

Know your community?

100 ideas to help engage
your community online

Second Edition



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“What was a winner from our point of view was the simplicity of the actual site for our users. Our community could navigate their way through the site without any particular issues, and that included people of all age groups and all levels of education.”

Anne Bransdon
Communications Manager
Broken Hill City Council

Hi there,

This little book was first put together by the team at Bang the Table back in 2009 when we were still babes in the woods. The business was just two years old, and our online engagement experience ran to around 200 projects, almost all in Australia.

Now we work with over 200 clients in five countries—Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and most recently, the USA. In 2015 alone, we hosted more than 2300 consultations on our specialist online engagement platforms EngagementHQ and Budget Allocator.

It's this experience that has helped us develop the second iteration of the 100 Ideas booklet. We've written it with the time-poor in mind. And we've tried to walk the line between creating a resource that will help get you up and running with online engagement, without weighing you down with too much information.

We hope it will provide a starting point for people working across a range of sectors; community engagement, public relations, communications and project management.

A few of our ideas are controversial, many are common sense; we hope all will help you navigate across the new and burgeoning field of online community engagement.

Ask us about the companion Online Engagement Guide if you'd like more detail. If you're looking for more practice-based articles, there's a good chance you'll find it on our website at bangthetable.com.

You might also want to take a look at our online engagement platform, EngagementHQ, at engagementhq.com. It's the only platform designed from the ground up for engaging communities online.

We'd love to hear from you.

The Bang the Table team





1

Why Engage Online?

There are many reasons to engage your community online using a platform like EngagementHQ. Here are our top ten.

1

Between 88% to 94% of people have internet access in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the USA. No traditional engagement technique can offer this level of accessibility for this proportion of the community.

2

The majority of people just don't have the time to get active in their community. Online engagement makes it convenient for people to get involved.

3

Online engagement provides an accessible option for getting people involved in important conversations; busy people like working parents, younger people, mobility impaired people and shift workers.

4

Online engagement can crack open long-term issues by bringing more people into your conversations.

5

The online environment provides a secure and safe space for people to learn and test assumptions, positions and options.

6

The relative freedom of an anonymous online environment removes the barriers of aggressiveness, loudness and power that may be present at community meetings and which often stifle debate.

7

Online engagement systems are cost effective and efficient. You can contact more potential participants directly at less cost.

8

Online engagement can change an organisation's culture by improving organisational transparency and responsiveness.

9

Online engagement means you can help manage the terms of a conversation before it manages you.

10

Online engagement tools can support community engagement at all levels of the engagement spectrum; from informing through consultation, involvement, collaboration, and even empowerment.



2

Planning

Planning to engage people online requires a disciplined thought process just like any other form of strategic planning.

1 Map your project. What's the overall strategic objective of your project? Will it support a decision-making process? Build capacity within your target community? Develop relationships within your community and between your organisation and the community? What will it change and what are the impacts?

2 Identify your stakeholders. Who will be affected by the project outcomes and the process? Who might be interested?

3 Clarify your communications objectives. What is the communications/ relationship objective for each stakeholder group throughout the various project phases? Is it to inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower?

4 Measure your success. How will you know you've done a good job? Will you use qualitative or quantitative metrics? Will you measure the number of people involved, the number of unique insights, the quality of input or dialogue, or all of the above?

5 Detail specific goals for each measure. While it's easy to get overexcited about the prospect of huge numbers of people flocking to your site, it's important to be realistic from the outset. Visitor numbers will actually reflect a mix of your target audience size, your marketing efforts, and the project's natural appeal.

6 Promote your project. How will people hear about your project? Putting it online and not telling anyone about it will guarantee tumbleweeds. Your response rate will be higher if you can directly market to your audience via well established channels.

7 Develop rich content about your project. It's not good enough to prepare a 300-page report and expect your community to wade through its wordy contents. Think about videos, slideshows, image galleries and breaking your documents into bite-sized, mobile-friendly chunks.

8 Design your question. Think carefully about the questions you want to ask your audience. Make them as visceral, concrete and specific as possible. Ensure they pass the pub test (or would you be embarrassed to say them out loud?).

9 Define your management regime. Decide how you will interact with your community. Online forum facilitation, for example, can be time consuming; determine your resourcing levels beforehand rather than on the run.

10 Keep in touch. At the outset, tell your community how their contributions will be used and when and how you will be getting back to them on the consultation's outcomes. And always remember to say thank you for participating!



"We found that the consultation opened up to people of all kinds, including people who had lower levels of literacy, or couldn't debate their opinion. We took that as meaning the forums were a truly democratic space."

