

## **Managing Unexpected Publics Online: The Challenge of Targeting Specific Groups with the Wide-Reaching Tool of the Internet**

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As Internet-based tactics become commonplace in public relations practice, targeting campaigns to specific publics becomes more challenging. The global reach of the Internet challenges a public relations practitioner's confidence that an online message targeted at a set of specific demographics will reach only the intended audience. Internet-based public relations campaigns can attract unexpected, or even unwanted, publics to a project or brand, and practitioners must be ready to manage these unexpected participants. This article examines unexpected publics that engaged an online public participation project focused on architectural design and transit planning. The project, which was targeted at everyday bus riders in Salt Lake City, Utah, attracted an international base of design professionals. These unexpected publics, who learned of the project through the Internet, caused global-local and amateur-professional tensions that complicated the outcomes of the project. Through website analytic data, user registration data on the website, and interviews with project participants, this article explores these tensions and offers practical advice for managing unexpected publics online.

Best practices in public relations (PR) assume a set of specific publics to which PR practitioners can target messages and forge brand relationships. At the same time, the centrality of new media technologies in many people's lives makes PR efforts via the Internet and other digital channels increasingly appealing. What happens, though, when these two assumptions collide? Online PR efforts, even those targeted to local or specific demographic groups operate on the global platform of the Internet, where unexpected—or even unwanted—publics may take interest in an organization's campaign or brand. What happens when an online PR campaign targeted at a specific group of people engages participants beyond the intended scope? How should PR practitioners react?

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In 2009, a website for the Next Stop Design project was launched at [www.NextStopDesign.com](http://www.NextStopDesign.com). A project funded by the U.S. Federal Transit Administration, Next Stop Design was intended as a test of the crowdsourcing model as an alternative, online public participation tool for a transit planning exercise. Crowdsourcing is a model that connects organizations and online communities to solve problems and produce goods. The purpose of Next Stop Design was to encourage people to submit bus stop shelter designs for a real bus stop transfer point in Salt Lake City, Utah. Participants could then vote on the designs, and the designs with the highest average scores at the conclusion of the project were declared the winners.

To build the online community—the crowd—necessary to drive the project, Next Stop Design was intentionally promoted to a local Utah audience through traditional channels, new media channels, and word of mouth. This made sense given the local scope of the bus stop design challenge. As the competition went on, however, many international participants were drawn to the project, and most U.S. participants were not from the state of Utah. The three winning designs were from designers in Greece, India, and South Dakota. Furthermore, the project targeted amateurs who frequently rode the bus rather than professional architects and designers, since the “energy of the creative amateur” was supposedly what made crowdsourcing work in other cases. Again, this did not happen; most of those who submitted designs turned out to be professionally trained in architecture or design.

I argue that the wide-reaching tool of the Internet complicates—and sometimes undermines—the efforts of PR practitioners to reach specific publics, especially local publics. I support these claims with an examination of the Next Stop Design case as a whole as well as Google Analytics site traffic data, user registration data, and interviews conducted with 23 Next Stop Design participants. Findings suggest that a global-local tension and an amateur-professional tension in the project not only challenged assumptions about how crowdsourcing works but also challenge the idea that online PR efforts can ever be reliably targeted to specific groups. My recommendations for PR practitioners seeking to engage publics online include reconsidering what defines an online public in the first place and whether we should be distressed when unexpected publics get involved. I also make recommendations for practitioners and teachers of PR to take seriously the art of *online community management*—a little-understood, rarely taught, and rapidly growing niche in PR.

### **Targeting Publics and the Reach of New Media Technologies**

PR practitioners identify distinct publics when planning a campaign. These publics may be defined by demographic or psychographic features, geographic location, behaviors, or other badges of identity. Assuming discrete categories of people is at the core of PR practice, and over the years there has been a push among PR scholars and practitioners to acknowledge different publics in the plural sense rather than a monolithic public audience to which messages are broadcast. Tailoring messages and setting different goals to fit different publics is the act of *targeting* publics. It is simple enough to target several publics in a PR campaign, but the underlying assumptions are that (1) these publics exist in a real form, and (2) PR practitioners control what messages reach these publics and how.

New media technologies, such as the Internet, often have global reach. Provided there are no restrictions placed on websites by governments and Internet service providers, content that exists on the Internet is accessible to anyone with a connection. This means that, although messages might be targeted to a few specific publics online, the messages can be easily replicated and spread to people who are not of interest to an organization. The reach of new media complicates the ability of PR practitioners to target publics, compromises the amount of control practitioners have over messaging, and blurs the boundaries of what defines publics in the first place.

### **The Next Stop Design Case**

With funding from the U.S. Federal Transit Administration and in cooperation with the Utah Transit Authority (UTA), the Next Stop Design website was launched June 5, 2009, at [www.NextStopDesign.com](http://www.NextStopDesign.com) (see Figure 1). The goal of the project was to test the crowdsourcing model as an online public participation tool in a transit planning context, and the specific task was for participants to submit and select designs for their ideal bus stop shelter. This design challenge was focused on an actual busy transfer stop in the UTA system in Salt Lake City.

