

Citizen Engagement Through Scientific Public Consultation (SPC)[©]



The Challenge

"To realize our agenda we are going to have to change the way we do things in Ottawa. No Government can hope to succeed working in isolation. We must re-engage Canadians in the political process." [Paul Martin, December 12, 2003]

Governments find themselves caught between rising public expectations for a greater "voice" of average citizens and broad dissatisfaction and apathy with traditional public consultation methods. The desire to go beyond the limitations of traditional polling and consultation techniques (e.g., petitions, town hall meetings, public hearings) to gain better public input has led to the development of a number of approaches that fall under the rubric of citizen engagement. The range of techniques is large and the labels – deliberative polling, study circles, dialogues, citizen juries – reflect the objective of generating input from citizens that represents considered judgments or deliberation rather than a snapshot of public opinion.

The SPC approach

Over the past five years, EKOS has developed a technique called Scientific Public Consultation (SPC), a practical and cost effective way of bringing the *representative* and *considered* judgment of the public to the policy table. SPC draws on the strengths of various consultation models and reflects Canadians' preferences as documented in our Rethinking Citizen Engagement study.

The SPC methodology has been carefully tested with large representative samples of Canadians and has produced:

- *more informed, reasonable and pragmatic conclusions from the original survey results;*
- *very high levels of participant satisfaction;*
- *representative results; and*
- *high value for money.*

The **key elements** of SPC are:

- *Statistically Valid Representation: traditional survey sampling techniques are used to initially survey and select participants.*
- *Informed Input: Participants are exposed to information in the form of facts, arguments and potential policy options.*
- *Face-to-Face Deliberation: Participants learn about, and consider the views and experiences of others by interacting in small working groups of eight to 10 people.*
- *Formal Evaluation: Participants provide feedback on the engagement process based on proven indicators.*
- *Follow-Up: Participants receive a post-engagement briefing package (e.g., results, message from the sponsor, next steps in policy development process/how input will be considered).*

Core Methodology

The design of SPC is tailored to meet a client's specific needs based on considerations such as the topic, timeframe, involvement of stakeholders and available budget. Regardless of these and other factors, however, **every SPC includes the following core design characteristics:**

Initial Telephone or Internet Survey

- *Based on a traditional public opinion research approach, this first component provides an assessment of the Canadian public's "real world" perceptions and opinions on the topic. It also provides a baseline for comparing the differences between the informed and uninformed views of Canadians.*
- *The survey also facilitates the recruitment of deliberative discussion participants in two ways: 1) by creating a pool of potential participants from which to draw, and 2) by providing a reliable measure of attitudes which is then used to establish recruitment quotas for ensuring valid attitudinal, as well as demographic representation of the target population.*
- *Typically survey between 800 to 1,500 Canadians.*



Pre-Discussion Participant Briefing Package

- The briefing package consists of information on the engagement process (e.g., sponsor, topic, agenda/format, location) and background information on the topic under consideration (e.g., facts, competing schools of thought, potential policy options).

Recruit Discussion Participants and Distribute Briefing Packages

- The recruitment phase is about ensuring that: 1) a sufficient number of people attend the deliberative discussions, 2) those who participate in the discussions collectively represent the target population's key demographic and attitudinal characteristics, and 3) participants arrive ready to be engaged, having been thoroughly briefed on the process and having received and read their briefing package.
- Participation of 80 to 160 Canadians.

Deliberative Discussions

- Conducted across Canada and lasting from three to five hours, the deliberative discussion groups involve the participation of 8 to 10 people. With the aid of specially trained facilitators, participants reflect, discuss and deliberate on the issues based on the information contained in their briefing package. The groups are designed and facilitated to achieve advice or judgment from the participants for consideration by decision-makers. The discussions can also include the presentation of additional information (e.g., presentation, video) and/or the involvement of subject matter experts who can present information and/or respond to questions.
- 10 to 20 discussion groups.

Post-Discussion Survey and Evaluation

- Participants complete a pen and paper questionnaire that replicates key items from the initial survey and include questions aimed at: 1) evaluating their satisfaction with the process, and 2) obtaining their final judgment/advice on policy options. By comparing these to the results of the initial surveys, the degree of movement, consensus and stability of judgment on specific issues can be formally measured. Responses to the

questions on policy options provide a quantitative indicator to complement the qualitative results, while the success of the process is assessed against a common evaluation tool. These results can contribute to ongoing evaluation and lesson learning.

Analysis and Reporting

- SPC produces a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information based on five sources: 1) the initial survey, 2) the qualitative information obtained from the group discussions, 3) the policy options results from the post-discussion survey, 4) the evaluation information from the post-discussion survey, and 5) the results of a comparison of common items from the pre- and post-discussion surveys. Our approach to analysis and reporting is dual. We provide a detailed report, intended for specialists and practitioners, presenting all results and supporting methodological information. We also provide a deck of key findings intended for senior decision-makers.

Provision of Feedback to Participants

- One of the keys to successful engagement is to follow-up with participants. EKOS will provide the results of the consultation to all participants, and also work with clients to provide participants with information on how their views were considered by decision-makers.

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