

Measurement & Evaluation

Community Voices for Social Good

We need a more systemic and accessible way for underserved individuals to share their beliefs, insights, and experiences directly with policymakers, nonprofits, and their own communities.

By [Perla Ni](#) | Dec. 9, 2015

Large corporations like Coca-Cola and Nike know a lot about their target audiences. That's because each year they invest tens of millions of market research dollars into gaining insights about their products from the best source: current and potential consumers. This includes those living in low-income communities, as many corporations target their products to the needs of those who have less.

Nike, for instance, before it launches new shoes, recruits women to try them and provide detailed diaries of their experiences wearing them every day. It then collects and analyzes the diary information to refine the shoes' features. They also analyze the attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests of their audience to tailor marketing messages to the people they want to reach.

Compare this to the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

Almost every foundation, nonprofit, and legislator wants to hear from the people their policies and programs impact most. We talk about seeking out and listening to the voices of those we're working to serve and empower. But in general, as a sector, we do a woefully inadequate job of getting regular, real-time insights and feedback from the beneficiaries of nonprofit and philanthropic support. Even when nonprofits do collect data, it's often months, sometimes years, later—long after the window to make changes to programs or take other action has passed.

Engaging and getting insights from underserved, low-income communities in particular is not easy. We've learned this the hard way through our 1,000-plus hours of work doing exactly that. It's

expensive to reach people in low-income communities—they move more often, may have less time, aren't online as much, may be less trusting of surveyors, and often have language limitations.

If we want dynamic data and feedback to create public policies that work, we need to learn how to find and access the opinions, ideas, and feelings of low-income people. And to get real-time, on-demand insights, we first need to overcome the structural barriers to communication and knowledge.

How do we do this? First, nonprofit and philanthropic leaders need culturally appropriate, simple, affordable, and convenient channels to hear from underserved communities. Second, in this era of pay for success, it's important that we capture the insights and stories of underserved people in the form of quantitative *and* qualitative data. This helps get beyond the anecdotes and provides policymakers with a broader perspective. Third, we can use technology in a culturally appropriate way that enables the community to participate in framing the discussion, identifying the critical issues, raising questions important to them, and saying what resources they want.

Community Voices for Common Good

Imagine the powerful improvements possible if foundations, city and county agencies, nonprofits, and affected communities could get on-demand insights and feedback directly from individuals and low-income families about issues such as health, education, job training, and childcare services. Imagine if they could do this quickly, affordably, and easily.

One of our projects at GreatNonprofits, [Citizen Insights](#), is working to make this possible by creating the largest and most easily accessible aggregation of “community voices for good.” We've already recruited 800-plus individuals, mostly people of color living in low-income communities, to provide ongoing comments and feedback (what's going on today, what local residents think about certain social services, what ideas they have) via text messaging, or SMS. These individuals' demographic and geographic information will provide granular data by neighborhood, age, gender, and other attributes, allowing policymakers, nonprofits, and foundations to easily take the pulse of the community on-demand.

We decided to use SMS for this project, because it is the most accessible technology; most people have a mobile phone, most people have used texting, and it doesn't require reliable Internet. Also,

according to Mobile Commons, households with an annual income under \$30,000 **send twice as many texts** as those with incomes over \$75,000. It is also an effective tool for engagement; 99 percent of all texts are opened, and the average response time is 90 seconds. In an SMS survey of more than 800 Californians on health issues, most of whom were low-income people and people of color, we saw a survey completion rate of 93 percent, and yielded high-quality data that we were able to share online and with legislators.

We also shared the data with respondents to help inform and empower the community, and to encourage them to continue participating. We can't overestimate the importance of ongoing feedback, as getting longitudinal data and seeing changes over time is essential to improving programs.

Fortunately, we aren't alone in leveraging technology to engage constituents. **GovDelivery**, for example, provides SMS tools for cities to get feedback on planning decisions. These opportunities to hear the voices of ordinary people are vitally important for both nonprofits and governments.

Authentic Community Engagement

The goal of Citizen Insights is authentic engagement with communities of underserved people. To do this correctly, we use traditional face-to-face methods in addition to the SMS.

We have learned that one of the first steps of establishing the ongoing participation of low-income people is to listen to their stories. In California, we were interested in the health experiences of people who recently enrolled or tried to enroll in health insurance, and conducted more than 100 short, open-ended interviews with people on the street—at bus stops, at the DMV, and in front of supermarkets—to understand their questions and concerns, and hear their stories about enrolling in health insurance.

We then made adjustments to our project based on community feedback. For instance, we created outreach flyers for the “health care survey” and asked people if they would take it. Many declined. We probed further and heard, “I don't have health care. So I won't be useful to your survey.” When we changed our outreach message to “If you don't yet have health care, or have health care ... ” participation increased significantly.

We can also harness the community’s wisdom to help frame questions. This is not new—“community-based” and “participatory” research in the 1960s were based on a similar principle. Connect by 25, a nonprofit in Florida helping foster kids, employs this principle when they invite foster youths to write questions for their statewide survey.

Restoring Dialogue and Hope

On-the-ground, community-based research can fuel innovation, including ideation and concept-testing for new services; it also uncovers motivations, needs, preferences, and desires of the people we seek to help.

There have been, and continue to be, many efforts to better engage people from low-income communities. But we need a more systemic and accessible way for these individuals to share their beliefs, insights, and experiences directly with policymakers, nonprofits, and their own communities. We believe SMS polling is a promising new method for driving this dialogue.

There’s so much frustration in underserved communities. People feel left out of the conversation and the opportunities in this era of growth. We can help restore hope, and bridge both the opportunity gap and the chasm separating decision-makers from communities simply by employing appropriate technology in continuous and culturally sensitive ways.



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