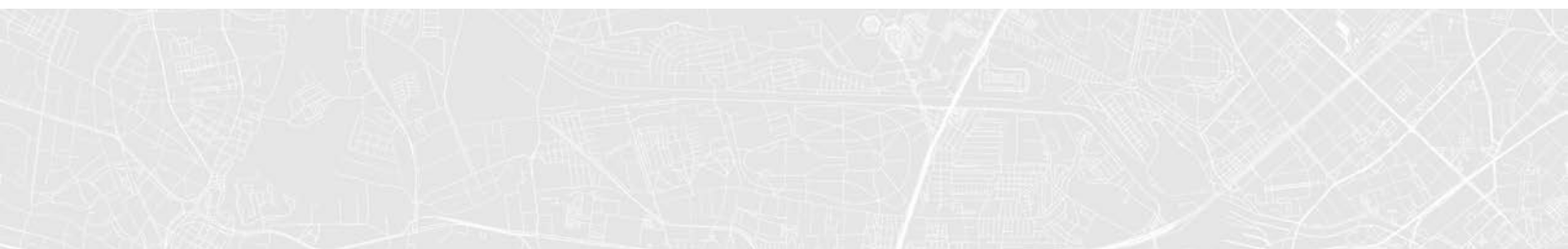




Bringing Public Dialogue to You

The business case for online public engagement



About the Authors



Ron Shaw
President
Ron Shaw & Associates

Ron has spent four decades working in and around local government, including more than 20 years as the Chief Administrative Officer of the City of Stratford, Ontario, CA.

He is a past president of both the Ontario Municipal Administrators' Association and the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators.

Ron's goals are to provide effective public services to the community. As chief administrative officer, he was responsible for all aspects of city administration over a wide variety of public services, from public works to parks and social services.



Matthew Crozier
CEO
Co-Founder Bang the Table

Matt has spent the past 10 years working with hundreds of government organizations in 5 countries around the world to successfully implement online community engagement strategies.

Prior to co-founding Bang the Table, Matt spent 15 years working in and around government organizations in the UK and Australia, often fronting public meetings and events for planning, infrastructure, economic development and transportation initiatives.

Matt is based in Boulder, Colorado where Bang the Table USA is headquartered.



Table of Contents

Preamble	1
Section 1	2
1. The case for investment in community engagement	2
1.1 Increasing satisfaction with government performance	2
1.2 Enhancing trust in public institutions	3
1.3 Getting better results and making better decisions	4
Section 2	5
The case for online community engagement	5
Case Study: Rural Municipality of St. Clements	8
Section 3	11
The return on investment for online community engagement	11
Section 4	15
The cost of not engaging digitally	15
Conclusions	16
References	17

Preamble

Most towns, cities, counties and other government institutions around the world invest heavily in civic engagement and outreach to allow their community to have a say (beyond the ballot box) on development of policies and services that affect their lives.

Often this engagement is mandated by statute and even a minimalist approach carries with it a hefty bill.

How effective is this engagement? Given community feelings of disenfranchisement, it would seem not very in a lot of cases.

Anecdotal reports abound of the same small group of people turning out to meetings on every issue with little or no inclusive representation from the wider community.

So, if going through the motions is expensive, time consuming and results in community cynicism, perhaps it's worth considering methods to reach more people and to have more effective engagement?

Online community engagement represents a way of broadening audiences, of building community capacity and making engagement work. It delivers new ways to understand, visualize and analyze the nature and scale of many pressing challenges and new opportunities.

This business case looks first at the case for community engagement to be done properly and then at the argument for using online tools alongside face-to-face engagement methods to achieve this goal.

Section 1

1. The case for investment in community engagement

Well designed and implemented, broad-based community engagement works.

- It increases satisfaction with government performance
- It enhances trust in civic institutions
- It helps us make better, more robust and resilient solutions which in turn saves large amounts of time and money.

