Beyond the Usual Suspects: The Art of Civic Engagement

DAVE MESLIN is a Toronto-based artist and organiser. Multi-partisan and fiercely optimistic, Dave embraces ideas and projects that cut across traditional boundaries between grassroots politics, electoral politics and the arts community. In his work, he attempts to weave elements of these communities together. Dave has instigated a variety of urban projects, including the Toronto Public Space Committee, Spacing Magazine, City Idol, Toronto Cyclists Union, and Better Ballots. He is the author of *Local Motion: The Art of Civic Engagement in Toronto* (2010).

A while ago the Toronto City Council held a 24-hour budget deputation session. One of the conservative councillors tried to discredit the deputants by accusing us of being the “usual suspects.”

What this councillor specifically said was, “They’re the same people who show up every time. They’re paid by the unions to show up. They don’t represent anyone except special interest groups. *They’re just the usual suspects.*”

I became really defensive about that and performed some informal interviews. I asked, “Do you have a job? Have you been here before? Are you a usual suspect?” And sure enough, there were a lot of new, fresh faces.

That said, the conservative councillor is kind of right. The same people do show up repeatedly, and we’re usually talking to ourselves. So what I’ve been trying to do with my work is determine how we get beyond involving only the usual suspects.
In a CBC interview a while ago they asked me, “Dave, do we really need to get more people involved? Is [increasing involvement] really an issue?” The answer is indisputable. Yes! In a city of two and a half million people is it exciting that 300 people show up? Is that how low we set our expectations? Is that engagement?

So I’m going to tell you a bit about how I’ve been trying to recruit the city of Toronto’s other 2.5 million people.

> SLICK OR SLICKER

I love the activist scene. What I’m always trying to figure out is how to get people who aren’t part of that scene into my work. And I think part of the problem is that we’re scared. We’re scared of marketing because we associate slick marketing ads with companies who are often doing things we don’t appreciate, or doing things in ways we don’t appreciate.

I try to take the opposite approach. I always try to be as slick as those companies, or slicker. For example, I never use photocopies. Everything is always in full colour. I put as much effort into developing a ‘corporate brand’ for my projects as I do into the research and the politics. In this way, I make myself a viable competitor.

The Toronto Cyclists Union was founded three years ago. Cyclists are often stereotyped as being aggressive, angry … reckless. So we spent a long time with a professional marketing group devising a logo to combat that stereotype. The logo we designed is a circle, using lower case and rounded fonts. There isn’t a single edge or corner anywhere on the text. The message there? We’re not angry. We’re quiet. We’re the Toronto Cyclists Union.

So, branding is one useful tool. Planning projects in creative ways draws more people out and thus moves involvement beyond the usual suspects.

Klein vs. Klein was an event we almost planned some years ago. I was working with someone who had left then Premier Mike Harris’s office and was doing some consulting. We met because this fellow had been sending out libelous press releases about me. The one thing that we agreed on was getting people talking about politics. I suggested holding debates
We all know what a planning notice looks like. It’s the one in the papers that you have to read half the notice before you find out which street they’re talking about. You’ll never see a Nike ad like that because Nike actually wants you to buy their shoes.

People are being intentionally excluded by those who are publishing the planning notices. I did a call-out to graphic designers in Toronto. I asked them to design an ad where the goal was not to meet the requirements of the planning act, but rather to attract an audience out to a planning meeting. I asked them to: use messages like, ‘We want to hear from you’; include a colour-sketch of the proposed building; and have a big banner saying something like, ‘Planning meeting coming up. Your opinion matters!’ We featured their submissions in an art exhibition downtown.

People care enormously about their community and if they’re invited in the same strong bold way that Nike tries to get us to buy their shoes, I think they’ll show up.
that would be called “boxing matches” rather than the “Toronto Civic Speakers’ Series.” I would get the big left-wing boxers and he would get the big right-wingers. The first one we were going to do was Klein vs. Klein, Naomi vs. Ralph.

Unfortunately the timing didn’t work out, but the example serves as a helpful illustration of how something we already do can be made so much more fun and colourful. People who aren’t politicos are more likely to show up.

> TORONTO PUBLIC SPACE COMMITTEE

The Public Space Committee (TPSC) is a project that I ran for 10 years in Toronto. What we did was try to find fun ways to get people involved with the concept of reclaiming public space. ‘Public space’ can mean a sidewalk or a park. It can also be a metaphor for reclaiming City Hall. It means thinking of libraries and publically-funded daycares as shared space. It means feeling a sense of public ownership over the sidewalks right in front of our houses.

