How to Plan a “Town Hall” Meeting

What is a town hall?
Town hall meetings are a tool to communicate a problem and gain support for the known solutions to that problem. Town hall meetings are community events in which people (e.g. youth, experts, community resource people, and/or public officials) present information on a particular problem and then highlight potential solutions.

Community members should be invited and allowed to ask questions and dialogue with the presenters. A good “town hall” has media either there or ready to print a story. The organizers of a town hall meeting must have a clear agenda for organizing them without making the event feel scripted and allowing for honest responses on what it takes to improve the problem at hand.

Town hall meetings are a great way to educate the public that is present and the media about the strategies that can most impact an issue. Regarding the NC Preventing Underage Drinking Initiative, we want people to know why reclassifying alcopops is an important issue to preventing underage drinking:

Planning Steps
1. Make a list of contacts to invite to speak/be on a panel/answer questions. Think about all the angles of the issue you are discussing and come up with experts that can speak to various parts of the problem. Regarding the focus on reclassifying alcopops at your town hall meeting, you can consider inviting an ALE agent, a parent/adult who did not know these were alcohol products, a member from the substance abuse coalition and an official from a public health organization (ER Doctors, etc.). The key is to find support from people who are credible and can support your goals. You would NOT invite someone to be on your panel that feel alcopops are properly classified or has a low understanding of the issue.
2. Carefully evaluate who might be a good moderator. You may want to call upon a local news anchor or other highly visible person who has the skills to moderate. Another option is to have a youth moderate. The person who moderates should understand and agree with your goals.
3. Make a list of contacts, including those organizations: local, state, and federal government agencies; businesses; faith-based organizations; and the media to invite to the event.
4. Select a chairperson, and form a planning committee that meets regularly. Divide responsibilities for materials distribution, media support, and event planning. Develop an action plan and a timeline.
5. Secure a meeting location. Anticipate the number of participants, and consider parking requirements. Choose a location that is easily accessible, politically neutral, and comfortable.

6. Develop the main points you want to make sure are communicated clearly to the media/audience. Share these points with panelists as they commit and go over which of these you think they can speak to the best. This helps them prepare adequately for your town hall meeting and to be effective supporters of the messages you want clearly heard at the event.

7. Hold planning meetings with key representatives in the community. Connect with academia, local health/mental health/substance abuse agencies, and other relevant networks. Present the program, and look for joint activities that could be incorporated into the meeting. Set up face-to-face meetings with selected groups. Make an appointment, take a marketing kit, and have ideas ready about what partners can do.

8. Write a letter of invitation to community members and public officials describing what the meeting is about. Try to get it published in the local paper as well. Plan to follow up with a phone call (youth may also be a great choice for this).

9. Develop an agenda and materials (most of which can be found in the alcopops tool kit). Send out press releases. Include information on how to register for the event.

10. At the meeting, be sure to have a moderator to give everyone a chance to speak and keep the pace. Be sure to acknowledge prominent community attendees (i.e. Mayor). Have someone take notes and transcribe the discussion. Be sure that microphones are set up for speakers and audience members. Develop a system for addressing attendees who ask questions.

11. Get contact information from any media there so that you can get a copy of any stories that run or to follow-up with additional information about the town hall.

12. After the meeting, follow up with contacts gained at the meeting, and debrief on how it went.

13. Send out thank you letters to speakers and anyone that helped support your event.

**Helpful Hints**

- Know your audience. Promote the meeting using traditional and non-traditional media channels to make contact with diverse groups of community members.
- Keep the number of presenters small to ensure plenty of interaction with participants.
- Give speakers a time limit for their presentations ahead of time. The moderator should ensure everyone adheres to their allotted time.
- Provide handouts or summaries of all speakers' presentations where appropriate.
Case Example
Below is an example of a town hall meeting to give you an idea of how you might want to organize one in your community.

**Name of event:** Properly Classifying Alcopops: Making Sure Youth Don’t Start on Starter Drinks

**Target audience:** Local elected officials, community members, including those involved in health care, academia, businesses and community-based organizations, media, industry, state and local governments, and faith-based organizations

**Purpose:** To educate the media/audience/key decision makers on what alcopops are, the impact of this product, the actual law on how they should be classified and to ask for their support in properly classifying them. Be specific about what actions are needed regarding their “support”.

**Event Structure:**
- Welcome
- Setting the Stage for Discussion (ground rules, expectations, flow of panel)
- Introduce the subject of underage drinking
- Introduce the alcopop issue and solution
- Conducting the Discussion
  - Each panelists introduces self and makes a statement based on a time that town hall meeting organizers have assigned. Usually 3 minutes about the issue or a solution.
  - Questions from moderator. These are based on getting answers that match the key messages. They were decided in advance and shared with panelists and the moderator and are not a surprise.
  - Questions from audience.
  - Final Thoughts
  - Summarizing statements, requests for specific actionable support, gratitudes and dismissal.

**Publicity:** Touch base with all the media present to collect the stories that actually ran.