

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Will Friedman, Ph.D., Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer,
Public Agenda**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA
Jan 27th, 2009**

Will Friedman on:

The American experience in citizen engagement on public policy issues

Part of the trick is to separate out the more technical dimensions of an issue like infrastructure from the truly public, political questions such as “Where do we invest our taxes?” “How do we prioritize public projects?” To get people to weigh in on the specifics of bridge reconstruction is a fool’s errand. To ask people whether it’s important enough to make a major investment in maintenance of an important bridge, or to make a choice between improving roadways and investing in new trains, for example--that’s a political question. That’s a question that affects people’s lives, that anybody can relate to, and people have different kinds of valid points of view. It’s not a technical issue. Part of the art of engaging the general public is figuring out what the right questions are, or the appropriate questions are. In general, we’re not very good as a society in creating the conditions that make it possible for the general public to have a productive discourse, even though there is the tradition of citizenship. But what instead tends to happen is that particular players with power and position try to spin the issue in their own way, to their own advantage—whether that’s an ideological advantage or an advantage in terms of their economic position. The public is being subjected to all sorts of informational or persuasion campaigns left and right, or they’re being kind of kept out of the issue altogether. It’s very rare that we would go out of our way to really figure out what would help the average citizen, and the collective citizenry of a community, to really understand the options here and the pros and cons of different directions that we might go on a public policy question, but that’s exactly the kind of work that needs to happen if people are to get involved and not just be pawns in the larger process. It’s rare but it’s very doable and people flock to it and appreciate when it is done.

The lack of serious public opinion research on infra

Infrastructure is an issue that’s not being heavily tracked by public opinion research. There’s a little bit of a dib and a dab there, but there’s not a great deal of knowledge. It’s also a complex subject. It’s sort of an overview concept for a lot of specific different kinds of things, and people may not relate to the abstraction of it, but they may relate to particulars of it very passionately depending on how they affect their lives. So there’s a lot to learn, is what would

be my bottom line...There may be ways of talking to people about these issues that are extremely engaging and compelling, and help them understand very quickly the significance of these issues for their lives, but we'd have to test that to really know. But I do agree that simply because there's not an uproar and a huge national movement about infrastructure—people aren't marching on the White House with infrastructure signs—that does not necessarily mean that people do not care about the issues. They probably do care about at least aspects of it.

Connecting with infra issues

Often times it's not a question of "they need this particular fact," or often time it's that it needs to be discussed in a way that they realize the ways in which it connects to their lives, things they care about. So there are informational elements, there are values elements, there are practical dimensions—"how does this connect to my life?" And I'm totally convinced that the way in which infrastructure is talked about is not a natural topic that people will naturally connect with, but it would be something that we could test, essentially, to see if you talked about it in different ways, if you broke it down into its constituent parts—around getting to work, or safety, in terms of important bridges or school buildings and so forth. As you talk about it in ways that connect people's lived experience, they could very well become much more engaged in the problems and possible solutions.

Challenges in generating dialogue about long-term issues

You can make an argument that infrastructure is a major issue and I'm persuaded, but there are many, many, many high priority issues that, as a community and a nation, we need to be attending to. So it *is* hard to figure out how to give everything its due. That's one piece of it. Secondly, long-term issues that tend to be harder to deal with than extremely immediate concerns. Infrastructure becomes an immediate concern when the bridge breaks, you know, then it's a immediate concern. When it hasn't broken, it's something that, you know, could happen, could be a problem, it's going to be a problem, but it's a little harder to get it up in the queue for those kinds of issues. An issue that has a related dynamic is the federal debt. The baby boom generation is going to drive the nation's finances further and further and further into the red, and it's going to happen over the next generation. People kind of get it, and it's possible, but it takes a little work to help them engage that because it's something that's happening over time. So, it's not supposed to be easy. It's a challenging...it's challenging to solve these problems, to help people prioritize and deal with them. In addition, the fact that people have not yet figured out how to talk about infrastructure in ways that are compelling and help people connect to what this means for our lives, very effectively—I mean, I try to resist reducing everything to "if we only knew how to communicate it better it would all be simple," but there is a real communications issue here in terms of talking about abstraction of this infrastructure concept as opposed to talking about very, very concrete things that

people can relate to in their day-to-day lives. So I think there's a number of things that make it a challenge, and that's the point of what you're trying to do, really, is to deal with the fact that it's not an easy issue to solve or to engage people on. It's one of the harder ones, and therefore it needs some special effort.

The goals of conducting public opinion research on infra

Do people care about it? How much do they care about it? What will it take to get them to care about it? We'd want to learn how people think and relate to this issue and to clarify how much of it is that they can't relate to the way experts talk about it vs. they simply don't care about it. Those are two different things, and we need to clarify that. And then we'd want to track how that evolves over time, whether in response to different kinds of information and different kinds of events they begin to care more or less. And we certainly would want to look at the way in which people respond to different kinds of solutions, different kinds of measures that can be taken to improve the infrastructure challenge that we face. So there's a whole series of things, but I think that would be a few of the key points.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**