

Vermont Public Television (VPT) began holding listening sessions in 2004 to better understand what issues were important to Vermonters and to identify how VPT could help citizens address those issues. Station staff visited each county for small group discussions about what participants felt were their local successes, values, challenges and opportunities. In each county, VPT relied on two or three local leaders to invite and convene diverse populations for the discussions.

The station discovered it was more difficult than expected to gather a diverse group of participants. Attendees were usually station supporters with similar socio-economic backgrounds and a liberal mind-set. Participants tended to think of VPT solely as a broadcaster. When asked to suggest what VPT could do to address the community challenges discussed, participants typically said "make a show about it."

To have more fruitful conversations with citizens, VPT investigated different ways of implementing the listening sessions. They discovered the Council on the Future of Vermont (CFV), a coalition of organizations that shared VPT's interest in discussing local challenges and hopes. VPT joined CFV to host a two-year series of community forums, online surveys, and telephone surveys called the Conversations on the Future of Vermont.

How did it work?

Community Forums were central to the initiative. VPT and CFV hosted "forum days" in every county of the state, implementing up to 10 separate discussions in the day. They committed to reaching community members who often aren't heard in public dialogues and scheduled discussions at schools, senior centers and public facilities. At the end of every forum day, they hosted a widely-publicized evening session to reach participants who worked during the day.

VPT's role in the partnership was to promote the effort, assist in reaching discussion participants, and provide staff to listen during the conversations. They deliberately did not take notes or participate in the discussion. Rather, they gave the participants all their attention, listened carefully and looked for connections between the ideas discussed. Listeners later summarized what they heard and shared their summaries with all the partner organizations. Listener summaries helped to clarify the discussions and reveal concepts that could otherwise have been overlooked.

What were the results?

VPT and CFV are still implementing conversations and gathering information. Together, they are involving 80-300 participants in every county and reaching a more diverse audience than either organization could reach alone.

The information collected in the forums will be published in a public report and adapted into a multimedia format that can reach decision-makers around the state. Also, VPT will use the content to inform its decision-making about programming, community engagement and overall station strategy.

VPT's partnership in the project clearly demonstrates that the station wants to play an active role in the Vermont communities. Discussion participants leave the events with the knowledge that VPT cares about their current concerns and goals for the future.

To learn more, visit http://futureofvermont.org/About_CFV

WVIZ/PBS and 90.3 WCPN ideastream: The Listening Project

How did it come about?

The Listening Project began in 2001 when Cleveland's PBS and NPR affiliates joined to create the multi-media, public service organization known as *ideastream*. The stations hoped that by coming together to create *ideastream* they could more effectively strengthen the communities they served. To gauge what mattered most to the residents of Northeast Ohio and how *ideastream* could best address their needs, *ideastream* launched The Listening Project. More than 1,000 community members participate every year in what has become an annual community survey.

How does it work?

The Listening Project includes online surveys, phone questionnaires and facilitated discussions. Participants are solicited on-air, online and in print and asked to complete a 16-question survey. Two facilitated public discussions are held annually to gather additional information.

ideastream uses the Listening Project to uncover:

- "The public's assessment of its community, its assets and challenges and its viability as a place to live," and
- "The public's idea about the role *ideastream* plays in the Northeast Ohio community."

With five years of data gathered, *ideastream* can also rely on The Listening Project to reveal how the community is changing and what services need to be developed or adapted to respond to those changes.

What were the results?

Through The Listening Project, *ideastream* has cultivated a nuanced understanding of the community, including its needs and aspirations, its perception of the stations, and the services it values.

In the 2007 survey, respondents indicated that *ideastream* is valued and seen as a public organization that makes their community a better place to live. They are increasingly interested in using *ideastream* to tackle the economic and educational challenges they face.

ideastream responds to feedback from The Listening Project by applying it to radio, television, Web, and engagement content and using it to fulfill their organization's mission to strengthen community.

To learn more, visit http://www.wviz.org/index.php/WVIZ/listening_project/

Wisconsin Public Broadcasting: Community Listening Sessions

How did it come about?

After the events of September 11, 2001, senior management at Wisconsin Public Television (WPT), University of Wisconsin-Extension and Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR) agreed there was value in creating a forum for getting input from communities to shape broadcasting ideas for the coming weeks and months. On October 3, 2001 an inaugural forum was held in the WPT studio. People from across the state attended to discuss topics such as expectations for the future, the local impact of the sustained war on terrorism, issues for kids, freedom versus security, and the idea of "normalcy" in a post-9/11 world. The discussion produced many good ideas and presented a unique opportunity for Wisconsin Public Broadcasting to produce programming related to the forum.

The success of the initial listening session inspired plans to conduct listening sessions across the state—opportunities to invite local residents to meet radio and TV management on their own turf to discuss local views on how public broadcasting can best serve Wisconsin communities.

How did it work?

Taking the lead from the concerns raised in the first meeting, the following guidelines were implemented as part of the listening sessions:

- Maintaining contact with the community members invited
- Letting them know how their advice/suggestions were put to use
- Devising an evaluation process
- Sending questionnaires and surveys to people who could not attend
- Providing an email address so attendees could continue to communicate with WPT and WPR, and
- Sharing the information gathered with all station departments.

What were the results?

- Since the initial session in 2001, Wisconsin Public Broadcasting has produced at least fifteen similar events in communities across Wisconsin. These gatherings have created relationships between local community leaders and station management, demonstrated Wisconsin Public Broadcasting's concern for local communities and provided valuable feedback that influenced station priorities.