Taking these elements one at a time:

1.1 Increasing satisfaction with government performance

Communities have expressed a desire to engage with their local governments, sharing views during engagement sessions in cities across the world and are demanding channels where they can “participate in the decisions of government; connect with representatives; and, know their input has meaning and relevance.”¹

The Australian research company Micromex Research and Consulting conducted an analysis of satisfaction with the performance of Australian Municipalities based on over 30,000 interviews in 2011.

They found that when respondents were asked about how they measured a city’s performance, they resorted to listing ‘basic services’ such as roads, rate levels and trash collection. However, other factors came to the fore when deeper analysis of revealed preferences was carried out.

Stuart Reeve, Managing Director Micromex research states:

*Across our analysis of over a dozen LGAs, we could see that the key drivers of overall satisfaction with Council was the content and scope of Council interaction with its residents. In fact, in most studies the community engagement variables contributed 20%-30% towards overall satisfaction. Community engagement is critical.*²

It should come as no surprise to learn that a community that feels well informed about a municipality’s business and has opportunities to be part of the formation of policy would be happier with the institution.

The Micromex study showed that the extent to which the community feels engaged is consistently one of the most important factors explaining community satisfaction.

¹ Paraphrased from discussions held 2013-2014 with citizens in St Catharines, Toronto, London, Thunder Bay, Kitchener, Ottawa & Brampton, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/open-government-engagement-team>.

² Stuart Reeve, Managing Director Micromex research, quoted in ‘What role do unstated expectations play in community satisfaction with local government?’, Bang the Table Blog, July 2011, <http://www.bangthetable.com/council-satisfaction-model/>, accessed 14 July 2017.

1.2 Enhancing trust in public institutions

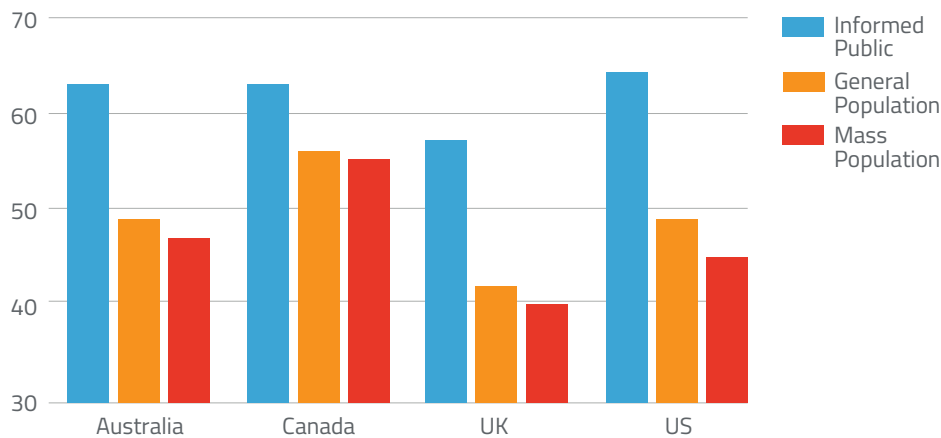
Public demand for increased accountability and transparency is shifting how local governments are engaging the public.

In the era of dogmatically divided communities seeking out news that suits their personal value set, it is ever more important that institutions have a direct way of engaging the community. Moving past allowing the media to be a conduit between a government organization and the community to engage directly will allow the city or department to ensure facts are correctly communicated and the community voice is heard.

The Edelman Trust Index researchers have noted an increasing gap over the decade between the well informed and poorly informed publics with regards to trust in our public institutions. This gap is growing in most developed nations including the USA, Canada, Australia, and the UK.

At the same time, peer-to-peer influence is becoming more powerful than top-down information sharing, which makes it even more important for institutions to get quality, accurate, and shareable information into the hands of their best networked community members.

2015 Public Trust in Institutions



1.3 Getting better results and making better decisions

In 2010, in a now notorious case study of what not to do when developing public policy and delivering services,³ the then mayor of Newark, Chris Christie appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show with Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook to announce a \$200 million program to turn around the failing Newark school system.