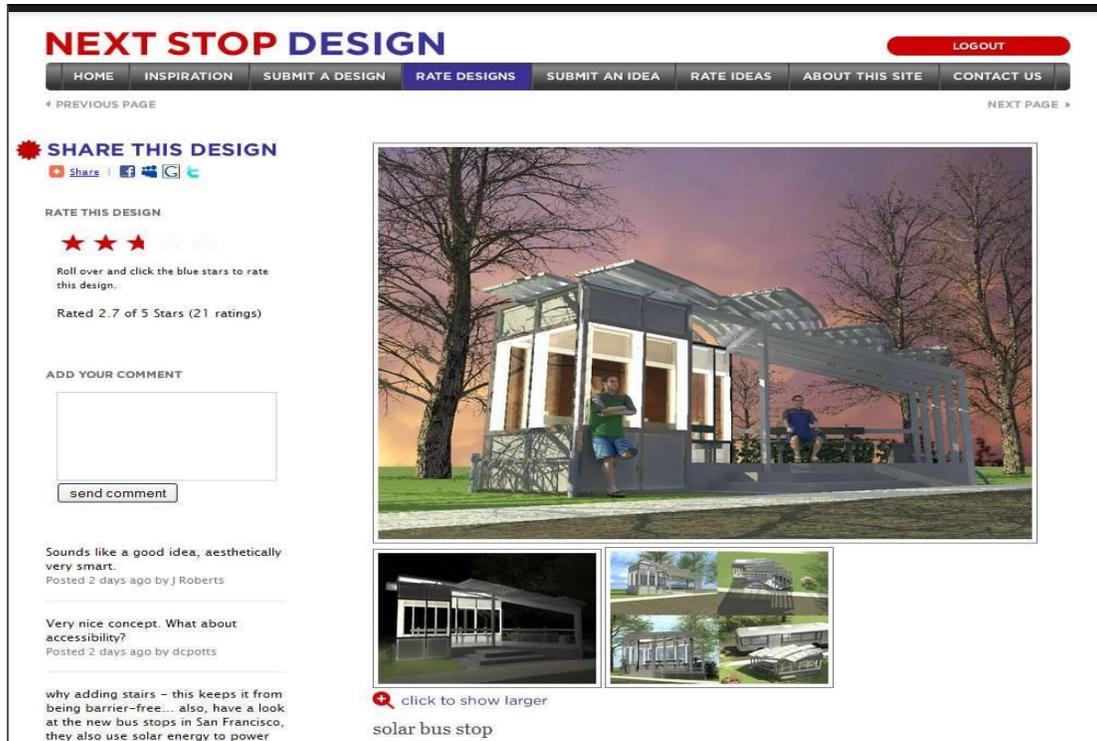
Crowdsourcing is an online, distributed problem-solving and production model that leverages the collective intelligence of an online community for a specific purpose (Brabham, 2008; Howe, 2006a, 2008). It is a blend of bottom-up open innovation and traditional, top-down management whereby organizations task individuals with producing ideas and goods for the organization's benefit. Successful cases of crowdsourcing in for-profit contexts include T-shirt company [Threadless.com](http://Threadless.com) (Howe, 2006b), scientific research and development clearinghouse [InnoCentive.com](http://InnoCentive.com) (Lakhani, Jeppesen, Lohse, & Panetta, 2007), and user-generated advertising contests (Brabham, 2009a) and films (Lietsala & Joutsen, 2007). Crowdsourcing has also been applied to government affairs in the case of the Peer to Patent project (Noveck, 2006), a platform for the efficient discovery of "prior art" in patent applications. The Next Stop Design project was an attempt to extend the power of crowdsourcing into other government contexts, specifically the fields of urban planning and public participation (Brabham, 2009b).



**Figure 1. Screen shot of the home page of [NextStopDesign.com](http://NextStopDesign.com).**

On the Next Stop Design site, participants could create a free account by completing a registration process that included questions about past bus ridership, past public participation in urban planning issues, and demographic information. Once registered, participants could submit designs for the Salt Lake City bus stop shelter. Registered participants could also comment and rate each submitted design based on a scale of 1 to 5 (see Figure 2). At the end of the project, on September 25, 2009, the three designs with the highest average scores were declared the winning designs (see Figure 3).

