

Best Practice and Emerging Trends: Navigating online public engagement

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About two weeks ago I spoke on a panel with Chris Haller of Urban Interactive Studio and Tim Bonneman of Intelletics at the International Association of Public Participation's North American conference. Tim had organized the session as a conversation around the topic of "Navigating the Online Public Engagement Space," with the intent to explore the issues and challenges facing communities and organizations who are trying to figure out how to use online public engagement in their work, and navigate the dozens of potential ways to do that.

This was a fantastic opportunity for me personally to think big with two guys who are among the leaders in the U.S on this topic. Even though I work with Chris in his role as founder and publisher of EngagingCities, as well as on client projects, it's great to get some space to talk about the big issues. And the experience was made all the better by Tim's session leadership and the involvement of our colleagues from communities and tech providers across the continent.

Since I'm not a programmer or a tool-maker, my role was to frame up the big issues and the big trends-- the stuff that I get to see by virtue of my role with EngagingCities and with my other consulting and publishing firm, the Wise Economy Workshop.

So I set my own comments within the two perspectives of my professional life: as a user of several online public engagement tools through my consulting work, and as an observer of the field through Engaging Cities. And I thought it might be useful to share those big issues with you.

Here's what I told them from underneath my consulting hat:

1) The most important thing you can probably do is make sure that you have matched the tool you choose to your objectives. One of the most consistent errors I have seen is

people selecting an app or platform because they like how it looks, or it seems cool or exciting, or another town use it for their project and loved it. But it is not a one size fits all, or even an easy off-the-rack kind of situation.

The project or initiative leadership needs to ask a lot of questions and dig deeply. Are we trying to do something ongoing or project specific? Are we talking to the general public or a more targeted subset? Are we seeking feedback or something more engaged? The broader the scope of the work, the harder it is to get it right. And while three years ago, you may have had few practical choices, that's not the case today. There are dozens of great tools out there, designed for different purposes and audiences, but not all of them have the same level of visibility or marketing reach. The best-known one might, or might not, be the best choice for your specific needs. And chances are that a long or complex initiative may need more than one approach. Chris noted how often he sees communities looking for "uber-tools," and we all agreed that no tool can pull that off.

2) One issue that we often overlook in that process of figuring out our online public engagement is **fitting our tools to our capacity**. Online public engagement often looks appealing to a local government or organization because we don't have to have our staff spend time printing boards and staffing evening meetings. But online public engagement also requires staff capacity, just a different kind. And often communities don't account for that in the process of deciding what tools to use.

Here's an example: I recently managed an online public engagement process that used one of the most well-known ideation tools in the US public sector today. This platform is very well developed, and one of the most powerful things it does is enable project staff to respond to ideas generated by the public. The power in this is the fact that the responses help people know that the agency is listening and actually pays attention to what's going on with the site. Without that response, it's hard for people to know whether the feedback they're taking the time to share is actually getting anyone's attention or not. This client, which wanted to use the platform because of its reputation, didn't have the political willpower or the staff capacity to respond...and as the consultant, I didn't have enough information to do it for them. So this critical element of the platform went unused, they received a dwindling amount of public participation as the project progressed, and the silence became noticeable.

3) **Channel, channel channel**. I harp on this in all public engagement, whether online or in person. A wide open platform does no one any good. Good teachers manage their students' ability to meet their objectives through how they structure the learning

process. They don't just throw it open and let whatever happens happen.

A public engagement process that doesn't leverage social media and provide some opportunity somewhere for open public comments will probably garner complaints, but feedback through wide open channels is more likely to be an antagonistic, stress-level-jacking waste of time than anything else. If we want people to give us feedback that has value, that helps us figure out what to do and what not to do, we need to take a page from those teachers, and structure the feedback activities and channels so that people participate with us, not just throw up random responses that may or may not have anything to do with what we all need to figure out.

4) Wherever possible, **crowdsource wisdom, not just opinions**. Give them something meaningful to chew on. People don't want to be just asked their opinion. They--at least a sizeable number of the they's -- want to be part of the solution. So take a page from crowdsourcing: enable them to contribute to solving the problem.

In my role as EngagingCities' Editor, I focus on the leading edge of interface between technology and public engagement. We try to bring our readers the information, trends, new ideas that they might not find otherwise. As a result, I read a lot of pretty obscure blogs--and learn a lot about online engagement trends across the world, including many that I would have never encountered otherwise.

Here's what I see as the strongest emerging trends at this moment--I'd be very interested in whether you see the same, or if you're perceiving something else.

1) **Visual interfaces**. as the technology matures, I find the growth of interfaces and interaction methods that rely on maps, photos and graphics fascinating. They're being used more and more to not only improve people's grasp of the information, but also to give them new methods of participating. I'm a verbally-oriented person myself, but I know enough to know that I am the minority. Most people do not want to read a paragraph, let alone write one to get their opinion across, but historically that's what we have defaulted to. Accommodating other types of communication, both for people who can't write and those who just don't want to, is critical to

broadening engagement. The fact that Pinterest and Tumblr are the two fastest growing social media sites tells us a lot.

2) **It's a multi-platform world.** I swap between my phone and tablet and computer without thinking about it, including flipping over to one when the other is running slow. If that's the case for an old lady like me who still has a computer, how much more is that the case for the increasing number of people who have learned to default to their mobile--or who, among less privileged populations, do most or all of their internet access through mobile? We provide interpreters for public meetings, but a community that decides to use only web-based methods is excluding a large subset of their population in exactly the same manner they are trying to avoid. And typically the ones that they're excluding are the young and disadvantaged. An unintended but undesirable side effect.

3) We're **starting to move past using online for only idea-generating or feedback.** If you're thinking about developing an app, I would say, don't do something that looks like a survey or a "hey! Tell us your great idea!!" thing. I assure you, it's been done and done over again. But we are starting to see platforms that actually enable discussion, consensus-building, meaningful evaluation of alternatives, deliberation, decision making. The higher order tasks that we truly need if we are going to, as I've been pushing for all over, crowdsource wisdom. We're starting to see some interesting tools that take people through the impacts of different choices, and we're starting to see the development of platforms that actually lead people through a deliberate process, much like a professional facilitator would.

4) **Open data is moving swiftly from a "gee whiz, look what we can do!" to a transformative tool that's starting to live up to its long-vaunted potential.** I am all in favor of hackathons, especially if they pull people into thinking transformationally about the way communities work and how they can meet their new and articles challenges. But hackathons alone won't develop the deep fixes that we need. They're just a first step. But we're starting to see more and more that people who have gotten a taste of how open data

can help connect people more meaningfully to their communities, and that's yoking a much-needed new set of skills and, more importantly, perspective, to the challenges that face us.

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