Claire Hatch
Director
Cultural Value



3

Content

Great content will make or break your consultation process. It's not good enough to print out a 300-page draft plan and leave it in the foyer for people to discover by accident.

EngagementHQ allows you to present your content in a variety of bite sized accessible formats.

1 Websites are neither books nor government reports. You have less than ten seconds to convince an online audience to stay. Write punchy copy that's colourful and tells a compelling story. Every word counts.

2 Start with a clear project name that makes sense to Google (and other search engines). Don't try to be too fancy!

3 Clarify and highlight your call-to-action. Exactly What do you most want your audience to do? Fill in a survey? Join a discussion? Provide an idea? Pin a suggestion on a map?

4 Write in plain English. This means (1) keeping sentences short, (2) using active verbs, (3) using you and we, (4) using words the reader will understand, (5) giving instructions where appropriate, (6) avoiding nominalisations, and (7) occasionally using lists.

5 Provide a clear incentive to participate. We don't mean offer an iPad as a prize for every consultation you run! However, you must identify and clearly state the benefits for the participant to take time out of their day to provide you with ideas, feedback and/or background information.

6 If you're consulting on a very large document, include both a short and long summary. Your community can access the information they need without having to dig too deep. Cut documents down into bite-size, downloadable and printable pieces.

7 Upload documents in a couple different forms (i.e. doc, .txt, .pdf, .html). This makes them accessible for people using screen readers and the like.

8 Video is the single most effective medium for conveying complex ideas. Use a video to talk about the rationale for your plan, invite people to participate, discuss specific hot issues or showcase community vox pops.

9 Slide-shows are a great way to present information. Take key messages from your summary document and put them into a slide-show with supporting imagery. Stimulate people's imagination using image galleries. This works when getting people to think about a project's present, past or future potential.

10 Take new rich content—videos, photos, slide shows, image-decks—and embed them directly into the descriptive areas of your feedback tools.

4

Promotion

If your project is to have a chance of success, people need to know about it. Online community engagement is no different from traditional methods in this respect.

To give your project a chance of success, people will need to know about it!

1 Place a prominent link to your consultation site on your corporate website. This will drive around 30% of your traffic.

2 Pick a short and easy to remember URL. Make sure it appears on all collateral, media releases and in any editorial pieces you get into the local paper. This will account for another 30% of your traffic.

3 Make sure your project is easily found by search engines. Use appropriate keywords in your project description and let the world know about it through social media.

4 Put a note about the project in with your next mail-out or rates notice. Advertise in local school newsletters. Hand out branded bookmarks at your local library.

5 Hand out leaflets at public events, in the mall, at public transport stops, wherever your audience may frequent.

6 Find local groups with a online and/or a social media presence and ask their administrators to share a link to your consultation.

7 Direct email your entire staff and relevant local organisations. Ask them to pass it on to friends and family.

8 Display signage at local libraries, internet cafes and any other places where people access the web. Ask them to make your consultation their default homepages.ps.

9 Talk to local schools about the possibility of integrating the consultation process into appropriate lesson plans.

10 Engage online repeatedly and build a community of people to directly market to each time you launch a project.

Accessibility

Consultation accessibility has many facets. For a person with computer skills it has one meaning, for a person without, something else; for a person without sight, it holds another meaning entirely.

EngagementHQ is accessibility audited and WCAG 2.0 AA compliant.

1

Be 100% sure your site (and your content) is WCAG compliant.

2

Integrate an online process with other traditional engagement methods. Specialist online tools, such as those provided by EngagementHQ, will help broaden and deepen the engagement experience.

3

Ask your local library to make your project website the default homepage on community-accessible computers. Then train the librarians to facilitate patrons' engagement with your consultation and encourage contributions.

4

Install web-accessible digital kiosks in a public place such as a foyer that gets a lot of foot traffic. Make sure your project is set as the default homepage and instructions easy and straightforward.

5

Have WiFi-enabled devices such as laptops or tablets available at all public events and encourage participation with dedicated engagement facilitators.

6

Integrate an online translation service, such as the Google translation widget, into your website to ensure that community members across diverse cultural backgrounds can take part in the conversation.

7

Work with local community centers to promote education and access to the internet for older people.

8

Break up large documents into bite-size pieces that can easily be delivered online. Try using infographics, photos, and/or videos to convey relevant information and encourage online sharing.

9

If you're undertaking stakeholder engagement with a small group of people without reliable computer or internet access, including with disadvantaged communities, why not donate a few laptops or tablets? The gift says thank you and leaves them with the digital literacy skills and capacity to engage in the future.

