Using a Digital-First Community Engagement Approach

bangthetable®

What is Digital-First Engagement?

Digital-first engagement is a concept initially developed to challenge thinking around community engagement, but it is rapidly gaining mainstream acceptance.

For many years now, digital engagement techniques have been used as part of community engagement and consultation processes to open those processes up to wider audiences. Despite the successful use of online techniques to broaden audiences beyond the few people who choose to attend face-to-face events, we have continued to treat digital engagement as the poor cousin of traditional face-to-face engagement. All too often, an online tool or survey is tacked on to an engagement process that is designed around in-person events.

What practitioners are increasingly accepting is that there is no way to reach a significant audience for engagement without the use of online tools. So why not design the process around the use of those tools? This doesn't have to mean less face-to-face engagement. It just means giving more emphasis to the method that most people will use to learn about and give input to the project.

Great digital first engagement means thoughtful use of engagement tools (not just surveys); it means giving consideration to consistent usage across your organisation; it means using digital engagement to inspire greater attendance of face-to-face events and ensure you truly reach the broad the community rather than just sectional interest groups.

We hope this brief guide will help you in the transition to digital first engagement.

Bang the Table

Preparing Your Organisation

Shifting your thinking towards delivering a digital-first community engagement program can be difficult, especially if you're already used to doing community engagement a certain way.

This is why it's important to think strategically about the ways in which your organisation views community engagement and to think about the challenges you need to overcome in order to roll-out a cohesive digital-first strategy.

COMMON CHALLENGES

- Lack of organisational support and buy in from Senior Managers/Elected Officials.
- Lack of resourcing of staff, their skills, expertise and capacity to deliver meaningful engagement activities.
- Lack of internal process to support digital-first engagement, such as policies, toolkits, guidelines and training.
- Ability to effectively measure impact of online engagement.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

- Demonstrating the use of digital-first engagement through pilot projects and case studies.
- Presenting the successes and learnings from your digital-first engagement.
- Educating leaders on the benefits of digital-first community engagement and encouraging them to become champions of digital-first engagement.
- Building transparency internally and externally by closing the loop with stakeholders. Building faith in digital amongst community.
- Development of internal systems and frameworks to support digital-first engagement, with 'Digital Champions' driving the cultural change.
- Resourcing beyond Monday to Friday 9-to-5pm to ensure digital-first is supported.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

In implementing these strategies to shift traditional and embedded attitudes towards engagement into a digital-first mindset, the following may be useful as you to seek to prepare your organisation for change:

- Consider your current spending on engagement activities. Can you make a case for scalability and cost savings which will resonate with your organisation?
- Develop a roll-out timeline. Try not to implement change rapidly and without a strategy to bring everyone on the journey.
- Consider the impacts on your community? What behavior changes will you be asking of them if you shift to a digital first approach?

These simple considerations can be useful in helping you deliver strategies towards preparing your organisation for digital-first community engagement.

Planning Digital-First Engagement

Process design continues to be a challenge for practitioners in digital engagement with it frequently treated as a 'set and forget' exercise.

Shifting thinking to a digital-first mindset requires thinking about which digital tools you will use, when and why you are using them and also deeper consideration of what you are going to ask your community to do and answer during the activity.

Planning for digital-first community engagement needs to focus on identifying and accessing audiences online, providing engaging digital content and information, scaffolding learning and feedback opportunities and building better transparency by publishing data and results.

COMMON CHALLENGES

- Limited understanding of which tools to use and when.
- Time constraints for planning engagement.
- Over reliance on surveys and not knowing how to use other digital tools effectively.
- Too much risk.
- Audiences are too hard to access. Everyone is online.. But they are nowhere to be seen!

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

- Think about different types of input, qualitative and quantitative and which tools allow you to collect that information.
- Take a longer view of your digital engagement process. Are there different intervals where the activities, questions and tools change?
- Plan for digital-first engagement with reporting in mind.
- Have a policy and process for how you will deal with risky situations.
- Explore digital channels and understand where different communities congregate.
- Develop messaging which reaches and appeals to different groups.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Before you can arrive at the utopia of having a finely tuned and well equipped engagement team who is capable in planning for digital-first engagement, it's important to consider the following;

- Getting by-in for your program comes first. You won't be able to expect your team to grasp and execute digital-first project plans if they do not feel included in the transformation of your engagement program.
- Hold reasonable expectations. You cannot expect a quality digital-first program from a team which hasn't been effectively trained in digital-first principles, understands your digital platform and is capable of thinking beyond their ingrained way of doing business.
- Give it time. Allow for time to reflection, evaluation and peer support to improve planning practices to ensure that your digital-first programs continually evolve.