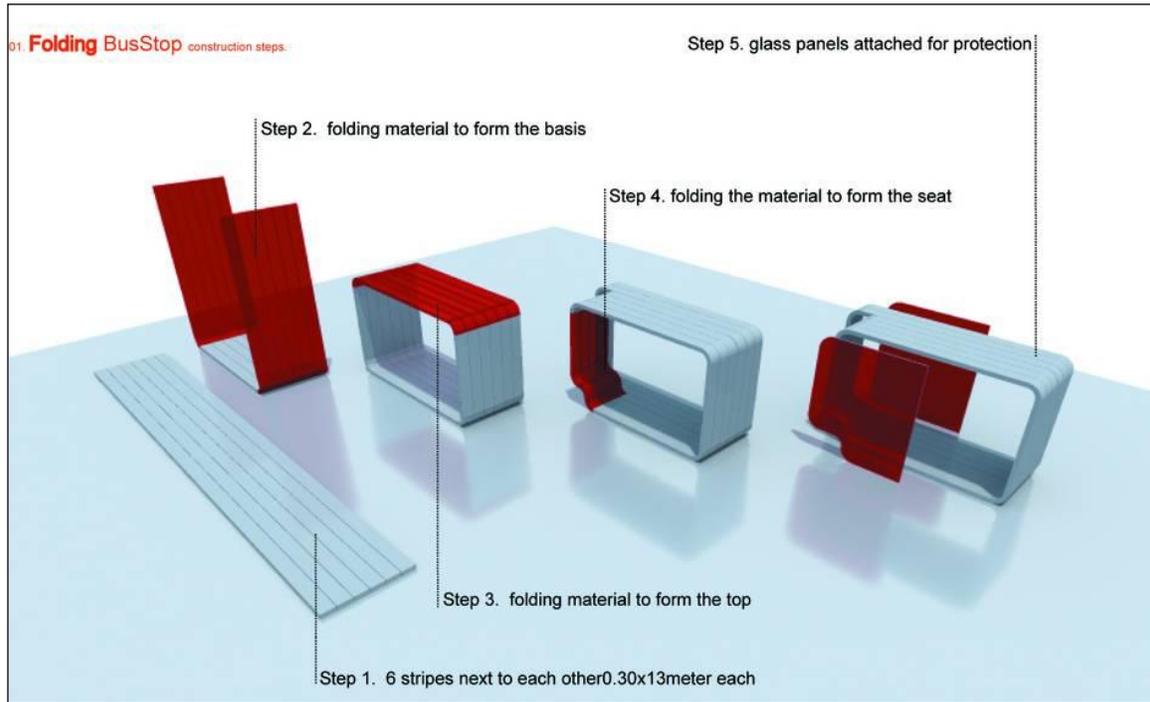
To build the online community from scratch, the project team executed a PR plan that involved a mix of traditional media relations tactics, online tactics, and word of mouth. The goal was to generate a large base of participants from Salt Lake City, or Utah more generally, and to reach other interested participants in the Intermountain West and the broader United States. The team assumed that promoting the project in Utah would make for an online community of mostly Utah residents, although the team also assumed that there would be a small amount of interest from people outside the state given the national scope of the funding source for the project.



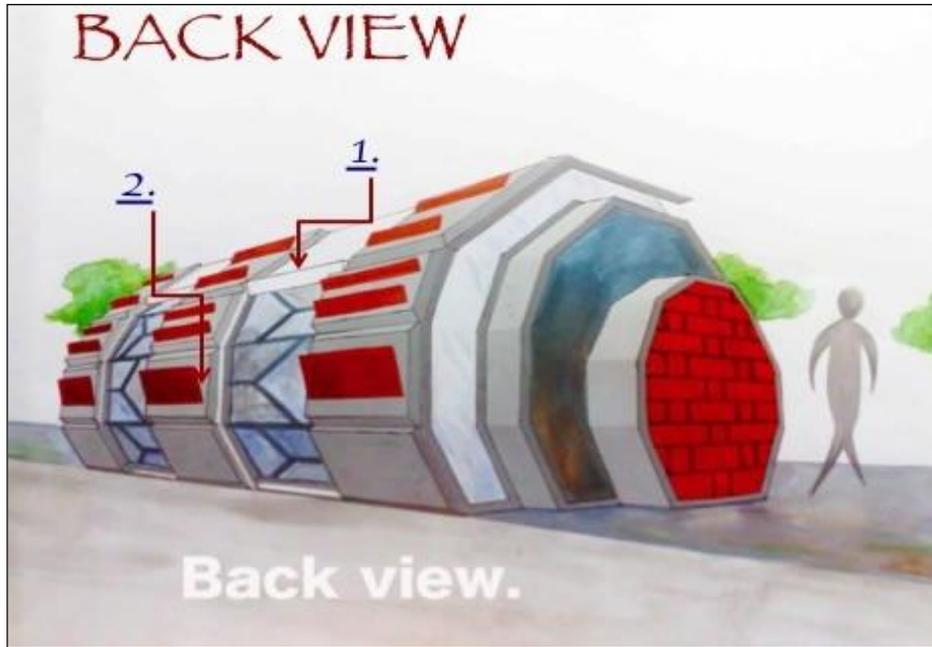
**Figure 2. Screen shot of a rating page for a user-submitted bus stop shelter design.**

A media kit was sent to Utah newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, and locally focused blogs prior to the launch of the site and during the first few weeks of the competition. Despite thorough distribution in the Utah market, only the *Deseret News* newspaper in Salt Lake City covered the project, and only in the last two days of the competition, despite several personal connections the project team had with local media. Press releases were also sent to niche trade publications in the urban planning and transit planning field nationally, including some academic association newsletters; some of these press releases resulted in a modest amount of coverage. A technology contact at the White House was also sent a press release about the project, and the White House blog ran a brief mention and link to the project around the time of the project's launch. From this exposure, a talk radio program in Washington, D.C., conducted an interview with the project team around the same time. Facebook and Twitter accounts were created for the project as well. The Facebook account had more than 100 friends at its peak, and the Twitter account had 280 followers at its peak. Members of the project team also promoted the competition on their own Twitter and Facebook accounts and in person to generate interest by word of mouth. Some of these in-person announcements occurred in large college classes taught by members of the team, and announcements were sent to department chairs and electronic mailing lists of local colleges' urban planning, design, communication, and architecture programs.