The community protested. The next mayor of Newark campaigned against the plan as part of his election bid and large amounts of time and money were wasted.

The Newark Schools experience stands out as a classic example of the folly of trying to impose externally conceived change on a community without involving that community in the process. However, it's really far from an isolated occurrence.

How often have there been plans for an infrastructure project that flounder at a late stage because of community protest?

How often do we see carefully prepared strategies turned over by a newly elected official because the strategy had no broad based community support or understanding?

How often do we see resources being used up in lengthy and expensive legal appeals?

These things happen in many institutions and represent significant costs. Enlightened city managers are realizing that the answer lies in building the capacity of the community and the ability of the community to engage early and often in government processes.

³ Barnes, Melody and Paul Schmitz, 'Community Engagement Matters (now more than ever); Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2016, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever, accessed 2 July 2017.

Section 2

The case for online community engagement

In coffee shops, on social media, and numerous other outside forums, our citizens—as they always have—will continue to comment and discuss what is going on in our municipalities, what is proposed on major projects and on services provided to them.

The community does find the time to weigh in on these matters and feel that it's important to do so. Online discussions on municipal issues are taking place as we speak in various outside forums that provide easy access from one's laptop, tablet or smartphone. The question is, are these discussions being listened to?

Like never before, local government has the opportunity to communicate with its residents through Facebook, Twitter and Nextdoor and a myriad of other 'digital engagement' tools. In fact, local governments that do not participate in digital engagement risk remaining unaware of online mobilization, until it manifests as protest at public meetings and other face-to-face events.⁴

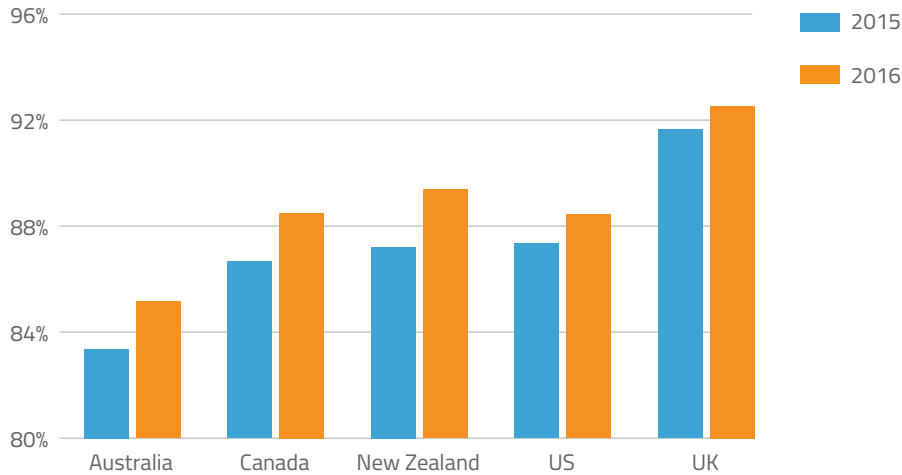
This myriad of sources of discussion can be a mixed blessing. Many "community owned and initiated" discussions take place without the benefit of accurate information on the issue at hand. They are not moderated and are hard to monitor, leaving city staff feeling stretched far too thin when trying to listen to community concerns. Moreover, often these community discussions are echo chambers where only like-minded community members are welcome; participants in these discussions are not exposed to other views and can become increasingly intolerant of dissent.

Online engagement effectively addresses these matters by having the municipality itself provide a platform for citizens to comment directly to the municipality on one or more issues. Comments that are based upon accurate information provided by the municipality, are moderated for topicality, compliance and privacy.

What makes online engagement so attractive is its reach and ease of access. Data shows the world is increasingly connected through access to the internet via computers, tablets and smartphones. This isn't news to anyone!