10

Use your online consultation as an opportunity to make a profound difference to a few people's lives. Treat it as a capacity building and skills development exercise and train your stakeholders in civic engagement, computer and internet use, and English literacy.



“Using EngagementHQ has meant that we are engaging more effectively than ever before. Of course we’d tried traditional community engagement methods in the past—you know, public meetings, face-to-face—but we’d never gotten the numbers that the online forum is pulling in for us. It’s the first time we’ve used online and it’s been great.”

Simon Adcock
Project Manager

Anonymity

While there is some debate around the topic of anonymity, we firmly believe in its value. Anonymity removes barriers, breaks down power relations and frees up individual expression. EngagementHQ permits both anonymous and authenticated engagement.

1 Anonymity removes a major barrier to entry for most people. How do we know this? The proof is in the pudding. Over 95% of our online participants choose a username that protects their anonymity.

2 Anonymity breaks down power relationships between participants. We've observed conversations between 50-year-olds and 18-year-olds that would never take place face-to-face.

3 Anonymity removes power relations between the participant and the consulting organisation.

4 Anonymity removes the possibility of bias due to sex, ethnicity and age.

5 Anonymity allows an individual to express an opinion without the fear of intimidation. It greatly reduces the ability of anyone to bully or humiliate others, particularly in an online discussion forum.

6 Anonymity allows an individual to express an opinion that might be contrary to that of their employer.

7 Anonymity allows an individual to express an opinion that their position in life may not otherwise permit.

8 Anonymity ensures that the consultation's analysis focuses entirely on what has been said, rather than who has said it. The logic of the argument becomes paramount as opposed to the emotion or power behind it.

9 Ensuring that a person's username is the same as their legal name would require such a high onus of proof that 95% of people would be put off joining your conversation in the first place.

10 Even if a site enforced legal name usage, there are those who would break the rules and use a pseudonym anyway. Such actions within the first few minutes of sign up can create a negative mindset, leading to ongoing negative behaviour.



7

Moderation

Moderation is the process of checking participant-generated content to ensure it falls within your site rules. Moderation is all about keeping your site safe so that everybody feels welcome, no-one is scared to contribute, no-one leaves the site (or engagement process) with a bad feeling (or out of fear), and you are legally protected.

EngagementHQ is moderated 24/7 by our experienced team.

1 **Automated moderation** is when software does the job for you. It's limited to checking comments for bad language and can help identify spam.

2 **Pre-moderation** is when each comment is read before it goes live to the site. It is often used as a knee-jerk reaction to an inflated perception of risk and is generally regarded as poor community engagement practice. Pre-moderation does NOT work in threaded discussion forums.

3 **Post-moderation** is when each comment is read within a reasonable period of time after it goes live to the site. Providing moderators are checking the forum regularly, post-moderation is perfectly safe.

4 **Community moderation** is when the community nominates the comments they feel should not be on the site. The final call still lies with the moderator on whether it should or should not be removed.

5 **Independent, third party moderation** is the best way to remove suggestions of bias or censorship in your moderation.

