

The rise of online engagement

How organisations are seeking meaningful engagement through online engagement platforms

It's no secret that online engagement is essential these days, but behind the buzz words and selfies how do organisations seek meaningful engagement with their stakeholders and communities without sacrificing connection, interaction and open ideas?

During the pandemic, the economy has been dealt a huge blow. The conversations about economic development are now more important than ever. In this 'new normal', how do we create the spaces and tools to enable these conversations to continue?

In this article, we explore what you need to consider to make sure your engagement on your projects can thrive and grow online despite the pandemic. We identify examples of how grass-roots engagement can be done successfully on your own digital turf and what to look for in the tools and applications that can support you to achieve your goals.

Online v traditional engagement

Online engagement is not a complete replacement for traditional engagement methods like public meetings, focus groups, citizens juries etc. It's a perfect adjunct to it and used correctly, can help you capture both your online and offline activity into one data set. They can work hand-in-hand, for example I-pad kiosks locked to your survey at a local shopping centre, combining both digital and face-to-face methods, can capture your data centrally and saves valuable resources.

Online engagement opens up new avenues and new audiences. Traditional methods often didn't activate the silent majority but with quick, simple (and sometimes incentivised) engagement available in a couple of clicks - your possible audience just got a whole lot bigger.

Online engagement also opens up whole new methods of engaging e.g., budget simulators, interactive maps / images and quick polls. These are all possible face-to-face but without careful capturing of data and sentiment it can often be difficult to quantify and take forward into decision making.

Data galore!

Within a project setting, consultation is vital to securing feedback on plans, facilitating discussions and raising awareness. A project can often succeed or fail due to the outcome of stakeholder engagement.

Working backwards, the goal of consultation is the data you need to proceed so knowing how and what you want to capture is critical.

Online engagement platforms are specifically created to assist you in capturing and assimilating data so making sure you have the right tools in your kit needs to be a primary objective. With the right digital software, you can transform how you seek, engage and collect your data.

Ongoing engagement allows you to be nimble, see results as they come in and respond to them. You can start to easily measure data month-on-month, see trends and report to your team with just one click. Even if staff members change across the project lifecycle, your data is there and project knowledge isn't lost.

Another benefit is being able to segment your data and tailor your actions e.g. see how many 'business owners' have completed your survey, email everyone in West Ward or gauge whether age is a factor in positivity or negativity to a project.

Safety, Moderation & Accessibility

Some of the key concerns around 'going online' are often security of personal and corporate information, the safety of the environment for those engaging (and how you moderate that) plus the questions around making sure you are accessible and open to all community members who may have specific needs, not be online or require translations.

It's important to do your homework into these significant issues before selecting your software and tool, plus being clear on what support you can get if you get stuck or if anything goes wrong.

Some things to look out for:

Where is data stored, is it encrypted and who can access your data?

How many site and project administrators can you have?

Can you set projects to public or private?

Are on-site translations available?

Does it meet WCAG Accessibility guidelines?

Is third-party moderation available and are basic filters in place?

Are IP addresses available for users and can you only allow one submission per IP address to avoid spam or multiple submissions?

Can you download surveys to paper forms and upload results?

Can you add notes, actions and files from offline engagement?

Online engagement software provides you with the peace of mind that all that is taken care of and you can concentrate on your projects and stakeholders. They are not all the same however, with Engagement Hub being the only solution which provides a complete stakeholder management system built-in so you can marry your online and offline data together, segment and tailor reports / communication and truly understand your audience through reporting from macro to micro level.

Case Study 1:

Fraser Coast Regional Council regularly use their online engagement platform (<https://frasercoast.engagementhub.com.au/>) to inform, consult and collaborate with their community.

Hailey Rickard from Fraser Coast Regional Council said "Online engagement has completely transformed our engagement process here on the Fraser Coast. By using an online platform, we have been able to create a community space for the life of our projects – engaging with the community along the whole journey. From our Recycled Water Strategy, to our Planning Scheme to Small Community planning – Engagement Hub has been useful in a vast array of projects.

As a local government, you are always concerned you aren't reaching the whole community – not everyone wants or has the time to attend a workshop or a drop-in session. Online engagement provides the opportunity to contribute in your own time – you can be on the couch having a 'cuppa' – and providing your feedback at the same time.

At Fraser Coast, we were able to easily adapt during COVID-19 last year as we already had an online engagement platform. We were able to create online portals (private project pages) for our community groups as a space where they could learn and work together. It also allowed us to be innovative in how we present information or engage with the community – including videos, interactive images and online mapping tools.

The data – so much data! The reporting and data functions have enabled us to be able to provide more in-depth analysis. That's made it so much easier to evaluate a project – including being able to evaluate in real time. For example, we've been able to provide fortnightly project updates during a project – tagging/ theming as you go or presenting decision makers with a comprehensive evaluation at the end of the project.

On the Fraser Coast we strive to 'build better communities'. Online engagement helps build our social license and community trust in what we are doing. It creates a space that the community know they can visit and see what you are doing, while also building your reach for community

involvement and feedback.”

Case Study 2:

Central West Local Land Services in NSW has found their online engagement hub (<https://engage.centralwest.lls.nsw.gov.au/>) a fun and convenient way to engage with their community and gain valuable feedback.

Community Engagement Officer Brooke Kirkman said that “Based on a strong need to ensure social, environmental and economic community values and needs are incorporated into local service delivery, (and a thing called a pandemic!) Central West Local Land Services took a leap towards online engagement and we haven’t looked back. By expanding on existing methods, we are now able to connect with a much broader audience. Reaching those who either simply prefer an online option or are unable to connect via more traditional channels.

Implementing an online engagement platform has allowed us to adopt a whole-system approach to meaningful engagement.

Despite the obvious appeal of a dynamic online platform, the real beauty lies in the ability to meet high performance standards in terms of a strong data and evidence base.

In a relatively short time, this technology has already proven to be an invaluable tool with the ability to import historical data from a multitude of sources, improving the capacity to build on, and identify community aspirations.”

Central West Local Land Services undertook a large data migration process in an effort to design a new Local Strategic Plan. The process, along with an extensive consultation campaign enabled the business to identify key themes for strategic development.

By adopting a fresh, holistic approach to engagement while increasing organisational capacity, online engagement has allowed Central West Local Land Services continue moving forward in leaps and bounds.

Case Study 3:

Lockyer Valley Regional Council has uses online engagement across the full range of Council services to increase the visibility and availability of consultation with their community - (<https://lockyervalley.engagementhub.com.au/>)

Neil Williamson from Lockyer Valley Regional Council said “We are actively using our engagement platform for a large scope of projects that range from environmental planning, public art, skatepark design consultation, Council policies and more. The online platform means consultations can be accessed 24 hours a day – offering greater flexibility for hard-to-reach stakeholders with limited availability to engage.

The greatest benefit of pairing online engagement with more traditional methods is that we gain richer feedback from our community which helps Council make decisions that reflect the values and aspirations of our local residents and businesses”

The cost of not engaging online

The pandemic has been quick to demonstrate the cost of not shifting to how users want to interact with you and are able to reach you.

Embracing online engagement as normal practice, with staff and resources to match, is not only how to survive the chaos wreaked by COVID-19 but to grow through it with new, exciting and permanent ways of collaborating meaningfully with your communities and stakeholders.

Research, address concerns and find your way to establishing your own digital turf. The cost of not doing so is too great.

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