⁴ National League of Cities Sustainable Cities Institute 'Digital Sustainability Conversations, How Local Governments can Engage Residents Online', 2011, <http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/topics/equity-and-engagement/community-visioning-and-participation/digital-sustainability-conversations-how-local-governments-can-engage-residents-online>, accessed 10 July 2017

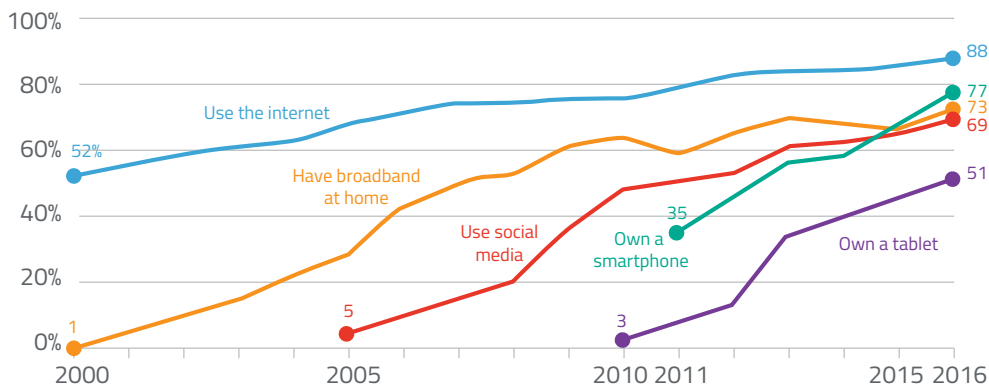
Internet Penetration by Country



Source: <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>

The Evolution of Technology and Usage

% of U.S. adults who...



Source: PEW Research Center Surveys conducted 2000-2016. Internet use figures based on pooled analysts of all surveys conducted during each calendar year.

It remains true that not everybody is online, therefore, online engagement is imperfect. But, providing the opportunity to engage the community online as well as face-to-face, engagement will open your organization to much broader community involvement than face-to-face engagement alone.

So, online community engagement will broaden the reach of your engagement processes considerably. Indeed, there is no comparable way of doing this without incurring a massive financial cost. It's not at all unusual to inform and engage 2,000 or more people using online engagement tools. Imagine the cost of getting those people into face-to-face meetings. You'd probably have to run 20 meetings to manage the numbers. With facility rental, staff time, publicity for the events, and catering, costs would be astronomical. Online tools are the only way to achieve mass engagement in a cost effective manner.

JoAnne Kleb, Community Engagement Specialist at the City of Penticton, spoke about how the city's adoption of online engagement was part of the City's commitment to authentic engagement, providing accurate content, and truly listening to the community. She said that the City was particularly keen to engage working people who were usually under-represented in traditional engagement processes. She remarked that: "Online engagement significantly improved the efficiency of our engagement activity."

It is possible to achieve outreach to large numbers using a market research survey, but ask yourself, is this really engaging? Is a survey something that people feel engaged by or is it more an instrument of administrative convenience? Surveys certainly have their place as a way to quantify community views but a survey will never make the community feel they are really being involved in decisions that affect their lives.



Case Study: Rural Municipality of St. Clements

A brief overview

Bang the Table's EngagementHQ platform is used by organizations ranging in size from national governments and capital cities to small regional communities. The Rural Municipality of St. Clements in Manitoba, Canada, has a population of just over 10,000 people. St. Clements started using EngagementHQ in October 2016 for their "Let's Talk Trash" project. CAO DJ Sigmundson explained that they chose EngagementHQ because,

"We wanted to talk to as many people as possible by engaging through multiple channels."

St. Clements started with a survey and information about the municipality's trash project and an appeal for the community to register to share views on future municipal projects. In less than a month this small rural community achieved 1,271 visitors, gained feedback from 486 participants on the "Let's Talk Trash" project and have built a database of 550 community members who are registered to get involved in future projects. Said Sigmundson:

"...comments from participants have indicated that they appreciate being asked what they thought. We are only getting started and will continue to engage using the other tools on EngagementHQ."