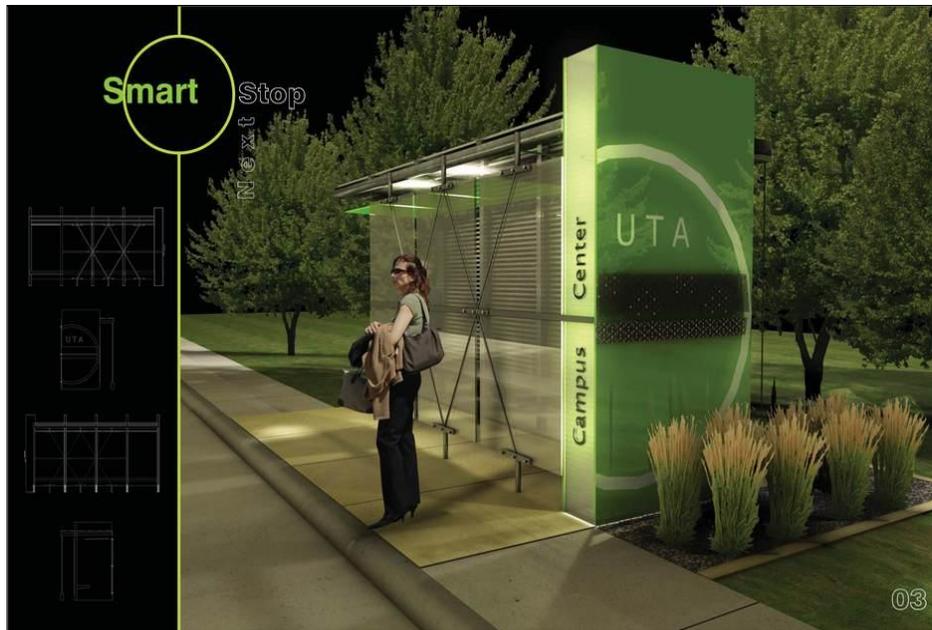
### Top Three Winning Designs



**Figure 3a: First place—“Folding Bus Stop.”**



*Figure 3b: Second place—"Stop to Move."*



*Figure 3c: Third place—"Smart Stop."*

A few weeks after the launch of the website, an architecture blog based in New York City picked up news of the competition and included a small mention in its calendar of upcoming design competitions. This small mention quickly snowballed, until more than a dozen architecture and design websites, many with very large followings, wrote about the project. The most significant moment of coverage for Next Stop Design occurred when the official blog of Google SketchUp, a free three-dimensional (3-D) modeling tool, wrote a story about the project at the end of June 2009. Its readership—fans of the modeling software—no doubt viewed the competition as a chance to enter their own 3-D-rendered bus stop shelter designs. Traffic to the Next Stop Design site spiked considerably after this write-up. Media mentions of the project were tracked using Google Alerts keywords and manual searches online and in news databases. Eventually, stories were written about the project in German, Dutch, and Spanish on websites worldwide.

### **Methods**

The methods used to analyze the global-local tensions in the project included Google Analytics scripts and user registration data. Google Analytics scripts were appended to each page of the Next Stop Design website. These scripts, a free service of Google, allowed the project team to track basic traffic and user data on the site, such as the numbers of visitors; pages viewed; referring sites, search engines, and search keywords; and geographic location of visitors. Like even the most expensive and sophisticated analytics packages, Google Analytics is imperfect, but it provided perhaps the best available approximation of user behavior on the website. Analytics scripts are imperfect because a small percentage of web users employ script-blocking software on their web browsers or use browsers that do not support scripting, which prevents the analytics service from tracking the user on the site. However, few web users, estimated at no more than about 2% in October 2010 (Zakas, 2010), use browsers that block or do not support scripting. Google Analytics also has some quirks with its geographic location tracking that separate distinct national subdivisions from parent countries for discrete tracking. For instance, Guam and Puerto Rico are tracked as separate from the United States, Taiwan and Hong Kong are tracked as separate from China, and Greenland and the Faroe Islands are tracked as separate from the Kingdom of Denmark.

During the registration process, participants were asked to supply information that included a geographic location. Thus, registered participants form a subset of all of the general traffic tracked by Google Analytics, except that registered participants took a more active role than casual visitors.

To analyze the amateur-professional tensions in the project, interviews with Next Stop Design participants were conducted via instant messenger (IM) programs. Conducting interviews via IM programs was the most appropriate way to study the Next Stop Design community, and online interviewing methods have begun to receive thorough scholarly treatment and support (e.g., Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004; Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2004; Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Lange, 2008; Mann & Stewart, 2000; O'Connor & Madge, 2001; Opdenakker, 2006; Stieger & Reips, 2008).

Participants were recruited from those who indicated a willingness to be contacted for a follow-up interview during the registration process on the Next Stop Design website. Out of 3,187 registered users, 950 (29.8%) indicated that they were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. A purposive

sample was sought for interviewing so that those who were interviewed represented the whole of the registered user pool in terms of past public transportation ridership, previous public participation meeting attendance, level of involvement on the Next Stop Design site (i.e., whether one submitted designs or merely cast a vote on someone else's design), and geographic and demographic mix. Twenty-three participants were interviewed in March and April 2010, well beyond the typical 12 interviews needed for theme saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Table 1 describes the 23 participants interviewed.