TPSC was voted ‘Best Activist Organization’ by Eye Weekly, a leading entertainment weekly in Toronto. We never had any staff—just volunteers. No office. No funding. Just using branding, good marketing, and creative ways to do things that people were already advocating for, but going beyond involving merely the usual suspects.

> THE POSTER BYLAW FIGHT

The Toronto Public Space Committee’s first campaign was against a bylaw that would ban posters on public property in the city. At the time, huge electronic billboards were going up around the city. The first billboard was in Younge-Dundas Square and then there was pressure to put up 17 across the whole city, including residential neighbourhoods. People know how to “turn off” ads. They can change the channel on TV, turn the radio down when the ads come on, or flip the page in a magazine. To combat this ability, companies are resorting to advertising in intrusive places where they have a captive audience: in bathroom stalls, at gas pumps, in elevators, and along highways.

Meanwhile the City was trying to ban posters 8.5 by 11 inches because the Council considers it visual clutter! Essentially, what they
were trying to do was put a price tag on freedom of expression. You can say anything if you have $50,000 a month to put it up on a screen, but if you have a piece of paper you want to post somehow you’re polluting the environment. So the TPSC launched a campaign, and it was exciting because many people got involved. Talking about large abstract issues such as the environment or even Occupy, is vague. But lots of people use posters, and lots of people look at posters. So, we started putting signs on posters to reach people: 

**Warning: your poster will soon be illegal.**

**Come to our website.**

PHOTOS COURTESY PETE TUEPAH AND KINGSTONIST/Flickr

On our website we explained how people who teach piano lessons, or have a lost pet use posters; babysitters, political groups, and religious groups all rely on posters. We had artists who made campaign materials using cartoons and illustrations. We got groups to endorse a statement. Groups who probably had never signed a petition in their lives, or gone into City Hall, or even known that you could go to a City Hall meeting, suddenly had an issue that they cared about. We held a press conference with Billy Bragg. We got the attention of the *National Post*, the local paper, and City Hall.
Then the TPSC did something else to involve people other than the usual suspects. We found orphan public spaces and we invited the public to come and plant things. It doesn’t sound exciting, but two things happen in situations like these: people show up and they plant. And, they’re being exposed to a group that’s also doing policy advocacy at City Hall. So they come to our meeting about the gardening, but then they hear about the poster bylaw and a whole variety of other things. And many are hooked.

Something also changes in people’s minds when they participate in a community action. As soon as we do something like plant a boulevard, suddenly there’s collective ownership. It changes the way that our brains are wired.

**> GUERRILLA GARDENING: VANDALIZING THE CITY WITH NATURE**

Fences obviously divide neighbours. But more importantly, fences are a symbolic barrier between the City and individuals When you take down a actual fence, you are also dismantling that sense of separation, and your thinking shifts.

**> THE DOWNTOWN DEFENCE PROJECT**
Compelled to act by these thoughts, TPSC launched the Downtown Defence Project. Volunteers put flyers on people's fences, and sure enough, people phoned us. This is one of the ways I recruited volunteers, who spent a few hours dismantling a fence with grinders and pliers. In an hour the fence is down and all these people have engaged with each other and learned about volunteering. They’ve had that wiring change in their head, understanding that our community can transform.

A lot of people got involved with these fun projects and then got involved with policy advocacy. And once they are involved with advocacy, suddenly everything is part of their City ... That library should be open an hour longer ... People shouldn’t have to wait 20 minutes for a bus.... What’s wrong here? How can I get involved?

> ART ATTACK

Another TPSC project was to take on commercial advertising in public spaces. Corporations can already advertise on TV and radio; they don’t need more space. Public space is the one place where people can express themselves, where communities can put up their own signs and art.

It wouldn’t have been effective to vandalize ads by throwing paint on them, or breaking the glass. For one thing the media wouldn’t cover it, at least not in a positive way. And we wouldn’t get volunteers or funding that way either. But what if we covered the commercial ads with community art?

So we hosted an event called Art Attack. We taped precut pieces of paper over ads. We received broad and positive media attention; for
example, MuchMusic put it on their national show. Tons of people showed up and learned about ownership and the malleability of public space.

