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Promoting online consultation

Quality market research, audience identification and promotional activities are key to driving traffic to an online consultation space.

The big picture

Create a “Consultation Brand”

Create an integrated consultation brand for the project, or if possible, for all of your consultations across the organisation.

Branding should be accessible to the general public and entirely consistent across all online and offline promotional material.

Choose a memorable project name

Around one-third of your website traffic will be generated by organic web search of your project name.

Many public sector projects have long, jargon-laden or otherwise hard to recollect names.

Instead choose a project name that has a bit of punch, vitality and life to it. Also choose a name that uses plain English and clearly relates to the subject matter.

Select a memorable project URL

Around one-third of your website traffic will be generated by direct access to your site URL.

Many URLs are far too difficult to recall or to type.

Choose a URL that reflects your project name.

Avoid acronyms. Avoid long URLs.

Offline options checklist

- Let everyone know at your public gatherings about the online consultation space.
- Mainstream media coverage in local newspapers and on local radio stations.
- Talkback radio with the project manager or proponent.
- Editorial content in local newspapers.
- Direct mail to relevant audiences.
- Public authorities could add a note or piece of promotional material to the next correspondence with the community, e.g. council rates notices, services bills, etc.
- Hand out postcards at key transport hubs and social meeting points.
- Public kiosks in high traffic areas such as malls.
- A tent or stand at local festivals, major events or community markets.
- For local issues, ask the library to hand out a “project bookmark” with each borrowed book.
- Quirky promotional material, such as magnets, wristbands, drink holders, squishy toys, beer coasters.
- QR codes linked directly to feedback opportunity on all paper promotional material, particularly posters.
- Take out advertisements at public transport hubs (bus stops, train stations and tram stops) on routes affected by projects.

Online options checklist

- A clear link on the consulting organisation’s website homepage.
- Footer message with direct link to consultation site as part of staff signature blocks.
- Internal email to all organisational staff with direct link to the consultation site.
- Cross-promotion from the organisation’s Twitter account with a link directly to the consultation site.
- Create a Twitter hashtag (#project).
- Cross-promotion from the organisation’s Facebook page (or group) with a link directly to the consultation site.
- Facebook advertisements directly to the consultation site.
- LinkedIn in advertisements for professionally oriented consultations.
- Contact administrators of existing Facebook (and other social networking sites) to request permission to paste links to their group pages.
- Google advertisements directly to the consultation site.
- e-Newsletters.
- Direct marketing using email databases.
- Create banner advertisements for highly relevant websites.

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Integrating offline and online engagement

Online community engagement provides a range of opportunities to complement, supplement and otherwise enhance f2f community engagement processes.

Principles

Online consultation is generally, but not necessarily, complementary to offline consultation rather than a replacement.

Note: Exceptions may include projects with very small budgets, very large geographic ranges, or both.

Determine the most appropriate consultation tool for the audience and consultation objective, rather than beginning by focussing on the latest tool.

Develop the overall consultation strategy first and then run the online process in parallel with f2f process using relatable tools, e.g. online survey match f2f surveys.

Ensure consultation managers respond consistently to enquiries whether in an online or offline environment.

Build trust through time with the online audience by being consistent in terms of commitment to the online space, responsiveness and “closing the loop” when projects wrap up.

As with offline engagement processes, deeper engagement — such as deliberative dialogue — requires significantly more planning and focus on methodology than “shallow” engagement such as brainstorming. It also requires far greater commitment on the part of the participants.

Planning & preparation

- ❑ Establish the specific role of the online consultation process in the overall consultation strategy, e.g. to gather community ideas; to test existing concepts, or to validate plans.
- ❑ Carefully plan the rollout of the online tools through time to match the overall consultation strategy.
- ❑ Properly resource the online component of the consultation strategy.
- ❑ Develop clear guidelines on “participation” or “moderation” rules for participants and make them easy for participants to find.
- ❑ Spend time on developing the right questions (whether in a forum, survey, or guestbook) to elicit good quality responses.

Linking f2f with online

- ❑ Video key speakers at public meetings and place this online.
- ❑ Use closed forums to compliment f2f discussions and to provide an avenue for indepth discussion.
- ❑ Promote the online engagement opportunities at all offline events.
- ❑ Promote the online engagement opportunities on all offline collateral, e.g. use QR codes on posters.
- ❑ Use tablet computers to capture f2f feedback and stories from field surveys directly into online environment.
- ❑ Use desktop computers in kiosks/project offices/open house spaces to capture feedback directly into online environment.