When asked about future plans, he added:

"It's really about the next steps and building on the online community. We see a lot of synergy in using the tool for other projects in the city. Our community is very spread out so using EngagementHQ makes a lot of sense."

In 2015 a group of government communicators at a Bang the Table masterclass in Wellington, NZ put together the following list of reasons government institutions should be engaging the community online:

-
- 1 Digital is convenient for the audience.

 - 2 Digital allows you to reach the harder to reach audience in order to get a more representative view of issues—specifically, people who are time-poor and find public meetings inaccessible.

 - 3 Digital may be safer than face-to-face engagement in certain circumstances.

 - 4 Digital can lower the cost of higher quality (in terms of reach) engagement by reaching more people.

 - 5 Community engagement generally, and digital engagement specifically, address the need within the community to allow community members to be “part of governance” rather than “having government done to them.”

 - 6 Digital makes analysis easier if built-in data mining tools are available.

 - 7 Digital provides evidence of open and transparent government.

 - 8 The broader engagement provided by a larger digital audience moderates the power of the executive which protects democracy and protects the executive from itself.

 - 9 Digital permits rich media formats for content and information dissemination.

10 Digital allows conversations to evolve through time, where face-to-face requires participants to “think and respond in the moment.” Therefore, digital has the potential to be more of a dialogue; a conversation instead of broadcast.

11 Digital makes it easier to measure the effectiveness of different channels.

12 Digital makes it easier to segment the audience for targeting.

13 Digital demonstrates a commitment to the community through accessibility.

14 Digital helps identify (and avoid) real problems/issues—issues of significance to the broader community—quickly.

15 Digital allows the consulting organization to leverage other and organizational networks more easily.

16 There is an immediacy about digital that speeds up the feedback process—this allows you to address myths, misconceptions and inaccuracies quickly.

17 Better quality dialogue through broader digital engagement means more community buy-in on decisions.

18 Digital allows the engaging organization to present as a leader in contemporary government.

19 Digital can be more fun.

20 Digital is more environmentally friendly.

Section 3

The return on investment for online community engagement

In section 1, we discussed the importance and value of good citizen engagement. In section 2, we discussed how to achieve broad engagement, with the community use of online tools as the only viable approach.

But what are the tangible benefits and returns for adopting an online engagement platform? In this section, we outline some of these benefits. We assume here that the online engagement platform you are using has a minimum feature set and is not just a plug in survey tool. That minimum feature set should include:

- A variety of engagement tools for different circumstances
- Ways of sharing information with the community in different formats
- Automated reporting that allows you to measure not just contributions but also site visitor behavior
- A participant database including demographic information tailored to your needs
- The ability to reach out to selected participants
- Mobile compatibility
- Compliant with accessibility and security standards
- Experienced support team who understand your issues (not just the technology).

A fuller discussion of what to look for in an online community engagement platform can be found here: <http://www.bangthetable.com/blog/6-tips-for-choosing-online-community-engagement-software/>

The benefits:

- 1 Measurable output:** You will receive strong purpose built reports that can be used by both management and Council to formulate and approve policy and projects for the municipality based on strong analytics. You will also own the data produced unlike social media platforms.
- 2 Measurable input:** You will be able to provide accurate and relevant information on each topic on the platform to ensure that those making comments will do so after having the opportunity to be properly informed on the issue. Moreover, there will be those who take the time to read the material who will be satisfied with the information provided and may not comment. The ability to measure the number of people who do so is important to both management and members of council as it puts into context the often small number of people who may be opposed to an initiative.
- 3 Responsive policy:** Policies that are developed in response to public engagement can be more aligned with on-the-ground conditions. Digital engagement also opens new venues for feedback, which can help improve services and supporting policies.
- 4 Citizen satisfaction:** Digital engagement satisfies the public's desire to have an easy way to share their opinion. Publicly displaying these contributions (as is the norm with discussion-oriented tools) can foster feelings of efficacy and being heard by government.
- 5 Building an online community:** You will have an increased audience. An online platform provided by the municipality will direct interested citizens to this platform. Once people become accustomed to engaging with the municipality, they are much more inclined to participate in the future. Once people have signed up, you can communicate with them through newsletters and emails which target sub groups of your database. This makes the job of your team easier as more people get involved. With a platform each project adds value.

