Strategies that Support Active Living: Tips for Using Data Strategically in Active Living Campaigns

Active living campaigns are designed to increase awareness about ways sidewalk, street, and community design can encourage physical activity and influence behavior. Organizations may initiate campaigns to influence decision makers about a policy, inform businesses or local institutions about the potential impact of a proposed infrastructure project, or to increase resident support for changes that would expand opportunities for physical activity. These campaigns are often used when specific changes to community infrastructure are being considered, such as redesigning streets to add bikeways and widen sidewalks, or when planning documents or budgets are being developed or updated. Gathering the right data can increase the effectiveness and impact of an active living campaign. However, collecting the wrong data or the wrong amount of data – information that doesn't help guide the work or answer key questions – can squander organizations' limited resources.

This summary offers a simple framework for developing a strategic evaluation plan based a set of five key questions:

- Who is your audience?
- What do they need to know?
- What information is already available?
- How can you gather any new data that you need?
- How will you share what you learned?

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Who is your audience?

Strong campaigns begin by engaging residents in discussions or activities that highlight concerns and elevate needs or interests. However, the buy-in of multiple stakeholder groups is needed in order to make changes in communities that will support active living. For example, city council members may be the primary decision makers for infrastructure funding or changes to zoning laws, but residents, organizational partners, business owners, and program staff in your own organization may also have a vested interest in these topics.

What do they want to know?

Once you have identified the key stakeholders, the next step is to think about the information they might want to know before making a decision. Listening sessions with residents or informal conversations with key stakeholders can help you identify what type of information is most important to your audiences. The following questions can be helpful in understanding the motivations and interests of your audiences:

- What questions or concerns have you heard from business owners, residents, and policymakers about your proposed change?
- What questions or concerns do residents have about the proposed change, particularly those most likely to be impacted? How have they been involved in planning and decision making steps taken to date?
- What types of information are needed by the decision makers who will vote on your proposal?
- What information can help program staff improve future campaigns or other work?

What information is already available?

Before collecting new data, conduct a brief scan of the information already available. Previous studies can show the potential impact of a proposed change. For example, if pedestrian and bicyclist safety is important to policymakers who will decide on a proposed change to an intersection, you may want to look for information about the safety impacts from other places that made similar changes. This information is not always readily available online or through published journals. You may need to reach out to organizations who have been involved in similar work to identify information they collected. Reviewing existing sources or reaching out to other organizations may also help you identify impacts or issues you had not thought of.

How can you gather new data that you need?

Reviewing existing data can provide broad information about your community, and previous studies can be helpful because you do not have to gather the data yourself. However, in some cases you may need to collect new data. Collecting your own data can provide information that is specific to your local community and aligned with the interests of your target audience(s). The following are common tools that can be part of an evaluation approach for an active living campaign:

- **Surveys.** Surveys can completed via pen and paper or electronically. They can also be administered by a staff person or volunteer or filled out independently. Compared to in-person interviews, surveys allow you to target more people, and can be relatively easy and inexpensive to administer. However, they can require time and resources to achieve a high response rate. You might need multiple rounds of data collection to hear from a representative sample of residents. It is also important to consider the preferred languages and literacy levels of the population you are hoping to reach. Surveys may be less effective in capturing open-ended, in-depth information.

- **Interviews.** Interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone, and can also involve a tightly scripted set of questions, or be more unstructured, allowing you to decide which questions to ask and how to ask them. However, both conducting and analyzing the results from interviews can be time consuming, and there is also the possibility that people might adapt their responses to please the interviewer. When interviewing residents, consider offering an incentive to thank participants for their time.

- **Focus groups.** Focus groups involve a discussion with a group of people about specific issues. They can build trust with a stakeholder group, and provide more in-depth, open-ended information than can be gathered through a survey. They can be more efficient than interviews in that you are gathering information from a group of people all at once, and may provide new insights that might not otherwise emerge from talking to people individually. Like interviews, it can also be time consuming to analyze the information from focus groups. Participants might be less open or adjust their responses depending on their comfort with sharing information in a group setting. If the focus group includes residents, offering child care, a meal or refreshments, and a small incentive can help build trust and increase participation.

- **Observational methods such as bike and pedestrian counts.** Observational methods, such as counting the number of people riding a bike along a specific bike path, allow you to collect firsthand data in real-life settings, avoiding some of the drawbacks of relying on individuals' accounts or recollections. However, these methods can also be time consuming and expensive if they require special equipment or trained observers.

You do not have to use traditional evaluation methods, but remember the goal is simply to gather information, and using creative methods can help engage people in the evaluation and stimulate interest in the results. For example, if you are planning a demonstration project and want to gather feedback from community members, you could have a sign with a question and have people write responses on the sign or vote for a response with stickers. Participatory methods, such as Photovoice which asks stakeholders to photograph and discuss assets or barriers in their communities related to a specific issue, can increase stakeholder involvement in the evaluation and your ongoing work.

Considerations when choosing a method

There are many potential evaluation methods that could be used to collect information, but they are not all equally feasible or appropriate for the specific situation. Ask yourself the following questions when considering which method is most appropriate:

- What type of data will most resonate with the audience you are trying to target? Is it hard numbers? Stories? Some combination?
- Are there cultural factors you need to consider? Will you need to translate surveys or use an interpreter? Will the audience you are seeking input from understand the terms you are using?
- What staffing, time, and funds will be needed to collect, analyze, and report the data? Do you have the capacity to do the work?
- Will you need any technical assistance in collecting or analyzing the data?
- Is the method appropriate for the event?