To schedule an interview via an IM program of their choosing, participants were sent an e-mail to the address they supplied during registration. Interviews remained true to the conventions of instant messaging, with an informal and courteous tone. Participants were asked a number of questions relating to their participation on the site, their background, and questions relevant to the present article. Questions included "What is your profession?" and "What is your background and schooling in architecture, design, or planning?" Some questions asked about whether participants viewed the project as inclusive, open, and accessible.

There was not a rigid plan for the order or wording of questions. The interviews were semi-structured and proceeded like natural conversations, where themes emerged through questions and specific probes rather than proceeded like a survey with multiple-choice responses. Broad themes were identified on the fly as a way to direct the line of questioning to more specific probes. In a process similar to what Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe, emergent thematic coding was performed on the 83 single-spaced pages of automatically generated, time-stamped IM transcripts. I made marginal notes identifying relevant words, phrases, and passages.

These notes were grouped into clusters of meaning, and the clusters were distilled into themes. This process resembled a discourse analytic approach to the interview transcript texts. As discourse analysis "emphasizes the role of language in the construction of social reality" (Talja, 1999, p. 460), this seemed a fitting approach to interrogate amateurism and professionalism, which are themselves socially constructed concepts (Ritzer, 1975; Stebbins, 1992; Strychacz, 1993).

### **A Global-Local Tension**

Despite targeting PR efforts to a local audience for the Next Stop Design project, only a slight majority of visitors to the site (53.7%) were from the United States. Among all registered users, 45.4% were from the United States. And only 3.6% of U.S. registered users were from Utah; most were from New York, California, and Texas. It was a decidedly nonlocal crowd driving the site. Table 2 describes Next Stop Design's basic site traffic data based on the analytic scripts, and Table 3 describes Next Stop Design's 3,187 registered users.

The international participants on the site were an unexpected public, and, to a degree, somewhat unwanted. The goal of the project was to bring local input to bear on a local design issue. The local focus of such a project follows the ideals of deliberative democratic practice (Noveck, 2003) and public participation, drawing upon the "local knowledge" crucial to the making of public plans that can most widely address the diverse needs of citizens (Corburn, 2003). Thus, the design input of someone from

another country on a public space in Salt Lake City is inherently undemocratic in that the foreign participant is providing input on an issue in which he or she is not a stakeholder. The likely regular user of the UTA system should have the most say in what his or her bus stop looks like, not someone who may once in a lifetime, if ever, patronize the UTA bus system.

**Table 1. Basic Information About Interview Subjects.**

Participant*	Sex	Age <sup>†</sup>	Hometown	Public transit use frequency	Ever attended a traditional public meeting?	Number of designs submitted	Number of votes cast
A	M	47	Dublin, Ireland	More than once a week	Yes	1	1
B	F	52	Olympia, WA, USA	Every day	No	0	2
C	M	25	Istanbul, Turkey	Every day	No	1	12
D	M	33	Santa Rosa, CA, USA	Every day	Yes	2	8
E	M	26	Ft. Worth, TX, USA	Not used in the past year	No	0	1
F	M	30	Beijing, China	Every day	No	0	48
G	M	34	Riverton, UT, USA	Yearly	No	0	0
H	M	23	Salisbury, MD, USA	More than once a week	No	1	36
I	F	36	Baton Rouge, LA, USA	Yearly	Yes	0	3
J	M	23	Kansas City, MO, USA	Monthly	No	0	0
K	M	21	Honeoye Falls, NY, USA	Monthly	No	0	11
L	F	26	Buenos Aires, Argentina	Every day	No	0	1
M	M	34	Brooklyn, NY, USA	Every day	No	1	37
N	M	39	San José de Guanipa, Venezuela	Monthly	Yes	3	6
O	M	28	Delmar, NY, USA	Every day	No	0	12
P	M	23	West Jordan, UT, USA	More than once a week	Yes	1	0
Q	M	30	Los Angeles, CA, USA	Monthly	No	1	2
R	M	37	Bhopal, India	Yearly	No	2	1
S	F	21	Elkton, MD, USA	Yearly	No	0	1
T	M	40	Thessaloniki, Greece	Once a week	No	0	1
U	M	19	Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina	More than once a week	No	1	0
V	M	54	Ardmore, PA, USA	More than once a week	Yes	0	4
W	M	29	Thessaloniki, Greece	More than once a week	No	1	71

\* Letters have been used to represent participant names to protect individuals' identities.  
<sup>†</sup> Participant's age at the time of the competition's closing on September 25, 2009.

