

How to Run a Successful Community Meeting for Election Candidates

On September 18th 2019 a small group advocating for sustainable transport hosted a community meeting for council and mayoral candidates in their town, Nelson. About 180 people turned up and they were educated, entertained and motivated to vote. One candidate believed it to have been the most well attended election meeting in the last nine years.

Here is what they did...

With the aim of holding an event that would not be dull or dreary they titled it 'Not Your Normal Candidates' Meeting', without revealing what this actually meant, thereby creating some intrigue and a promise of something different. Posters, email lists, local media and social media were utilised for promotion.



Candidates were invited to speak for two minutes each on three specific questions which had been well honed to elicit clear information on key issues. They were also asked to bring their own name tags with which many had made creative efforts.



The gathering was held in a large community hall adjacent to a school in a suburban part of the city and attached to an active community centre. One of the group members had brought bright flags which adorned the outside arrival area.



Everybody sat in a large circle. When people kept arriving, mats and cushions were provided and many sat on the floor, including children. The MC explained that this was because everyone was part of the process, on equal ground as they all had equally important roles in the community, and it meant that speakers could utilise and move in a large space when speaking. Some did, some didn't.

The candidates were seated together and found a chocolate fish on their chair on arrival, which many appreciated.

The time-keeper ran a tight operation. He was supported by a five year-old with her pet unicorn. The child rang the bell to warn when time was almost up, and when time was up a rooster crow sound was utilised. This provided some light relief.

The MC, a woman, was dressed in a tails and a top hat with knee high red boots giving an air of authority and fun.



When speakers ran over time the next speaker was able to 'wrestle' the mic from them. There was a strong emphasis on keeping to time and a water pistol was employed for those who didn't. A loud cow bell was used to call order when things got unruly. The 'super soaker' water pistol was also used as a threat at this time.

The event started with a flash mob style choir performance where just a few men began to chant in the audience and were gradually joined by a strong four-part harmony singing The Contemplation Chant – a multicultural medley, followed by a rousing traditional African song with drum accompaniment. The audience was immediately roused into clapping and the energy of the meeting was lifted. A candidate of Maori ancestry then offered a karakia to officially open the meeting.



After the first hour of candidate speeches a young colourful Colombian dance crew surprised the crowd with two high energy dances. These were former refugees and the MC asked the crowd to support the dancers so as to help keep their culture alive, by hiring them for other events. They were fantastic!



The mayoral candidates then got three minutes to speak to the questions.

During the evening clip boards had been circulating for the audience to record questions. These were put into a colourful hat and drawn randomly and put to candidates on the spot, with 30 seconds to answer. This avoided audience members soap-boxing, provided a fair process for the questions to be heard, and ensured concerns of the less visible in the audience were not overlooked.

The MC read a question and addressed it to one candidate at a time. This provided some tension and excitement which the audience enjoyed.

Throughout the evening the audience was asked NOT to applaud in the traditional manner as this can often take up quite some time and saps energy for some. Instead they were encouraged to raise and wave their arms, (applause in sign language), whenever they supported a speaker's notion. This provided audience movement and energy, keeping the event interactive, almost like a Mexican wave at times. It was also useful for audience members to see how others in the audience felt about certain issues.

The meeting ran exactly to time, finishing at 9.15pm as dictated by the running sheet. The core team of five volunteers worked together supporting each other in their various roles including meeting and greeting, liaising with the choir and dancers, looking after the candidates' needs, collecting koha (donations) for venue hire etc. Two microphones were utilised making for smooth transitions between speakers, and the questions put to candidates were projected in large format onto a wall for all to see.

The community was then invited to stay for supper which had been provided by volunteers. At least 60 people stayed on and engaged in lively discussion which was encouraging for the organisers to see. The last person to have their hands in the dishes sink at the end of the night was the youngest of the candidates, a 19 year old man, who stayed on to help clean up. Volunteers and the community pitched in to clean the hall whilst sipping on brandy to celebrate a good time had by all.

Feedback was unanimously positive. One participant said "As soon as I stepped into the room and saw the circle I thought this is going to be interesting. I felt included. It was a breath out. Inclusion."

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