6 **Enhancement of existing engagement practices:** A municipal website is a tool to help inform citizens on a myriad of topics, but it is not a discussion platform. A website might also provide engagement through surveys and forms, and it can also, offer some means of engagement. However, unless a website is built explicitly for the purpose of engagement, gaps in reporting and analytics will emerge. Instead, a strategy needs to be defined to understand the sentiment of a community, and work towards improving that sentiment. This can be done both online and in face-to-face meetings; online simply delivers a broader reach whereas face-to-face satisfies a deeper understanding. Used together, both engagement strategies will be effective in capturing community sentiment on a topic and planning outcomes.

Online engagement is best done with a website, or an area of a website, dedicated to online engagement.

7 **Trust:** Trust is important for the success of many government policies, programs and regulations that depend on cooperation and compliance of citizens.⁵

An online stakeholder community can provide near-instant feedback on any number of issues. However, the real value of an online stakeholder community is the ability to have a two-way dialogue with those stakeholders. Interactions can take many forms across a full spectrum of engagement levels, including:

- Listening to and understanding stakeholders
- Distributing information, promoting ideas and education
- Crowdsourcing ideas and prioritizing them
- Discussing solutions interactively
- Consulting and collecting quantitative and qualitative submissions
- Visualizing and co-designing options
- Co-creating and collaborating to deliver solutions
- Building long-term online stakeholder communities as a source of reputation capital.

These interactions help government and enterprise gain the ability to relate directly to thousands of citizens and stakeholders at a time, across multiple forms of media that provide both quantitative and qualitative insights. They also enable them in a manner that is quickly and cost-effectively for 360 degrees of stakeholders, 24/7 and 365 days a year.⁶

⁵ OECD Website, 'Trust in Government' <http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>, accessed 5 July 2017.

⁶ Kim Heismann quoted in 'Why Stakeholder Engagement is Key to Successful CSR Programs', Ethical Business Update, 2015, <http://ethicalbusinessupdate.com/stakeholder-engagement/why-stakeholder-engagement-is-key-to-successful-csr-programs.html>, accessed 24 June 2017.

8 **Secure accessible space:** Reputable platforms comply with global and local accessibility and security standards. They should be regularly tested against these meaning you do not have to worry about compliance beyond requesting to see the provider’s policies.

9 **Improved service delivery:** Digital tools increase your government’s availability to the public, which enables service issues to be quickly reported and results to be efficiently shared. You can make use of the public’s distributed view of your community and source information about potholes, graffiti, and other issues directly from people using these services. Furthermore, receiving input digitally is more cost effective than phone calls.

10 **Increased and diversified engagement:** Digital engagement can give the public a more interactive, convenient and informative way to participate in decision-making. Governments can use their online presence to ask their constituents for feedback, new ideas, spending priorities, and policy and issue discussions. Digital engagement can also increase public understanding of decisions and foster potential support for ongoing implementation.

A key benefit of digital engagement for local governments is engaging hard-to-reach people, expanding input beyond the “usual suspects” who come to meetings often or write many letters to council. Diversify and increase engagement by connecting with demographic groups—like young people, families, people with physical disabilities—who are less likely to attend a public meeting, but are comfortable participating digitally.

If you have a large non-English speaking population, choose a platform that is capable of allowing for participation in multiple languages.

11 **Cost effective:** Online engagement focuses your dollars on one platform and allows your communications staff to focus their efforts in a consolidated space using other communication tools to direct the public to engage with you online.

12 **Flexibility:** The online platform can be used to add unlimited issues to the platform in the future and to build a larger online community that will routinely engage with the municipality on new and emerging issues. The municipality can readily share the information in line with recent open government initiatives which will add value for all residents as well as management and council.

