

PUTTING THE WWW INTO DEBATE

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT CAN BREAK THROUGH THE NOISE OF FACTIONAL INTEREST GROUPS AND INTO THE HEART OF COMMUNITIES, WRITES **MATT CROZIER**.

■ Community engagement can be challenging.

I sometimes see public servants recoil in horror at the suggestion that they should be aiming to get more people involved in their community engagement processes. "Why would we want to hear from more of them?", while usually unspoken, is etched across their faces.

I can understand this reaction – 15 years in the government sector being battered around by one interest group or another (or doing the battering) gave me a healthy cynicism of what traditional engagement processes achieve.

These processes are often deeply flawed. Not because they are not entered into with the best of intentions, nor due to lack of skilled facilitation or process design. They are flawed because they are entirely dependent upon people turning up, and we are all far too busy to turn up to anything that we are not already angry about or afraid of.

This means that for most of government, what passes for community engagement has become a painful exercise of holding discussions with the usual suspects and various lobby groups.

Getting more people involved should be an end in itself because these 'other' people will be more moderate, more considered and will give you a much better understanding of whether the usual suspects actually represent the community as they undoubtedly claim.

The opportunity to engage the community online represents a leap forward in the tools available to government to get more people involved.

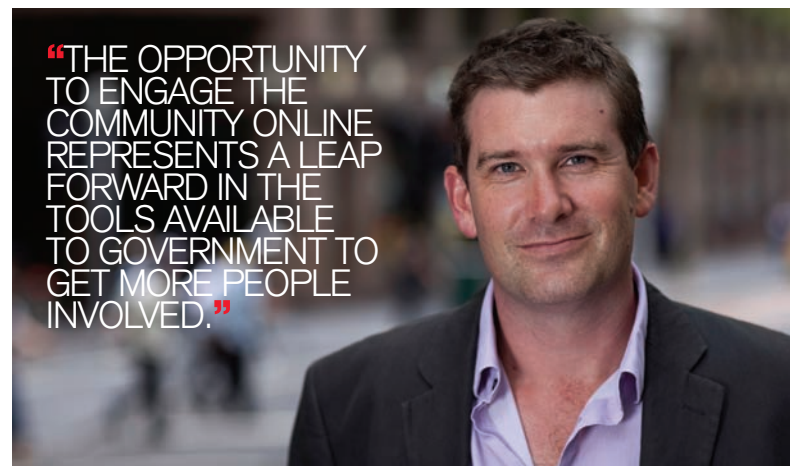
More than 85 per cent of Australian households are connected to the internet. Get the word out to the community and they can now participate as never before, at their own convenience and without leaving their homes (or offices).

Of course simply being online is not enough to add value. Just as community engagement practitioners have made a science out of managing face-to-face community processes, online engagement also needs careful planning and execution.

Here are a few guidelines:

1. Select your online platform (or tool) with care. Don't fall into the trap of relying entirely on free social networking tools: they haven't been built for community engagement and you will have trouble accurately interpreting the results and may also have issues with community safety. Also be wary of having the IT department purchase the product with the longest list of features. What you are looking for primarily is something that welcomes users who might not be technically competent. Remember, this is primarily about getting more people involved. Online tools must be simple and accessible.
2. This should not be an 'either/or' situation. Online tools should form part of a suite of community engagement methods. There are still those who would rather be engaged face to face. In fact, your online engagement might help to promote your face-to-face events and to continue dialogue afterwards. See these tools as complementary, not alternatives to traditional engagement methods.
3. Many organisations, worried about risk management and attracted to neat statistical results, opt for online engagement in the form of market research polls. This is not community engagement. Engagement allows the community to discuss what is on their minds, not what is on yours. The reason I 'disagree strongly' with that issue put to me in a survey might be because I have a better idea. You need to hear it. Market research is a fantastic way to validate the results of online engagement but remember, market research is not community engagement.

4. Remember that this is online engagement, it is not e-democracy. You are entering into a dialogue with the community, not a democratic process. Don't worry if people from outside the area want to get involved and encourage people to get their friends involved – these are good things. It is ideas and thoughts you are collecting. You may choose to give more weight to one voice with a new idea than to 100 voices with the same idea. Good online engagement is about recognising all opinions and ideas; it is not about vote weighing.
5. Publicity is critical. The online world is no different from the real world. Use traditional media to let people know about what you are doing and how to contribute. You will need to work hard at this. There are lots of other things competing for your community's time and attention. Publicity is a critical success factor for any community engagement process.
6. Be sure to measure the attendance to your online meeting, not just the comments. The power of an online forum is the ability to get people to attend. Many of these people will not comment but if you know thousands of people have visited, spent time reading the content and downloaded the documents, and have not troubled themselves to comment, this will give you important information about the strength of feeling on an issue in the community. Accurate reports on all site activity are essential.



7. Online engagement gives your organisation a way to break down community cynicism about government. To show them that you are listening, can handle criticism and respond positively. To achieve this goal you need to give the community feedback. Come back to them with the results of the consultation, show you have listened and taken ideas on board. If you do this the proportion of the community you are actively engaging will grow and grow. This is a critical element to online and offline engagement. Provide the community with feedback.

Government organisations across the world are starting to embrace online engagement as a key element of community engagement practice. This will soon be something that the community demands as a standard across government.

The web is part of most of our lives because of its enormous convenience. This convenience means governments can now build a relationship with their communities that is infinitely more accessible than in the past and, with careful nurturing of this relationship, will be able to see past noisy factional interest groups to the more moderate and considered community beyond.

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