Minimizing bias

Although you may be working to build momentum for a proposed change, it is critical to minimize bias in data collection and clearly describe the limitations of the approach. In any data collection activity, make sure to include opportunities for people to share their opinions whether they support or oppose the change you are working toward. In addition, try to gather input from a wide variety of people who may have a stake in the efforts. Think about who you are and are not hearing from in your evaluation. If possible, adjust your data collection strategies to gather additional input, and consider and describe the implications of who is represented in the sample when you interpret your findings.

How will you share what you learned?

It is important to build a communication plan into any evaluation. In campaigns, it is especially important to share the information you have gathered to inform or influence your target audience. Communicating findings clearly and accurately can also help build trust with residents and key stakeholders and credibility for your campaign. You may use more than one tool to communicate the findings, but common approaches include:

- **Reports.** Reports can provide more detail about your methods and findings, and can be easily shared with others, and may be especially appropriate when working with policymakers. However, time constraints may prevent people from reading the full report, and so you may want to think about presenting the findings in a focused and meaningful way or providing an executive summary.

- **One-on-one meetings.** One-on-one meetings can help you build relationships with your audience, respond to any questions or concerns the stakeholder may have about the findings, and adapt your communication strategies and messaging in the moment. However, they can also be time consuming, and it may be difficult to secure meetings with some stakeholders. One-on-one meetings can be effective with policymakers or smaller groups of stakeholders such as business owners.

- **Social media and press releases.** Another effective way to communicate findings to a broader audience is via social media or a press release summarizing your findings. Press releases and news stories can help draw more attention to your campaign, but you may have less control over how the findings are presented or shared.

- **Presentations.** Presentations allow you to describe your findings in a more structured way, while also responding to the audience's interests, questions, and concerns. Presentations are also an efficient way to present the information to a larger group of people. Presentations require a skilled presenter and facilitator. They can be an effective communication strategy with most groups, including policymakers, business owners, or community members. They can also be done in a variety of settings, including existing meetings or events. Make sure the presentation is at a time and location that is accessible to your audience, and consider offering the presentation multiple times to increase reach and build trust.

- **Infographics**. Infographics present information in a visual, easy-to-understand way. Infographics can grab people's attention and help your audience quickly understand and retain information. They are easy to share, including on signs or social media, and are appropriate for a wide variety of audiences. Infographics capture key themes, but are less helpful in presenting complex or in-depth information.

With any of these strategies, tailor your communication efforts to the interests, needs, and culture of your audience. Creative approaches can also be used to communicate results. Using less traditional presentation formats can help you draw the attention of residents and key stakeholder groups and provide new ways for people to engage with the findings. They can be especially effective in sharing findings with community members. Some examples include pop-up presentations, photographic displays, or "pocket reports," a poster highlighting key findings that could be folded up and carried in campaign staff's back pockets to share and discuss with residents.

Putting it all together

The following table shows how these four planning questions can be used to create an evaluation framework for your active living campaign (Figure 1). Data can be a powerful tool in campaigns in making a case for a proposed change or demonstrating the impact of early efforts. Careful consideration of who the audiences are, and the information they need to know, can help you think strategically about how to design an evaluation plan, collect data, and communicate findings that will help advance your work.

1. Sample evaluation plans by key audience

Key audience	What information do they need to know?	What information is already available?	How can you gather any new data that you need?	How will you share what you learned?
City council members	Examples: Who are the residents who might be impacted?	Data from the U.S. Census or the American Community Survey		Reports One-on-one meetings Presentations Press releases
	What concerns do residents have about their community?		Surveys or focus groups with residents	
	Do their constituents support the proposed change?		Surveys of residents	
	Are business owners supportive of the proposed change?		Surveys or focus groups with business owners	
	What is the potential impact on rates of biking, accidents, and traffic?	Previous studies looking at the impact of similar infrastructure on these factors		
Community members	Examples: What concerns do residents have about their community?		Surveys or focus groups with residents	Presentations Community meetings or events Social media and press releases
	How will the proposed change affect safety in the community?	Previous studies looking at the impact of similar projects on safety in communities		
	How will the proposed change affect parking and traffic?	Previous studies looking at the impact of similar projects on parking and traffic.		
	Do residents in the community support the proposed change?		Surveys of residents	
Business owners	Examples: How will the proposed infrastructure affect revenue and the customer base?	Previous studies of the impact of similar infrastructure on businesses		One-on-one meetings Presentations Community meetings or events
	Do customers support the proposed change?		Surveys or focus groups with customers or residents in the area	

1. Sample evaluation plans by key audience (continued)

Key audience	What information do they need to know?	What information is already available?	How can you gather any new data that you need?	How will you share what you learned?
Program staff	Examples: Who are the residents who will be affected by the proposed change?	Data from the U.S. Census or the American Community Survey		Presentations or reports
	What concerns do residents, business owners, and policymakers have about the proposed changes?		Surveys, focus groups, or interviews with key stakeholders	
	What are effective strategies for community engagement?	Review of previous studies		
	What worked well in the campaign? What challenges were encountered?		Focus groups or interviews with key staff and stakeholders	

Additional resources

The following resources provide additional information and tips for using a number of the evaluation approaches described in this summary.

Conducting interviews. This summary includes tips for conducting effective interviews and focus groups.

Effectively using qualitative data. This document provides a short tutorial on analyzing and reporting qualitative information.

Survey says: The role of surveys in your evaluation. This document summarizes important factors to consider when using surveys and tips for effective survey design and implementation.

For links to these summaries and additional evaluation resources, see the Wilder Research website at http://www.wilder.org/redirects/ProgramEvaluationandResearchTips.html

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