



Forward

How technology improves community engagement

by Lisa Attygalle

How new technologies are lending fresh perspectives and putting power back into the hands of communities.

Technology has changed the way we engage the community. Fifteen years ago, there wasn't a way for the majority of the community to share their opinion without calling a town hall meeting, voting, or going door-to-door. Now, people share their opinion without being asked.

There is a growing trend towards civic participation, localism, and being active in community-based decision-making. In this age of technology and connectivity, everyone has a platform and everyone has a voice. If people care about something they will talk about it. Loudly. And if you're not present in that discussion or better yet, leading that discussion, there's a problem.

Studies show that a community's sense of belonging is directly connected with their ability to understand and help shape the vision for their community. Increasingly, citizens are looking less to their elected representative to create change in their communities. They want to be involved in creating the change themselves. They want to be engaged.

The possibilities of technology and the trend toward community involvement have spurred a renewed interest in community engagement. It is not a new field by any means, but there is definitely new-found energy.

I believe this revitalization has occurred because of two main factors: First, the communication methods available to us have grown exponentially, and second, technology has made deeper engagement possible online, which can expand the breadth, depth and quality of engagement.

The exponential growth of community engagement methods

Technology enables those who want to be involved in their community. It allows people to participate across geography, regardless of timing, and without physical or psychological barriers. It allows people to champion their ideas, share broadly with their networks, and advocate for change in ways that

weren't previously accessible.

Technology has also enabled the facilitation side of community engagement in

You have seven seconds to capture someone's attention.

many ways. Online surveys and polls are easier to set up and administer compared to their traditional versions. The amount of manual input is reduced and the tabulation and analysis of the data are built into the tools. The average cost per person is less than offline methods. And, the breadth of exposure widens with sharing capabilities available through integration with social networks and email.

Notwithstanding the advancements in technology, the fundamental principles of designing an engagement strategy are still relevant. I love using the Community Engagement Continuum as a framework and checkpoint when designing engagement strategies. The continuum was originally developed by IAP2 in the early 1990s and has been adapted and evolved ever since. Despite the modifications, I still prefer the original, mostly for its simplicity.

When online communication methods are layered onto the continuum, it becomes evident just how many options there are to engage the community in the online space alone. This makes the work of designing engagement strategies both easier and harder, while raising a series of new considerations:

Your audience: How do they receive information, how can you reach them, where are they already interacting, are there any barriers to engagement?

Your resources at hand: What's your budget, do you have creative people or resources to use?

How your engagement will be iterative: How are you engaging the community to generate ideas rather than waiting until you have the answers?

The appropriate level of engagement: How complex is the initiative? How much time do you have? How interested is the community? How do you want the community to feel at the end of the initiative?

The term *buy-in* is often used when referring to the goal of engagement activities: "We need the community to buy-in to the idea of X, Y, and Z." But it's



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important to note that buy-in should only be the goal when informing, consulting, or involving. Buy-in is when the community feels informed and agrees with the decisions made, whereas ownership is when the community feels part of the decisions made.

Consider both online and offline engagement strategies and link them together. The lower levels of engagement are easy to facilitate online since the technology has been around for over 10 years. Most initiatives have websites, newsletters, email lists, and social media accounts that make informing easier than it's ever been before. Informing used to be done by paper fliers, going door-to-door, by radio and television, which are all more expensive than the online methods available to us today. It's also easier to track the reach of how many people saw the message – opened, clicked, interacted with it – than with offline informing methods.

You can also use online and offline versions of

the same strategy to reach a diverse and potentially wider audience. For example, an online survey and a paper survey, or social media and a paper comment card. Consider tactics that bridge online and offline, like an online survey on a tablet at an event, or inviting people who vote online to an in-person community roundtable.

How do you ensure that the community is informed?

Most of us look at the engagement continuum and aspire to invite deeper levels of engagement – which is great – but informing is still absolutely critical at every stage. Informing is a fundamental component of consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering. For example, you would not be wise to invite community-wide decision-making where people make decisions based on varying information.

Informing is also the way by which you demonstrate accountability to the community. Once you consult, the community needs to be informed of what happened – what did you learn, what new thinking emerged, what is the most popular option at this stage, is there consensus? This feedback loop is fundamental. Engagement is iterative, so these feedback loops of informing and engaging foster progress.

