

GEEK SPEAK »

Geek Speak: Colleen Hardwick, CEO of PlaceSpeak

by [Stephen Hui](#) on May 20th, 2011 at 1:46 PM

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Colleen Hardwick is the founder, president, and CEO of PlaceSpeak.

STEPHEN HUI

Colleen Hardwick says many people have lost faith in the public-consultation process in Vancouver. The 50-year-old founder, president, and CEO of [PlaceSpeak](#) is working on an online solution that she claims will take participation in democracy to the next level.

Hardwick describes PlaceSpeak as a location-based community-consultation platform that's the first of its kind. It allows people who have verified their identity and residential location to voice their opinions on issues submitted for discussion by governments and other organizations. Hardwick came up with the idea last summer while looking at a Google map of the Arbutus corridor. Now, she's got students from the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and Langara College working on the project, which she's been self-funding with the help of research grants.

Next week, the City of Vancouver and the Town of Gibsons are set to launch pilot projects using PlaceSpeak, according to Hardwick. Vancouver, which is already trying out PlaceSpeak with its [Talk Housing With Us](#) discussions, will kick off a neighbourhood-identity contest called Tag Your Hood. Gibsons will use the platform for consultations around its harbour-area plan. Over the coming months, Vancouver also plans to tap PlaceSpeak for fire-department and transportation-planning consultations. Hardwick expects the platform to see its commercial launch in the fall.



Born in Vancouver, Hardwick began her career as an urban geographer before joining the movie industry. Her father, Walter, was a UBC professor and TEAM councillor who is known as the father of False Creek. She started [MovieSet](#) in 2007 and sold that business earlier this year, wanting to return to her roots. Hardwick ran for city council in 2005 with the Non-Partisan Association, and is a former member of the Vancouver development permit board advisory panel.

The *Georgia Straight* interviewed Hardwick in her Kitsilano home.

Colleen Hardwick explains how PlaceSpeak works.

How would you describe PlaceSpeak?

PlaceSpeak is a location-based community-consultation platform designed to advance public participation. Many people believe that there is no meaningful consultation over location-based issues, and our mandate is to fix that problem.

What makes PlaceSpeak unique among online public-engagement platforms?

Specifically, its emphasis on geo-authentication. In simple terms, we focus on your geographic location, so that in whatever form consultation takes—whether it's polls and surveys or discussion forums—it's based on your neighbourhood and your place. There is nothing else out there online that ties your residential location with consultation.

Why is it important to link a person's online identity to their real-world location?

Depending on the nature of the consultation, you want to know that the people that you're talking to are the ones that are affected. So, if it's a real-estate development and it's going to affect people in the immediate vicinity, you want to be able to know who you're hearing from. Any land-based or geographically based consultation needs to know the where part of who they're hearing from.

How will the City of Vancouver use PlaceSpeak, in terms of the Tag Your Hood contest?

Tag Your Hood is designed to develop emblems or coat of arms, crests for each of the city's neighbourhoods. The city doesn't have that right now. There is no brand for Kerrisdale or Kitsilano or Renfrew or Downtown Eastside even. There's no symbol for it. So, we're using this as a mechanism to create those symbols by crowd sourcing through the communities.

What is unique is that, once we receive those submissions, only people who reside within the boundaries of a neighbourhood will be able to vote on that emblem. So, Kerrisdale folks will vote on Kerrisdale. Kitsilano will vote on Kitsilano. In doing so, we're trying to help people create a sense of connectedness to their neighbourhood, and neighbourhood awareness and attachment.

How do you expect your company will make money?

We're still exploring this. This is part of our current research. We're looking at the other engagement platforms, which are typically software as a service. But we're also working on a new per-capita model, which would be performance-based. So, the act of connecting an authenticated user with an issue proponent would be a trigger for payment, instead of software as a service.

Aside from governments, what other kinds of organizations do you expect to use PlaceSpeak?

Anything land-based, and that's largely going to impact the real-estate-development industry, although we expect that anything that's location-based that wants to be communicating with people in their neighbourhoods would be suitable for this kind of activity.

Every Friday, Geek Speak catches up with someone in Vancouver's technology sector, video-game industry, or social-media scene. Who should we interview next? Tell Stephen Hui on Twitter at twitter.com/stephenhui.

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