

QUICKNOTES

Using Online Tools for Public Engagement

Social media and online engagement tools provide new opportunities for planners to collect and share information with the community and engage in conversations with community members. Increasingly, these tools and platforms—which can include information gathering with voting tools and surveys, collecting responses on Twitter and Facebook, and hosting interactive Twitter Town Halls and Google Hangouts—are becoming a part of local public engagement strategies, as they offer new forms of interaction with community members, create opportunities to expand the reach of traditional engagement activities, and produce additional data to support planning activities.

Local governments can look to social media platforms and other online engagement tools to overcome some of the barriers posed by traditional engagement strategies. Public meetings can be sparsely attended and, whether they're held on weekday evenings or weekend mornings, will always be at time when segments of the population cannot attend. And, as shown by survey data from Public Agenda, many local officials feel that the public can be both disengaged and distrustful, and that public meetings are often dominated by "professional citizens" and people with narrow agendas. Online tools and social media platforms remove the time constraints of in-person meetings, offer opportunities for community members to engage in new and interactive ways, and can bring new voices into the engagement process.

Recommendation 1: Supplement Existing Engagement Strategies

Online engagement tools offer an opportunity to expand and diversify participation in the engagement process, bringing more people to the (metaphorical) table. Social media platforms and online engagement tools provide the most benefit when they are combined with traditional outreach strategies. Online engagement tools and social media platforms, combined with traditional outreach, can broaden outreach and engage community members in new ways.

Nearly a quarter of U.S. adults do not use the Internet at home. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 15 percent do not use the Internet at all, and nine percent use it outside the home but do not have a home connection. These numbers underscore the importance of continuing to use traditional media and outreach platforms, so that bringing new technologies into outreach strategies does not mean increasing engagement with one segment of the population, only to lose the voices of another.

Recommendation 2: Choose the Right Tools for the Situation

From social media platforms to more advanced online engagement tools, there are many online engagement tools to choose from. These include both qualitative and quantitative tools and can generally be categorized into those that allow sharing information, those that allow for the collecting of information, and those that provide an opportunity for the exchange of information. As reflected by these categorizations, these tools allow for different levels of engagement and interaction.

When selecting tools, it is important to consider the issue being addressed, the point in the planning process, and the ability of planning staff to support or manage the technology being used. This includes staff capacity to respond to social media posts or other interactive features.

To choose the right tools, it is also important to look at who you are trying to reach or engage with and to understand who uses different social media platforms. According to the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of adults online use social networking platforms, with 42 percent reporting that they use mul-

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The Cuyahoga County Planning
Commission maintains a Twitter
account to share news.



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tiple social networking platforms. Facebook is used by the majority of online adults under age 64, while Twitter and Instagram usage is concentrated in the 18–29 age group, with around one-third of Internet users in this age group reporting using these platforms.

Assessing and evaluating throughout the planning process will help ensure both that tools are being used effectively and that the right tools are being used. Look at areas where high levels of engagement are occurring, areas where lower levels are occurring, and who is engaging with what tools and platforms. Continuous evaluation of online engagement strategies can also ensure that they can be successfully applied to future planning efforts.

Recommendation 3: Use the Data

Collecting the data is only part of the process. Online tools and social media platforms offer the opportunity for an open exchange of information between planners and community members. And just as with traditional outreach and engagement processes, it's not just collecting information (data), but what you do with it that is a measure of the engagement process.

The use of social media and online engagement platforms has the potential to produce a lot of data, whether in the forms of votes on community preferences, survey results, Facebook comments, or exchanges on Twitter, among others, so it is important to have a strategy and staff capacity in place to manage and analyze this information to ensure that it is used in a meaningful way.

Recommendation 4: Connect the Dots

When expanding engagement strategies beyond traditional outreach, it is important to connect the dots. Outreach at the front end of the planning process has happened across multiple platforms, so it needs to continue at the end of the process. And outcomes need to be shared across these same platforms. If comments are solicited on Facebook and Twitter, outcomes should be shared on Facebook and Twitter. This helps ensure that you are building a quality presence on the outreach platforms that you are using and helps to ensure that community members who participated are able to see the results of their engagement with the process, which is important to building continued engagement.

Summary

Social media platforms and online outreach tools offer new opportunities for planners to engage and interact with the community throughout the planning process. When you're deciding which tools to use, it is important to consider who is using them and how, and which are best suited to the specific issue or part of the planning process. As with traditional outreach strategies, it is not just sharing information and collecting input, but analyzing and incorporating that information. Using social media platforms and online engagement tools can produce significant amounts of data, so it is important to select tools that can be supported (both in terms of technology and staffing capacity) and have a strategy in place to manage and analyze the data collected. Finally, if social media is used to collect information, social media should be used to share outcomes.

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