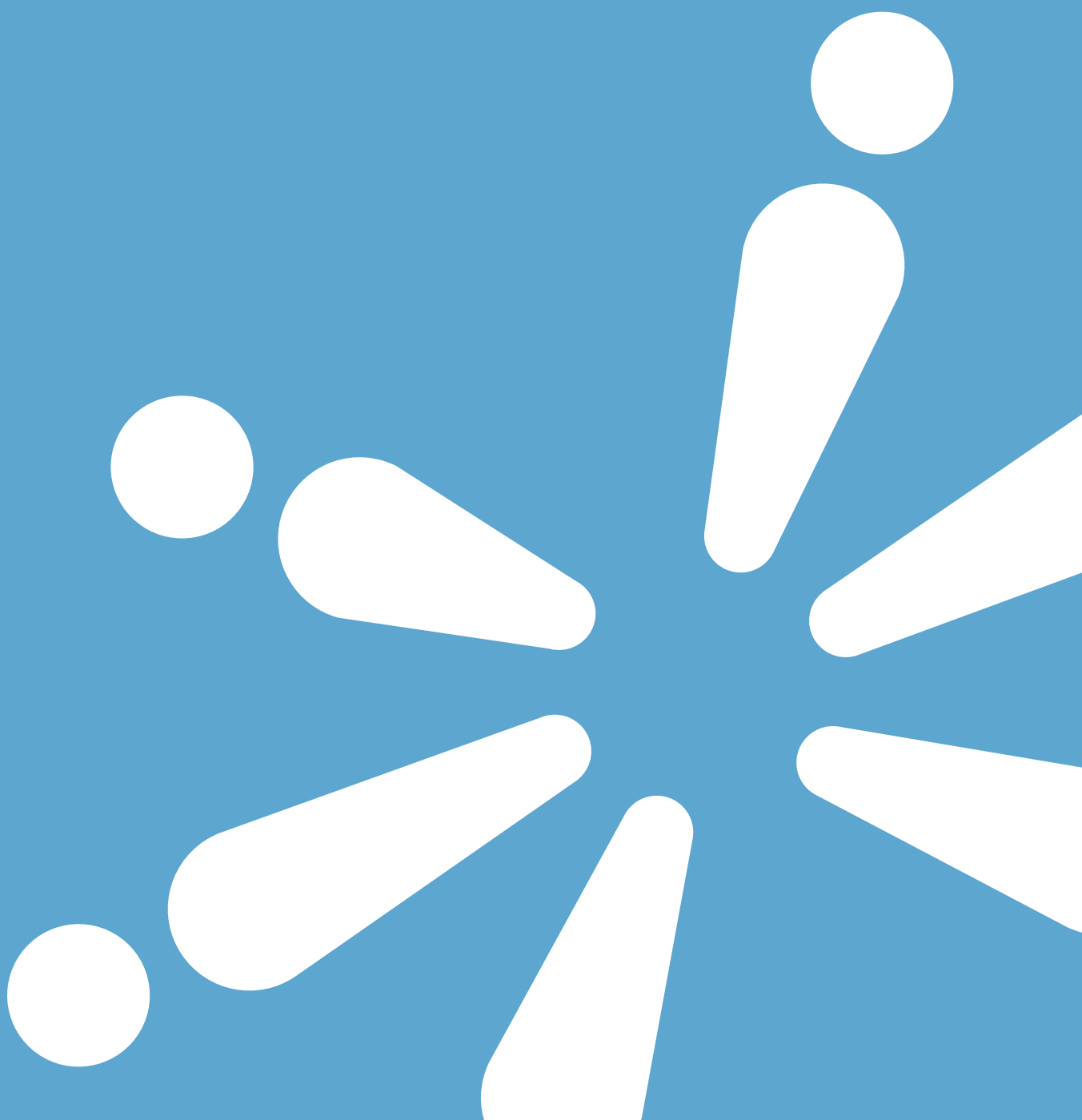
6 Moderation rules can vary from forum to forum depending on the audience, but the basics are to keep things clean, respectful and on-topic. Make these clear at the outset and stick to them.

7 Editing a community member's comments either before or after they go live leaves you open to suggestions of censorship. It's best to either remove or accept them.

8 Be sure to let the commenter know if, when and why you have removed one of their comments and invite them to resubmit within the rules.

9 Remain open to the argument that you've got it wrong and that a comment is actually legitimate and should be re-instated.

10 Consistent, active, independent, visible moderation considerably lessens the probability of high impact, unwelcome material being posted on your forum.



“Bang the Table is constantly revising and updating the features [of EngagementHQ] because they specialise in the online space. It really does give people a convenient opportunity to express themselves and can help everyone learn something new.”

Max Hardy
Director
Max Hardy Consulting

Facilitation

While moderation is about not losing people from your project, facilitation is about driving deeper participation and/or keeping people involved in the process.

Deciding on when, how, how often, or indeed if, you should involve yourself in your community's conversations, is an important strategic decision. Forum facilitation and management can be time consuming and resource intensive; it needs to be considered carefully.

1 Online forum management, in particular, may be as hands-on or as hands-off as you want. Think through your willingness to apply resources to the task and be consistent.

2 There are a number of different models of forum facilitation or management. These range from no interaction through to deep immersion. The no interaction model is preferred by most government organisations. However, if you have the time, budget and resources, you can get more involved by posting corrections, answering questions or asking your own follow-up questions to participants.

3 Think about whether you want to enter the conversation as yourself or as an anonymous representative of your organisation, for example a Project Coordinator.

4 Nominate the person in your organisation that is responsible for responding to queries or correcting misinformation ahead of time.

5 Don't get sucked into a debate with an individual on the forum. There's little to be gained from arguing with a community member.

6 If the project is likely to generate a lot of questions, consider using EngagementHQ's Q&A tool so that you can answer any query that comes up.

7 It's okay not to get involved in the discussion at all. However, from the outset, make it clear your site is a space for community-generated conversation and your organisation is listening.