**Table 2. Basic Traffic Data from Next Stop Design.**

<b>Basic Site Traffic</b>	
Site visits	29,855
Page views	316,141 (10.6 pages viewed per visit)
<b>Site Visits by Geography</b>	
Countries/territories visiting	127
Top countries in terms of visitors	United States (16,045 visits; 53.7% of all visits) United Kingdom (1,920 visits; 6.4% of all visits) India (1,174 visits; 3.9% of all visits) Greece (991 visits; 3.3% of all visits) Canada (897 visits; 3.0% of all visits)
U.S. states visiting	50 (plus D.C.)
Top U.S. states in terms of visitors	New York (3,379 visits; 21% of all U.S. visits) California (2,245 visits; 14.0% of all U.S. visits) Utah (1,250 visits; 7.8% of all U.S. visits) Texas (778 visits; 4.8% of all U.S. visits) Louisiana (745 visits; 4.6% of all U.S. visits)
Cities in Utah visiting	29
Top Utah cities in terms of visitors	Salt Lake City (716 visits; 57.3% of all Utah visits) Midvale (380 visits; 30.4% of all Utah visits) Orem (20 visits; 1.6% of all Utah visits) Provo (20 visits; 1.6% of all Utah visits) Logan (17 visits; 1.4% of all Utah visits)

For a similar reason, weather conditions also matter for this specific bus stop. Residents of Salt Lake City know that the city is an arid desert in summer and home to “the greatest snow on earth” (“Ski Utah,” n.d.) in winter. Temperatures drop from sweltering to chilly when the sun sets, thunderclouds roll over the mountains and out over the Salt Flats quickly, and snow can fall in feet. Ideally, a resident familiar with these fickle weather conditions should design a bus stop shelter for Salt Lake City, because he or she would inherently *know* what it is like to walk the notoriously long blocks of the city and wait for a bus under a shelter. Would the typical Moroccan, Indian, Finn, or Brazilian design an all-weather bus stop shelter the way someone from Salt Lake City would?

**Table 3. Registered User Data from Next Stop Design.**

<b>Registered Users, Designs, and Votes</b>	
Registered users	3,187
Bus stop designs submitted	260
Total votes cast in the contest	15,276
Fraudulent votes cast	4,218 (27.6% of all votes)
Legitimate votes cast	11,058
<b>Registered Users by Geography</b>	
Registered users from the United States	1,448 (45.4% of all registered users)
Registered users from Utah	52 (3.6% of U.S. registered users)
<b>Registered Users by Race and Age</b>	
Racial/ethnic breakdown of U.S. registered users	White, not Hispanic (935 users; 64.6% of U.S. registered users) Prefer not to disclose or left blank (225 users; 15.5% of U.S. registered users) Hispanic or Latino (129 users; 8.9% of U.S. registered users) Asian or Pacific Islander (73 users; 5.0% of U.S. registered users) Multiracial (42 users; 2.9% of U.S. registered users) Black or African American (21 users; 1.5% of U.S. registered users) Other race/ethnicity (15 users; 1.0% of U.S. registered users) American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian (8 users; 0.6% of U.S. registered users)
Racial/ethnic breakdown of Utah registered users	White, not Hispanic (43 users; 82.7% of Utah registered users) Prefer not to disclose or left blank (4 users; 7.7% of Utah registered users) Asian or Pacific Islander (2 users; 3.8% of Utah registered users) Hispanic or Latino (1 user; 1.9% of Utah users) Multiracial (1 user; 1.9% of Utah users) Other race/ethnicity (1 user; 1.9% of Utah users)
Age range of registered users	13-85 years old
Age breakdown of registered users	< 20 years old (9% of all registered users) 20-29 years old (49% of all registered users) 30-39 years old (21% of all registered users) > 40 years old (21% of all registered users)
<b>Registered Users by Ridership and Prior Public Participation Experience</b>	
Rode the bus "more than once a week" or "every day"	48%
Rode the bus at least once a week	57%
Had never attended a public participation meeting before	68.5%

### **An Amateur-Professional Tension**

Based on the interviews, most of the participants in this study—16 of 23—were in the architecture field as practicing licensed architects, intern architects seeking licensure, and architecture teachers. Nonarchitects participating in this study included an electrical engineer, a surveyor, graphic designers, and a computer programmer, and many of these people mentioned that they had studied architecture in college. In other words, nearly everyone interviewed for this study was in some way associated with design, architecture, or engineering. Considering the largest spikes in traffic to the site occurred in response to major architecture competition blogs picking up news of Next Stop Design, the fact that most participants on the site were professional architects is not surprising.

Some of the first designs submitted to the site were pencil sketches on paper, cleanly drawn and effective at conveying an idea but amateurish. As soon as the first 3-D-modeled design was submitted, however, no more amateurish sketches were submitted. From that point, only professional-looking drawings, architectural specs, and 3-D renderings appeared in the competition. Effectively, amateurs were scared off by the presence of professional designs. Although the high-quality input was welcome, these designs turned away the amateur input that was sought by the project team. After all, it is difficult to imagine someone being comfortable submitting a napkin sketch to a competition overrun by 3-D renderings, as Participant I suggests.

Participant I: There was a definite range of proposals—however, I can imagine that once architects/designers started uploading their ideas, it might have been a bit intimidating for non-designers. . . . It doesn't make for a truly equitable playing ground.

Some of the participants seemed to welcome the inclusion of the early amateurish sketches in the competition as a sign that the competition was truly open and diverse.

Participant W: My general view is that the competition had almost everything, amateur to professional design, and that was very interesting. More than that it was obvious that the projects came from different design backgrounds and the multicultural [presence] of the competition was the strongest point.

But some participants seemed to disregard the amateurish contributions as not competitive or as childish. On the topic of earlier entries in the competition, Participant O assumed they were made by children.