Linking online with f2f

- ❑ Use the online environment to provide rich and meaningful information to participants prior to f2f gatherings.
- ❑ Use the online environment to gather thoughts on critical agenda items for upcoming f2f processes.
- ❑ Use online forums to understand the nature and scope of debate and critical leverage points prior to f2f dialogue and decision-making processes.
- ❑ Use online guestbook or storyboards to gather rich stories for deeper analysis through f2f processes.
- ❑ Use online surveys to gather broad community feedback as an input to f2f discussions.

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Cultivating inclusive online engagement

Including everyone in our online engagement needs to recognise that online isn't everyone's preferred method.

Strategies to improve internet access

Sector	Integrate with offline	Public library computers	Internet kiosks	Tablet computers	Internet café	Community centres
People with a disability	✓					
Technically challenged	✓					
Access constrained	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Newly arrived people	✓					✓
Older people	✓	✓				✓
Homeless people	✓			✓		
Indigenous Australians	✓					
The bereaved	✓					
Children	✓			✓		
Young people	✓		✓	✓	✓	

Strategies to improve content accessibility

Sector	WCAG 2.0 compliance	Small files	Captioned video	Accessible documents	Clear imagery	Alt text on images
People with a disability	✓		✓	✓		✓
Technically challenged						
Access constrained		✓				
Newly arrived people					✓	
Older people	✓		✓		✓	
Homeless people						
Indigenous Australians						
The bereaved					✓	
Children						
Young people						

Strategies to improve participant capacity

Sector	Training programs	Personal assistance	Translation services	Schools' curriculum	Existing networks	Create champions
People with a disability	✓	✓			✓	
Technically challenged	✓	✓			✓	✓
Access constrained						
Newly arrived people		✓	✓		✓	✓
Older people	✓	✓				✓
Homeless people		✓				
Indigenous Australians					✓	✓
The bereaved		✓				
Children		✓		✓		
Young people				✓	✓	✓

To learn about strategies for the apathetic & disengaged, see marketing and promotions cheat sheet.

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Creating a culture of engagement

Organisational buy-in at a senior level is crucial to the success of your engagement strategy.

Building the business case

- Link online engagement to organisational objectives, strategic priorities, corporate management plan and, if available, community engagement framework.
- Talk to existing website users about their experiences.
- Gather case study material from similar organisations regarding the benefits from the outcomes of their online consultations.
- Clearly identify all risks and amelioration/negation measures — focus on the tailored application of various moderation and feedback options to projects with different risk profiles.
- Identify the risks to the organisation of not engaging properly. How will online engagement ameliorate existing risks to the organisation?

Winning approval

- Look for a leader on the senior/executive management team.
- Gather a group of colleagues from across the organisation to act as program-level advocates.
- Get the senior management team to sign off on the contract collectively.
- Invite Bang the Table team in to present and chat with the decision-makers.
- Set out post-purchase plan, including internal communications, external communications, implementation strategy, procedures and protocols, etc.

Preparing management & colleagues for criticism

- Prepare internal communications plan.
- Arrange briefings of executive, management and (if appropriate) elected members to ensure everybody understands that open discussion may lead to open criticism of existing policies, practices, service levels, etc.
- Focus on the risk management strategies and positive outcomes from the consultation process.
- Distribute briefing notes to senior management team outlining the risk management processes that have been built into the organisation's new online engagement processes.
- Bring the communications, marketing and media teams together so that they are fully aware of what is going on. Involve them in the branding and inward- and outward-facing promotional processes.

Internal processes & protocols

- Establish triggers for online engagement within the overall community engagement framework.
- Establish feedback tools for use under different circumstances.
- Establish who will manage the online component of the consultation process on a day-to-day basis.
- Establish governance model for online feedback (including forums, Q&A, forms, etc).
- Establish clear expectations regarding feedback, timeliness, and authorities.
- Support online engagement with good promotional strategies and activities.

Structures, resources & budgets

- Ensure the senior executive with responsibility for engagement is a "true believer."
- Find a home within the organisation for the (online) community engagement manager/team.
- Allocate online engagement to one person within the organisation to manage and promote.
- Maintain a cross-organisational group as online engagement ambassadors. Continually educate this group about new projects and successes.
- Consider a small budget to value-add to project consultations, e.g. for video production.

Driving uptake

- Distribute internal success stories across the organisation.
- Distribute external case studies to the appropriate line manager within the organisation.
- Benchmark online outcomes against other methods.
- Capture return-on-investment in terms that match the strategic objectives of the project.

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Integrating social media with engagement HQ

Linking EngagementHQ with other social media tools.