Another related issue that TPSC took on was concerning bus shelter ads. Toronto used to have street names on our bus stops, which was a helpful indicator to transit users of where they were on the bus route. When the city sold off all our street furniture, the company who took over thought it was more important for everyone to know that Vicom owned the shelter than that people know their current location. We decided to take this on. We didn’t ask people to sign a petition or phone City Council. Instead, we asked the public to create their own street signs for the shelters, put them up and send us a photo. And it worked.

When people exercise their own creativity for public good, they become part of the group, they show up at meetings, where they hear about current relevant issues, learn about policy advocacy. Isolated individuals join forces to become a cohesive movement.

> WHO RUNS THIS TOWN?

TPSC also did some work to get people involved with the civic elections. I stole Nike’s slogan and posted it on billboards everywhere with the added question: *Who runs this town?* Well, 45 people do. It’s called City Council.

Our goal was to help people find out how to run for City Council, or how to get involved in other ways, including volunteering on others’ campaigns. We were looking for city councillors, and we wanted people who were passionate about the City and who would represent greater diversity.

The final project of the campaign was called City Idol. The idea was to support young people who wouldn’t typically know how—or have the guts—to run for office. The trick was that they would first compete in a competition like American Idol. We asked people to stand on a stage, and instead of competing with songs, they competed with their own ideas. I told the contestants if they win City Idol they get a campaign.
TPSC will raise funds for them. We’ll make their signs and their flyers. They’ll have training sessions. They’ll be supported.

We had 70 people sign up to compete and 600 people in the audience. Both the candidates and the audience were incredibly diverse. We received tons of media attention and we had amazing candidates. If we had just called it ‘Speech Night,’ or ‘City Council Contest,’ no one would have shown up.

> KITE FESTIVAL

How do we promote wind power? Who’s going to show up to a big rally for wind power? Well, two groups would: the people who already love wind power, and the Ontario wind interest groups. How do we intrigue more people? How about a kite festival?

First of all, lots of families will show up who don’t care at all about energy—yet. But, once they’re there, the kids are doing workshops on turbines, and learning about solar panels, and the parents can go to the Bullfrog tent and the Ontario Hydro tent.

> CAMPAIGNS ARE POWERED BY PEOPLE

The main resource that any campaign has is people. People have time, energy, and creativity. Think of your campaign volunteers as a set of batteries. To run a campaign, you need slots for nine volts, triple A’s, maybe even a 12 volt car battery. If you create a campaign that has only nine-volt slots, others can’t plug in and you lose an energy source. Your ‘Nine Volt’ is going to drain.

So if people have time on a weekday night for a one-hour meeting, make sure there’s a meeting for them to attend. If they don’t have time for a meeting but they can contribute financially, make sure they know how to do that easily. If they’re broke and can’t come to a meeting but have 10 minutes to phone their city councillor during the day, ensure they can find information on the issues and their councillor’s phone number on your website. If someone doesn’t have much time, but they can receive an assignment in the afternoon and do the necessary research at three in the morning, indulge them. You have to be able to accommodate people’s fluctuating resource availabilities and skill sets.
If we're always thinking about ways to get beyond the usual subjects by using creative marketing, we're going to attract a larger audience, and that's when change will really happen. When we think outside the box, we can energize more than those 300 people who show up at City hall, and eventually capture the attention of all 2.5 million.

Create your own corporate brand:
- Always use good graphic design.
- Always think about colours.
- Always think about how to make it fun

Invitation checklist: ‘People’ details
- Is your marketing proactive?
- Is the venue accessible to your community?
- Is it happening at an hour when people can show up?
- Is there childcare provided?
- Is the invitation available in translation?
This is a campaign about voting reform, again attractively packaged. RABBIT (Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto) is a campaign advocating for instant run-off voting. No one would ever wear a button that said “We need rank ballots now!” or “Run-off voting is amazing!” But creating an acronym—RABBIT—allows us to use the Playboy logo. Phone companies use dogs and monkeys to sell phones. Why can’t we use animals like rabbits to attract people to political ideas?

Hundreds and hundreds of people across the City of Toronto are wearing our buttons because of the sexy way the movement is being promoted. We give out beer coasters instead of flyers; you can slide one under someone’s drink in a bar where people are hanging out. We have had great multi-partisan support for this campaign.
The Nature of Leadership
Ideas for Building Inclusive, Sustainable Communities