How will your message or invitation get through the clutter?

People are inundated with information and there are many communication channels vying for their attention. To help your message get through the clutter, Dave Biggs, Chief Engagement Officer at MetroQuest, shares these four tips from the advertising world for designing engagement strategies:

- 1. Know your audience:** Decide who your primary audience is and design your strategy with them in mind. Then think about your two secondary audiences. You'll be more successful if you design for someone rather than designing for everyone.
- 2. The seven second rule:** You have seven seconds to capture someone's attention. People are busy, they're driving past signs, skimming the paper and scrolling quickly through their Facebook news feed. If you don't capture someone's attention within seven seconds, you'll have to try again later.
- 3. The seven minute rule:** Once you have someone's attention, you've only got it for seven minutes.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO FACILITATE BUDGET DECISIONS

The City of Valencia has a budget of \$1.5 million to spend on public services and asked citizens to propose ways to use it. In a final shortlist of 17 issues (the engagement process started with crowd-sourced issue and idea generation), citizens can vote on how they would like the money to be spent over the coming year. The only constraint is that the total must not exceed \$1.5 million. Participants are asked to consider each issue and decide whether they want the city to move ahead with funding the proposals.

All of the options under consideration have been grouped under different topics:

- Health and Safety
- Recreation
- City Improvements
- Police and Fire Services
- Environment
- Education

Within each topic, participants can rate how much they support or oppose each option and weight the topics in terms of importance to them. Participants will have more influence on topics they identify as important.

The city used Ethelo to generate a database of scenarios by looking for actionable combinations of options. In this decision, there are 22,359 such scenarios that fit within the budget criteria. Ethelo analyses the vote information and ranks all the possible scenarios, according to the strength of group support.

While technology makes the process easier, the biggest barrier to community-based decision-making is fear. Fear that the community will want something that is out of scope or out of budget. Fear that consensus won't be reached. Fear that the decision will only represent the opinions of part of the community.

Using an online community decision-making platform helps to ameliorate these fears and still allows us to assert control through the setting of parameters, demonstration of accountability, and ensuring consensus is reached.

The above example is based on an interactive hypothetical case study, available at ethelodecisions.com/sectors/consulting.

Design your engagement activity to take fewer than seven minutes, or if that's not possible, split it up into seven-minute sections. Always let the person know how much time their involvement will take.

- 4. Use visuals over text:** Visuals resonate with us more quickly, evoke emotion, and are more memorable than text. Use visuals for every kind of engagement you do.

Engagement is not one-size-fits-all and what is appropriate for one initiative will not be appropriate

What is appropriate for one initiative will not be appropriate for the next.

for the next, just as the online communication method that works well for one subgroup within your community will not work for another.

Learn and be curious about what other communities are doing. With the growth in engagement methods available to us, it's unlikely you will be able to try them all. But if you are strategic and always keep your audience at the front and centre of your efforts, you will likely create real opportunities for people to engage with you.

The possibilities of community decision-making

It is only with the advent of newer technology platforms that deeper forms of engagement are even possible online. Now we can engage the community with crowdsourcing, online mapping, online budgeting, and online decision-making, using platforms such as IdeaScale, MetroQuest, TownHall Social, CrowdGauge, and Delib, to name a few.

If there's one area of community engagement where I see huge potential for the use of technology, it is in community-based decision-making: Placing the final decision making power in the hands of the community. It is the deepest form of engagement on the Community Engagement Continuum.

The only way we could do community-based decision-making a decade ago was through voting. Now, large scale decision-making has become possible and easy to conduct because of advances in online technologies and the intersection of data collection, data calculation, and social reach.

Ethelo Decisions is one platform that makes community decision-making possible. It combines functionality like surveying, commenting, and analytical processing to solve pressing community

and organizational challenges. With technology like this, the potential use-cases are endless – from public consultations, to strategy development, planning, program and service design, participatory budgeting, fund distribution, dispute resolution, and policy development.

Setting parameters

Community-based decision-making platforms allow for setting criteria or constraints that must be met for all possible solution scenarios. This way you will never run into the situation where the community chooses a solution that doesn't fit within your mandate. For example, when electing board members or a working group, your parameters may be that the board must include 10 members, of which at least 40 percent are male, 40 percent are female, one is an accountant, and two are people with lived experience.

