



Engagementworks

Community Engagement Basics

Session 7 – Video 3

How to Engage Online Successfully

How to Engage Online Successfully

Introduction

In this lesson we –

- Outline our guiding principles for successful online engagement
- Offer some of the key lessons learnt about engaging online
- Explain critical success factors for engaging online



Guiding Principles

We begin with guiding principles, first of all -

1. Start planning early

Start planning an online consultation exercise early on. Define what information should be provided to the target group, and in what format.

Remember that first impressions count. If you can't get attention within the first 30 seconds then your visitors will quickly depart.

Decide how long the online consultation should be run, who will be responsible for it and how the input received will feed into existing timetables for decision-making.

2. Demonstrate commitment

Ensure leadership and visible commitment to the online consultation at the highest level and communicate this clearly from the outset. Explain the purpose of the consultation (e.g. scoping new policy issues, developing draft legislation, evaluating policy implementation), where the results will be published and how they will be used.



3. Guarantee personal data protection

Guarantees for the protection of personal data must be provided for participants in online consultations. The implications for personal data protection will vary with the form of data collection chosen (e.g. anonymous submissions, online registration or password access for restricted groups).



4. Tailor your approach to fit your target group

Identify the participants whose opinions are being sought (e.g. general public, experts, youth) and adapt the online consultation to their capacities and expectations (e.g. language, terminology). Provide additional support to enable participants with special needs (e.g. physical disabilities, social exclusion) to participate. Focus on relationships Offer value to the people in your community with a goal of building real relationships



5. Integrate online consultation with traditional methods

Consider the use of traditional methods in association with online consultations (e.g. public roundtables plus dedicated websites). An approach based on multiple channels is likely to be more successful in reaching and engaging citizens than reliance upon a single medium.

6. Test and adapt your tools

Before launching an online consultation exercise, ensure that the tools chosen (e.g. software, questionnaires) have undergone pilot testing. Adapt the tools on the basis of feedback from participants and identify promising information and communication technologies (ICTs) for future consultations (e.g. mobile phone messaging).

7. Promote your online consultation

Invest adequate effort and resources to ensure that potential participants are aware that an online consultation will be launched and know how to take part (e.g. press conferences, advertising, links to websites, emails). Identify external partners who could help raise awareness and facilitate participation (e.g. NGOs, business associations).



8. Analyse the results

Ensure that sufficient time, resources and expertise are available to provide thorough analysis of the input received in the course of the online consultation. The use of closed or multiple choice questions will allow for automatic processing, while free text replies will require a far greater investment in human resources. Such considerations should be taken into account from the outset when designing the online consultation.



9. Provide feedback

Publish the results of the online consultation as soon as possible and inform participants of the next steps in the policy-making process. Ensure that participants are informed of how the results were used in reaching decisions.

10. Evaluate the consultation process and its impacts

Process evaluation aims to identify the main problems encountered, whether the consultation reached the target group and the level of participant satisfaction. Evaluating the impact of consultation requires an estimation of whether participants' input had an identifiable impact on the content of the final policy decision. Evaluation results should be communicated widely and may, in turn, prompt fruitful public debate on the benefits and drawbacks of online consultation.

Engaging with Success Online

Now we come to some of the key lessons learnt from experience of engaging online:

- Talk about what people are interested in – tell them why you need their input. People have very short attention spans and will very quickly become bored with information they have little or no interest in. Think about it like reading a newspaper. First people look at the headline. If it catches their attention they read the first sentence. If they are still captivated they will read on. Otherwise, they move on to the next story. It is the same online...
- Draw a crowd - More people makes a safer space. There will always be trolls. They don't carry so much weight in a crowd
- Be an active participant – be responsive. Listen to what people are saying and respond. Let them know that you are real people
- Let the community get accustomed to engaging online - adopt a good practice approach that includes information sharing, listening and learning.
- Set realistic and meaningful targets



Critical Success Factors for Engaging Online

Here are some of the factors that are critical to successful online engagement -

- Moderation and facilitation – people need to feel safe and the conversation needs to remain relevant
- Forum questions – concrete and visceral – you need to know how people feel about an issue and their reasons. Open ended appreciative type questions get people engaged.
- Key messages – clear and unambiguous. If you can't explain it clearly then you probably don't understand it yourself
- Appealing website – cover the senses and consider people with disabilities
- Forum functionality – easy to use
- Site functionality
- Usability – easy to navigate – the fewer clicks the more likely it is that people will stay engaged
- Accessibility – meets THE Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- Accessibility – available in public places
- Promotion – get the message out - if people don't know about it they won't come.



Conclusion

In this lesson we have focussed on a principles based approach to online engagement and identified 10 guiding principles. We have shared the collective experience of online service providers with the key lessons learnt for successfully engaging online. Finally, we have included 10 factors that we believe are critical to successful online engagement.