Participant O: It was interesting to see the wide range of submissions—especially seeing children getting involved in the design process.

Participants L and U both remarked that allowing nonprofessionals to even vote on winning designs, which was the point of the project, was unfair and that the decision making should be left up to a jury of expert architects. Even Participant O, despite his appreciation for the participation of “children” in the competition, felt that an expert jury was necessary to make the competition worthwhile. The sentiment that professional architectural input, whether through design or voting, was necessary in this

project was prominent. The number of design professionals engaged in the project, as well as their opinion that the project needed professional input or judging, did not square with the intent of the project, which was to bring in regular, amateur input.

### **Managing Unexpected Publics Online**

Unexpected publics are not necessarily detrimental to a campaign. Since the purpose of the Next Stop Design project was to reach a local Utah audience of regular bus riders (who were not necessarily architects), it was a bit disappointing to see the competition flooded with designs from professional architects outside of the state of Utah and outside of the United States. The project did, however, reach new people, bringing much creative energy to bear on a local problem of bus stop shelter design in Salt Lake City. Though many of the shelters in the competition may not have been practical given Salt Lake City's unique weather circumstances or its ridership, the shelter designs nonetheless added flavor to the competition; a diversity of perspectives; and a rich variety of colors, styles, and materials. Also, most of the designs were *good*—attractive, professional looking, and serious contenders worth examining. Without the diverse perspectives of international participants and without the skill of professional architects, the level of designs in the competition may not have risen as high. Ultimately, the value of the unexpected publics in this project—the professional and the non-Utahan publics—depends on how the project's goals are viewed. One goal of Next Stop Design was to test crowdsourcing as an alternative public participation method. Given public participation's principled connection to democracy, egalitarianism, and local stakeholders, these unexpected publics were a bit unwelcome. However, other goals of Next Stop Design were to host an open call for design ideas, attract a collection of great designs, and feature a diversity of opinion on the site. In this regard, the unexpected publics were a welcome addition to the project. Retroactive goal shifting to make sense of a project, however, is not ideal PR practice.

Rather, PR practitioners must be ready to manage unexpected publics in any online venture, regardless of whether a project turns out well. Some unexpected publics are certainly unwanted publics, and brands frequently run the risk of being seized by malicious online communities. What follows is a list of tips for PR practitioners attempting to target specific groups online and manage unexpected publics when they arise. These tips are derived primarily from the Next Stop Design case, but many academic (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009) and industry (Faber, 2012; "Like This," 2011; "Marketing's Biggest," 2011; Richards, 2011; V. Taylor, 2010) appraisals of successful and unsuccessful social media campaigns support these recommendations.

### ***Do Not Assume Your Public***

We tend to transfer what we know about the offline world onto the online world, but this is a mistake. To assume that an online community based on a website for North Carolina dog lovers is the same audience as those who attend dog shows in North Carolina is misguided. The website, no matter its specificity and appeals to a certain geographic location, may not provide the best avenue for reaching that public. Except in rare cases when extensive offline verification is required to join an online community, websites are open places, and people gravitate to certain online communities for a number of reasons. A

website for a state's dog-loving population might be a good approximation of the state's actual dog-loving community, but it is not exactly the same. Remembering that offline publics do not translate to online publics in a one-to-one way is important for devising PR strategies to grow and leverage online communities in PR campaigns. In some cases, there is no online equivalent to an offline community, and online PR strategies need to grapple with the definition of a target public at the outset.

### ***Use Offline Tools for Online Projects***

It seems counterintuitive, but word of mouth, community relations, local media efforts, and other offline tactics may be better ways to target specific publics for online activities than online tactics. When a message is sent through social media channels and sent to national and international news sites and blogs, it is disseminated widely, perhaps more widely than the PR practitioner intended. Aggregator sites can accelerate the spread of information across websites as well. Targeted offline efforts cannot guarantee that a message does not end up circulated internationally (anyone in the offline public can take the message to the Internet), but offline tactics offer the best way to at least initially target a narrower public.

### ***Use Filters to Give Different Privileges and Weight to Different Publics***

If a PR campaign involves bringing publics to a website to interact with each other, submit content, or provide feedback, then the site can be designed to give the PR practitioner maximum control over user behavior and data. Specifically, a website may require a user to register for free with a valid e-mail address to participate on the site. In this registration process, users can provide data such as ZIP codes, demographic information, and answers to a short survey. Based on these data, the PR practitioner can devise a number of filters or permissions for different groups of users. For example, if a website is created to solicit suggestions for musical acts to invite to a city's annual free concert series, the concert organizers may want to privilege the suggestions from local residents over those from outside the city, or they may choose to disallow suggestions from outsiders entirely. Based on the ZIP code attached to each user, one resident's suggestion might count as, say, five votes for a musical act, while a nonresident's suggestion might count as one vote. In the end, the voices of those living in the city that will host the concert series will ring louder. Any number of rules and data points can be designed into a system, and even passive data points, such as geo-IP address data of visitors to a website, rather than active data captured in a registration form, can be used to determine levels of access. The architecture of a site can help manage the access and impact of unexpected publics in an online campaign.