Planning for Continuous Engagement

One of the best ways to realise the benefits of digital-first community engagement is to utilise continuous engagement activities. This means thinking beyond the transactional mindset of project based consultations and instead utilising strategies to drive ongoing conversations with your community.

Strategies identified for driving continuous engagement include; issues identification programs; ongoing question and answer wikis; competitions; open forums where your community can talk about the things they want to talk about; advocacy campaigns; regular ideation; polling as well as live video.

By utilising some of these continuous engagement techniques you are able to maintain regular contact with your community, allow them to take control of issues which are important to them and help you get a better sense of issues and opportunities ahead of time.

COMMON CHALLENGES

- Managing community expectations, feedback/consultation.
- Data management of feedback to help provide background to projects before your get started.
- Sharing of data across departments/business areas, ensuring the organisation is using and protecting the data.
- Changing the corporate culture to invest in continuous engagement opportunities and community capacity building
- Internal buy-in to ongoing engagement activities and its return of investment.
- There is a internal perception that engaging outside of planned projects may not provide a cost benefit to the organisation.

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

- Use gamification principles to drive engagement e.g. ideas, challenges, quizzes, augmented reality challenges.
- Use engagement around pro-social activities i.e. fundraising.
- Establish an ongoing and regular forum discussion board to encourage meaningful conversations on a range of different topics.
- Build transparency and trust with your communities by being visible in online conversations and facilitating dialogue and discussion.
- Advocate on behalf of the community in a more meaningful agile way by promoting or opening dialogue on topical conversations on public debates.
- Use your digital space to have projects that promote and improve the communities capacity to understand the business or project.
- Use a single platform to engage or capture online feedback using a variety of accessible tools.
- Use digital channels such as Facebook to drive people into a light, but meaningful engagement.
- Empower your community champions to be subject matter experts and/or facilitators beyond 9-5pm.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

It may feel uncomfortable for your organisation and staff to understand the importance of continuous engagement. Taking consideration of the following may help you better implement strategies for planning for continuous engagement.

- Draw from your experience of your community. Understanding their interests, motivations and levels of trust with your organisation will greatly help you implement continuous engagement planning.
- Know where you stand. Position yourself as an advocate for community dialogue and your desire to better understand your community. Avoid being seen as a transactional organisation. Be a part of the conversation which your community are having out on the streets.
- You don't have to do everything. Identify the strategies which work for you and yoru community. Just because your neighbouring City is doing something doesn't mean it will necessarily resonate with your community. Choose the conversations and continuous engagement strategies most suited to you.

Using Digital Dialogue Techniques

A simple first step towards shifting your thinking towards digital-first community engagement is to consider digital dialogue principles. Digital dialogue is possibly one of the most neglected practices in digital-first community engagement. True digital-first community engagement must make a commitment to better harnessing this critical process. Identifying the types of conversations happening in your digital engagement space are critical for facilitators to ensure good engagement outcomes.

COMMON CHALLENGES

- Online forum questions are not effectively framed.
- Lack of facilitation occurs or fails to ensure a robust and healthy discussion.
- Identifying different types of dialogue and opportunities to shape discussion are missed.
- A lack of clear set of rules and guidelines around participation.

TYPES OF DIGITAL DIALOGUE

- Monologue – when participants visit a forum once, leave their comment, and never return.
- Debate – participants read and react to each other's posts. BUT, critically, they are competing to present the best argument. Their goal is to WIN the debate.
- Dialogue – when participants start to read and respond to each other's comments. They ask questions, they seek to understand, they build on other ideas.

FACILITATION BEST PRACTICE

- Greeting and welcoming participants.
- Thanking and acknowledging contributors.
- Enquiring, provoking, encouraging deeper participation.
- Reinforcing expectations and behaviours.
- Correcting misinformation and misunderstandings, direct people to information resources.
- Bringing participants back on topic.
- Resolving conflict and mediating arguments.
- Linking people together who express different views to gain different perspectives and positions.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

To help ensure the effective deployment of digital dialogue techniques, it's important to consider the following;

- You are the facilitator. To be successful at this practice you must treat it as if everyone were in the room with you in a traditional sense. You need to control the conversation, monitor the mood and change course if necessary.
- Don't be a destroyer of conversation. Allow people to discuss freely and avoid thanking everyone for their contribution.
- Know what's going on. Digital dialogue is about moving past a transaction. It allows you to be in-touch with the feedback, opinions and positions of your community well before your reporting stage and empowers you to better manage issues and inform your projects.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There are many obstacles to shifting to a truly digital-first community engagement environment and mindset. However, by confronting these challenges and developing strategies for overcoming them, you can better manage your transition.

Once you have successfully achieved organisational buy-in, developed the relevant skills capacity in your organisation and begun utilising digital-first principles and thinking, you will be better able to harness digital-first engagement to connect with your community.