13 **Internal collaboration and engagement:** The municipality can foster internal collaboration by involving multiple departments in developing content, managing, and responding to civic engagement projects. Digital tools aren’t just for engaging the public. Use internal websites, discussion forums, listservs, and other tools to tap into employee wisdom and preferences.

Section 4

The cost of not engaging digitally

Finally, let's take a look at the cost of *not* engaging your community online.

Many managers in government organizations view online community engagement as a risky enterprise, something they would rather not adopt. This ignores the fact that most of the risks around online community activity accrue to those who vacate the space, leaving it to others to lead (or mislead) the community. Some specific costs of failing to engage the community online are:

- 1 Inability to respond to existing conversations:** Let's face it; people are talking online about your community, perhaps specifically about your organization. If you're not at least listening to these conversations, you and your leadership may be left unaware of important community issues.
- 2 Reduced public relevance:** The public is online and expects its services and organizations to be there too. This is a growing public expectation.
- 3 Under-engagement of some audiences:** Some communities, who are unlikely to attend traditional engagement events like public hearings or open houses, are more receptive to digital opportunities. Additionally, online channels of communication can connect you with diverse audiences that don't pay attention to newspapers or other traditional information sources.
- 4 Over-reliance on resource intensive face-to-face methods:** Digital engagement is a complement to face-to-face methods (not a replacement), but it's an important approach for cost-effective and interactive engagement.
- 5 Mitigating the risk:** Members of the community who have not taken a position on an issue could go online looking for answers and get them from a vested interest group pushing a particular agenda. This can be how relatively small issues escalate. If you have an online space where community members can interact with you and ask questions it's likely they will come to you for their information.

Conclusions

Community engagement is a valuable investment for any city. It builds trust and satisfaction, saves time and leads to better decision making.

Given the difficulty of attracting representative audiences to face-to-face engagement events and the very high rates of connection to the internet in the population, it seems logical to look to online tools to enhance community engagement efforts.

Online engagement is convenient, easy, leads to better informed audiences and can build community capacity and trust.

Conducted properly, with an eye to the quality of engagement and inclusiveness of community representation, online engagement can massively enhance the reach and value of community engagement that cannot be rivaled by more traditional methods.

Not engaging the community online comes with serious risks. Vacating the online space does not stop conversations taking place. But if these conversations are not hosted by your organization, it is hard to monitor, impossible to control and it very difficult to properly inform the conversation with facts.

References

Barnes, Melody and Paul Schmitz, 'Community Engagement Matters (now more than ever)' Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2016, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever, accessed 2 July 2017.

Crozier, Matthew, Bang the Table Blog, 'The Business Case for Digital Community Engagement', 2015, <http://www.bangthetable.com/business-case-for-digital-community-engagement/>, accessed 12 July 2017.

Edelman Website '2016 Edelman Trust Barometer', <http://www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2016-edelman-trust-barometer/>, accessed 1 July 2017.

Heismann, Kim in Ethical Business Update 'Why Stakeholder Engagement is Key to Successful CSR Programs', 2015, <http://ethicalbusinessupdate.com/stakeholder-engagement/why-stakeholder-engagement-is-key-to-successful-csr-programs.html>, accessed 24 June 2017.

Internet Users by Country, 2016, <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>, accessed 17 July 2017.

National League of Cities Sustainable Cities Institute 'Digital Sustainability Conversations, How Local Governments can Engage Residents Online', 2011 <http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/topics/equity-and-engagement/community-visioning-and-participation/digital-sustainability-conversations-how-local-governments-can-engage-residents-online>, accessed 10 July 2017.

OECD Website, 'Trust in Government', <http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>, accessed 5 July 2017.

Pew Research Centre 'Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government', 2015 <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/>, accessed 14 July 2017.

Reeve, Stuart, quoted in 'What role do unstated expectations play in community satisfaction with local government', July 2011, <http://www.bangthetable.com/council-satisfaction-model/>, accessed 14 July 2017.