Linking EngagementHQ with other social media tools

- Switch on the social media sharing in the deep configuration to make it easy for participants to share the consultation with their friends and followers.
- Add "follow us on" Facebook and Twitter buttons to the top of the widgets column with HTML links through to either/both sites.
- Embed a Twitter stream widget into EHQ with your tweets, mentions of your organisation, use of a specific project #hashtag etc.
- Embed a comment stream from your Facebook page.
- Embed YouTube videos in the video player and/or in the advanced widgets.
- Embed a Flickr photo gallery in one of the advanced widgets.
- Embed an Instagram slideshow using a project #hashtag in the advanced widgets.
- Embed a Slideshare presentation in one of the advanced widgets.
- Embed any of the above rich media into the newsfeed or forum topics.
- Run FB page consultation in parallel to EHQ consultation.

Using social media to link the EHQ site:

- Use Facebook ads to drive traffic to the EHQ site.
- Use Google ads as above.
- Use the FB page to let people know about consultations on the EHQ site.
- Use Twitter as above.
- Post interesting comments from the EHQ forums on the FB page and Twitter stream.
- Report back on the outcomes of EHQ consultations via FB and Twitter.
- Report back when the project/program has been implemented via FB and Twitter... reflect back on the original consultation.
- Setup RSS feeds from the forum topics to display in a "comment widget" on the corporate site.

Possibilities for the future...

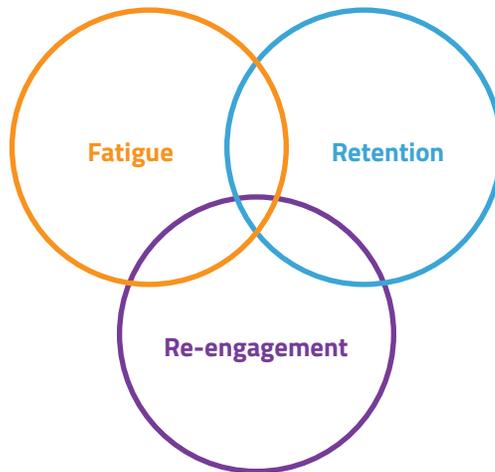
- Bring tweets directly into a dedicated EHQ space (possibly its own forum).
- Allow comments collected via other social media platforms to be imported into EHQ for comment tagging.

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Managing consultation fatigue

Setting expectations and coordinating across the organisation can work to avoid consultation fatigue.

Objective



Avoiding consultation fatigue:

To keep people interested in the current consultation.

Participant retention:

To reduce database churn and keep people in the system for the long term.

Re-engagement:

To bring people back to new consultations.

What would drive people away?

- Failure to deliver on projects that have been consulted on previously.
- Failure to explain why projects couldn't be delivered.
- Failure to acknowledge previous contributions.
- Failure to report back a summary of the consultation outcomes.
- Failure to report back on the impact of the consultation process.
- Too many emails in general.
- Too many emails about irrelevant subjects.

What can we do to get people to re-engage?

- Consult on interesting subjects that are easy to understand, have concrete impacts and some emotional content.
- Ask interesting and engaging questions.
- Provide a good reason to come back. How will the consultation affect the outcomes? How will the issue under discussion directly affect them?
- Provide incentives including prizes or preferred access to processes (e.g. by invitation to Council meetings).
- Personally invite people who have participated in the past to join discussions about new issues.
- Honour the commitment required to participate in the consultation process by closing the loop.

What can we do to reduce fatigue?

- Acknowledge particularly thoughtful contributions.
- Follow up personally with valuable contributors to have a deeper conversation about their views and suggestions.
- Share thoughtful contributions via social media.
- Share thoughtful contributions at face-to-face events (using panels, slideshows, etc.).
- Let contributors know when the consultation process hits major milestones.
- Invite contributors to participate in deeper decision-making processes.
- Distribute a summary email of recent consultation activity.

What can we do to keep people in the database long term?

- Keep emailed information to a minimum.
- Keep emailed information highly relevant to the individual (potentially by asking them to nominate subjects of interest in the registration form).
- Keep emailed information local by targeting information to people from specific suburbs that are more likely to be interested in projects.
- Always close the loop!

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Closing the loop

A simple 'thank you' is the most powerful tool to acknowledge the time and effort your community has put into your project.

Checklist

- Include the feedback process to the project timeline task list/budget.
- Create a process diagram for participants to illustrate the consultation and decision-making process.
- Clearly indicate on the site how the consultation feedback will be used to influence the decision.
- Provide thank you" letters to key stakeholders.
- Send thank you emails to all online participants.
- Create a consultation report summarising the outcomes of the consultation process.
- Distribute the report in a variety of forms so that it is accessible to as wide an audience as possible.
- Create a feedback report listing each of the issues and suggestions raised by the community AND the consulting organisation's response.
- Distribute as above.
- Advise participants of the decision-making process henceforth.
- Advise participants when a decision has been taken.
- Consider preparing a feedback video rather than paper report.