### ***Track and Respond***

Never do anything in PR without a plan to evaluate it. This standard PR practice is also true for online PR efforts, and a tracking plan can help a PR practitioner respond effectively to both intended and unexpected publics. Website analytics packages, such as the free Google Analytics service, provide a wealth of data. These data include referral sources, so PR practitioners can determine what other websites are linking to their client site and what keywords users search for to find the site. By identifying referral sites, PR practitioners can get early notifications of what other sites, which might be far outside the campaign's target, are directing visitors to the client website. Practitioners can then use this intelligence to

prepare accordingly for future unexpected visitors to the site or prepare for a potential commandeering of the brand if the referral site is hostile.

### ***Make a Plan for Handling Varying Degrees of the Unexpected***

PR practitioners must have a crisis PR plan in place to manage a variety of unexpected publics and issues that arise with online campaigns. Unexpected publics may turn out to be beneficial to a campaign, pushing it in unexpectedly positive directions. Or unexpected publics may, on the whole, affect a campaign in both good and bad ways, as in the Next Stop Design case. But in some situations, unexpected publics may do harm to a campaign. There are many examples of online communities circulating negative messages about an organization in response to an online campaign. One recent example was the failed Twitter campaign of the Australian airline Qantas. Qantas launched its "Qantas Luxury" campaign in the fall of 2011, "asking people to describe their 'dream luxury in-flight experience'" on Twitter using the hashtag #QantasLuxury for the chance to win pajamas and toiletries (R. Taylor, 2011, para. 1). Just a few days before the campaign launch, Qantas and union workers "stopped contract talks . . . and customers were still smarting from the grounding of the entire fleet" ("Marketing's Biggest," 2011, para. 5). Angry Twitter users hijacked the hashtag, posting complaints about Qantas and generating negative media attention for the brand. Plans for handling these kinds of crises are crucial for PR practitioners. Crises, online or off, cannot be handled well on the fly, so it is best to plan for them in advance.

### ***Have an Online Community Manager***

Online campaigns are costly in terms of labor. A PR practitioner should be prepared to devote several hours per day to managing an online community and at least an hour a day to monitoring, analytics, and handling inquiries from a website. These duties may be performed by a dedicated online community manager or a social media manager, depending on the nature of the campaign. Social media managers can be on call to respond to tweets and other messages throughout the course of a day and can plan content postings days or weeks in advance. Online community managers likewise can monitor the chatter and activity on a website to proactively respond to issues that may arise in the community. In both cases, the media manager effectively monitors the pulse of an online community or social media stream, immersing himself or herself in the ongoing activity of publics. The more immersed and integrated in the community the manager is, the better he or she will be able to handle unexpected publics that may choose to engage a campaign.

### ***Toward Future Research and the Study of Online Community Management***

Future research in new media and PR is essential to develop best practices for using specific new media tools and for keeping pace with rapid technological development. This seems an obvious focus for PR practitioners, but relatively few researchers are developing best practices based on empirical research. More empirical studies about the use, performance, security, and purpose of individual new media tools are needed.

We need to change the way we think about publics online. Online publics are difficult to target, and offline tactics may be more effective at this task than online tactics. The Internet is a wide-reaching technology, and narrowly targeted PR efforts are difficult to execute online. The global-local and amateur-professional tensions that arose in the Next Stop Design case were not anticipated by the project's original research aims. Thus, more research into this online/offline dynamic would help PR practitioners develop more effective online campaigns and better anticipate unexpected publics.

Finally, as far behind as PR practitioners may feel in the digital landscape, always struggling to keep up on new media trends, PR students may be even further behind. PR professors are still exploring the best ways to teach long-term social media planning and online community management. Systematic study of the dynamics of online communities is desperately needed, as online community is one of the least empirically studied concepts in communication and PR. We know relatively little about how and why online communities form, how they are maintained, how they weather change and crisis, and why these communities care enough about brands and organizations to engage them and produce content for them. And just as this topic needs further study, it also needs to be taught in college PR curricula. Graduating students enter the workforce with a native understanding of social media but scant training in the strategic use of social media and online community.

### **Conclusion**

The Next Stop Design project provided an opportunity to study the involvement of unexpected, unintended publics in a PR campaign. Though targeted to a Utah audience of amateur, nonarchitect bus riders, the project quickly became dominated by participants from outside of the state of Utah and outside of the United States and by professionally trained architects. The project team did not anticipate this in light of PR efforts that seemed targeted to specific (local, amateur) publics. However, the wide-reaching tool of the Internet drew in many others beyond the project's intended audience. Site traffic, user registration, and interview data suggest that two tensions arose among Next Stop Design's participating publics: one between amateurs and professional architects and one between Utah citizens and outsiders.

In the end, Next Stop Design was not a failure because of the participation of unexpected publics, but their participation did distract from the project's overarching goal to focus on a specific city's transit needs. The project team learned that a locally targeted PR campaign that involves online messages may not stay confined to the intended local publics. From these experiences, it is suggested that PR practitioners follow the advice herein to better manage unexpected publics. This advice includes a counterintuitive focus on offline PR tactics, a commitment to tracking and analysis, and the use of dedicated online community and social media managers.

Finally, I suggest future empirical studies that more closely examine the dynamics of online communities and best practices associated with online community management. PR practitioners and PR students need training in these areas to better understand the unpredictable nature of online communications and to better prepare for managing unexpected publics in online campaigns.

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