

CARD SORTING



This Citizen Engagement Technique is part of a series that Cities of Service has created to help city leaders work with citizens to solve problems. To learn more and access additional techniques, visit citiesofservice.org.

Card Sorting¹ is a technique to help cities understand how citizens view various aspects of a service or initiative. The city provides citizens with a set of cards containing images or words that represent different steps or facets of the service or initiative. The citizens then sort the cards in order of importance or into logical groups.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Prior to implementing any citizen engagement technique, it is important to set goals and expectations, identify stakeholders, and more. For a checklist of steps you should take before you begin, please visit citiesofservice.org/techniques.

HOW TO LEAD A CARD SORTING SESSION:

1. Before meeting with citizens, develop a deck of cards specific to the service or initiative that is the focus of this engagement. Each card should represent a key feature or element with imagery, text, or both. For example, the cards can depict the steps in a grant application process, steps to access a service, or menu items from a website.
2. Welcome citizens to the meeting and remind them of the meeting purpose, the challenge they are helping to address, and how their input will be used.
3. Provide a deck of cards to each participant and ask them to sort the cards in a particular order, such as in order of importance, or into groupings that make logical sense to them.
4. Break the participants into groups of about five to eight.
5. Ask participants to share their card sequence or groupings and the rationale for their decisions with their small group.
6. Ask each small group to collectively agree on a sequence or grouping of the cards. The facilitator can decide whether to ask the smaller groups to come together, share their respective sequence or grouping, and agree on a sequence or grouping.
7. Invite participants to share any surprises or insights with the full group.
8. Thank citizens for their participation and remind them how they can stay up to date on the project's development.
9. Capture the lessons from the Card Sorting technique and integrate them into the final design.
10. Report what you've learned to citizens and explain how their input will be used by the city.



¹Adapted from "Card sorting: Defining related content categories" by Linnea Ann Williams. Stanford University Web Services blog. Accessed November 1, 2019. <https://swsblog.stanford.edu/blog/card-sorting-defining-related-content-categories>

EXAMPLE:

Chicago found that its 311 system was being underutilized. Instead of using 311 to report and track service complaints, residents were mostly using it to ask operators for information. The most common call to 311 was to ask, “When is Lollapalooza?” The city wanted to modernize the system to increase accessibility, accountability, and transparency. To do this, they focused their citizen engagement efforts on the 60% of 311 users who only used the system for information instead of placing service requests and on young adults who had little to no connection to city government or 311.

Chicago’s Director of Design, along with a local contractor, used Card Sorting to determine the best taxonomy for service requests in a new 311 online interface. They listed all the keywords city departments used to organize their work and printed each word on a card. During engagement sessions, citizens were asked to organize the cards in whatever way made the most sense to them and to set aside cards that were unclear or unfamiliar. For example, citizens grouped streets and sidewalks, potholes, street lights, sewers, traffic lights and signs, and vehicles/bicycles together.

These events did not produce a single consensus arrangement, but they generated significant insights into how the public associated different city services. Using these findings, the city was able to identify more natural groupings for service requests in the new interface.

For guidance on using this and other citizen engagement techniques, or to learn more about customizing solutions for your city, contact Cities of Service at info@citiesofservice.org.