

Chapter 24

Public Participation Distribution and Marketing: An Inseparable Duality

Patrick Weber

University of Giessen, Germany

Sascha A. Wagner

University of Giessen, Germany

Rüdiger Kabst

University of Paderborn, Germany

ABSTRACT

The distribution of public participation in Western political environments has become an important topic in recent years. Low participation rates combined with low levels of trust toward government officials has resulted in low efficiency of public participation projects. Whereas prior research has focused on the quality of public participation projects, this study focuses on upstream processes to optimize public participation marketing and distribution. The present study tests the applicability of hierarchical marketing instruments with structural equation modeling in a sample of 266 individuals obtained from a random survey in Germany. The results indicate a sufficient relationship between the hierarchical steps.

INTRODUCTION

Public participation at the municipal level becomes more important for achieving citizens' acceptance and support for diverse plans (King, Feltey, & O'Neill Susel, 1998). There are many public participation projects scattered all over the European Union that address many municipality-, region- or country-specific topics (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). In Germany, we find that all federal levels are involved in such stakeholder communication projects (Kost, 2008). A representative opinion poll commissioned and authorized by the federal government of Hesse revealed that 74 percent of Hessian citizens want to participate in public participation projects (Bußer, 2014). Therefore, it is highly important to identify

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the underlying mechanisms to optimize political as well as governmental actions in public participation distribution.

The European Commission published a best practices report to present the actual European standard for public participation (Krek, Losito, Ridley, & Hoskins, 2012). Although this report shows good implemented public participation projects, it lacks practical behavioral guidelines for public proponents. Consequently, most research in the field addresses conceptual studies, evaluative frameworks or theoretically based procedure models. Several scholars have found criteria that help to evaluate the quality of individual public participation activities (Abelson et al., 2003; Chess, 2000; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008; Rowe, 2004; Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Stagl, 2006; Webler, Tuler, & Krueger, 2001). Evaluation concepts are helpful for public participation providers such as municipalities, administrative districts, states or the federal government to improve the process and foster a more efficient realization of public participation projects. However, there is little knowledge on what determines actual satisfaction with public participation distribution in the eyes of citizens, what consequences arise from an insufficient supply of public participation projects through public proponents and what strategy must be followed to promote public participation projects most effectively.

This article seeks to show that public participation marketing and distribution has to align with the sequential steps of a basic hierarchical marketing model to increase citizens' satisfaction with public participation. To test this relationship, we develop a structural equation model with survey data gathered in 2011 in Germany. We expect different results for citizen groups with different levels of awareness of public participation opportunities. Therefore, we also explore whether there are differences in the suggested relationship between different attention spans of citizens for public participation - specifically, whether citizens have acquired knowledge about public participation processes in their municipality within the last three years.

Theory

Public participation has become a well-recognized topic in public administration research in recent decades (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Innes & Booher, 2004; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Lourenço & Costa, 2007; Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001a, 2001b; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008; Renn, Webler, Rakel, Dienel, & Johnson, 1993; Vogt & Haas, 2015). Public participation is a political practice based on the principle that citizens can participate in decision-making. There are levels defined within the different participation processes that determine the actual possibility of citizens to be part of a political decision such as exclusive information or true deliberation. Because all German governments, both federal and local, act on a constitutional basis, all public participation practices must be viewed in an informal way because the final decision remains in the hands of the elected representatives. Therefore, the only formal options for citizens to participate in political decisions are elections and government-induced boundary modifications. Nevertheless, public participation has an important partnership outcome (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2004). Given its proximity to both governmental and political decision makers, public participation is essential to generating the efficient delivery of public services.

For establishing public participation processes within a municipality, it is essential to draw the interest of the local citizenry to local decisions, as low interest will result in low participation rates. Low participation rates are a huge risk for participation processes. Without a critical ratio of citizens participating in these projects, it is likely that the achieved results will be biased by small but more active interest groups that pursue their own interests but not necessarily those of the larger society (Martin, 2008). The major risk

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