8 If you have the resources, engage an external facilitator to dig deep into the underlying rationale behind visitor's comments and positions.

9 Regularly update the resources on your site in response to the questions and issues raised in the forum.

10 Add rich media content to the header, or background of any of the online feedback tools.

Reporting

If you're using your website for any kind of research—including community engagement—you'll need both qualitative and quantitative reports on the discussions. EngagementHQ includes integrated qualitative and quantitative analysis and reporting tools.

1 At Bang the Table, we use a preliminary categorisation typology that places site visitors into one of three groups; (1) Aware; (2) Informed; or (3) Engaged. Aware visitors are people that visit your website, but then leave right away. Informed visitors browse your site, download documents, perhaps watch a video or read other people's contributions. Engaged visitors create user generated content by joining a forum, completing a survey, pinning an idea to a map, telling you their personal story, etc.

2 Quantitative reporting of visitation, activity and contribution patterns is critical. It will help you compare performance against your expectations and other engagement strategies.

3 The raw numbers from your report are useful in understanding and explaining the level of interest in your project i.e. visitor, comment and registration numbers, etc.

4 Investigate the ratios between key indicators. For example, the ratio of registrations to visitors can give you an instant feel for the level of engagement around an issue.

5 Your IT department may try to convince you that Google Analytics (GA) can give you everything you need in the way of quantitative analytics. It can't. GA was designed for people interested in making their websites commercial. While some of its features are useful, a lot aren't and more importantly, it can't give you the information you need to analyse your consultation outcomes.

6 Big numbers don't necessarily mean success. For example, if you measure success by community satisfaction with your draft policy, then large numbers of submissions may point to a policy failure.

7 Small numbers don't necessarily mean failure. For example, large numbers of visitors but very few comments can indicate a general level of satisfaction with your proposal.

8 If you get lots of visitors but only a few that criticize your proposal, this could indicate that you're dealing with a noisy minority. While this doesn't mean you should ignore their views, it does mean that they should be taken into a broader social context.

9 If you get lots of visitors, a high rate of conversion to registrations and a heap of comments, chances are you have a very hot issue on your hands.

10 Tag your comments by quality and topics for a richer understanding of the conversation.



“There’s a saying that without data you are just another person with an opinion. Bang the Table gives you hard data on the numbers of people participating in community debate and the ability to demonstrate that the loudest voice does not necessarily reflect the majority view.

In one case the ‘High Volume’ of opposition turned out to be just two people... a fact revealed by the flexible, transparent consultation model set up by Bang the Table.”

Chris Ford
Managing Director
Ford Comm Consulting



10

Follow Up

How do you feel when you go to a lot of effort to do something for someone and they can't even be bothered to say thank you? Many government departments simply forget to say thanks.

EngagementHQ's integrated email newsletter system makes this easy.

1 For most of the community, government is an impenetrable, confusing black hole! Quality feedback can go some way to overcoming this.

2 Following up with your community demonstrates your respect for participants.

3 Following up with your community demonstrates your transparency as an organisation.

4 Keeping your community and stakeholders in the loop makes it easier to seek out their opinions during subsequent rounds of consultation..

5 An initial “thank you for your involvement” action can be as simple as sending out an email, postcard or letter. EngagementHQ allows you to segment your database per project and send out an online newsletter to consultation participants.

6 Provide either a detailed or summary report of the outcomes of your consultation process.

7 Once the consultation report has been considered by decision-makers, provide a report back to the community on the suggestions that have been adopted, which haven’t and why.

8 Colour your reports with plenty of graphics, images and participant-generated quotes from the engagement process.

9 Prepare your reports in a number of formats (Word, PDF, HTML, RTF) to ensure that they are accessible to the widest possible range of people.

10 And remember, most people won’t read a report, but they might just watch a video.

Our Story

At Bang the Table, we wanted to build something that mattered. So we created the EngagementHQ community engagement & Budget Allocator participatory budgeting platforms. Virtual spaces where individuals of all persuasions can safely connect to decision-makers and have their say at a time and in a place that meets their needs.

Bang the Table draws on decades of experience in community engagement, communications, design and information technology. Since 2007, our systems have been adopted by over 300 public and private sector organisations around the world, which helped them reach over 3-million people about local, state and national projects.

Accessible technology combined with empathic methodology reaches more of your community; which is why we walk with you every step of the way, providing complete support before, during, and post-consultation.

The increasing demand for web 3.0 technologies has opened up any number of discussions that just about anyone can enter. With this in mind, Bang the Table places great value on respect, integrity, leading practice and quality service.

To learn more, visit our website: bangthetable.com