With each additional parameter you can see how many scenarios are possible. With these parameters set, all solutions will then fit within your required mandates.

Demonstrating accountability

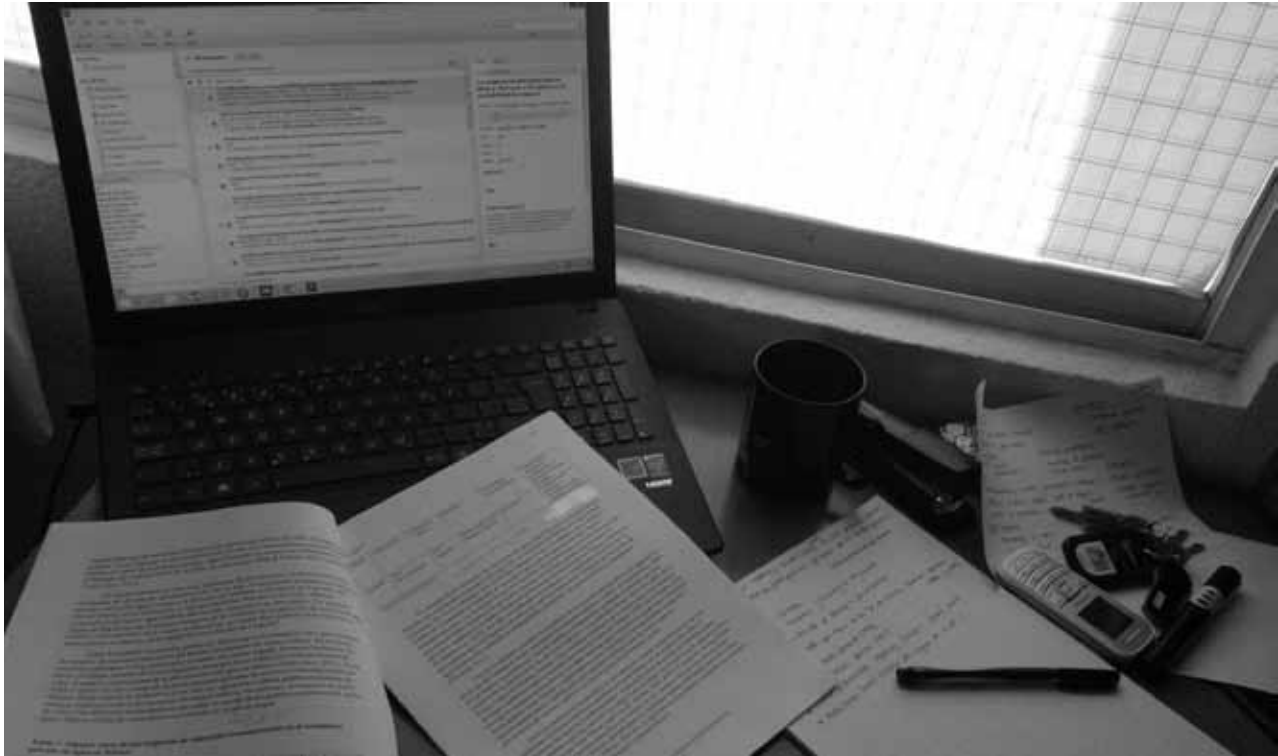
There's always a question of accountability with a community-based decision-making process – how can I be sure that the full community voice is represented? I would argue that you need to do everything in your power to ensure all demographics are invited in to your process and that there aren't barriers to participation, but at the end of the day the community needs to be accountable for sharing its opinion if it wants its opinion to count. It's the same as a traditional voting system.

You can, of course, use technology to assist in ensuring accountability as well. The process can be designed to be invite-only. If you have specific people that must be involved, you can restrict access and only analyze the results once all participants, or a certain percentage of participants, have contributed. You can also ask demographic information, such as postal code, age, or background, to ensure that the contributions are representative of the community. And if you're worried about misuse of the system, these platforms typically have a built-in functionality that tracks input to detect and correct double voting.

Getting to consensus

How do you ensure that the final decision is something the community wants? What if the community is fragmented?

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Each platform is designed with different analysis algorithms. For example, Ethelo finds and ranks outcomes that optimize satisfaction and minimize resistance due to unfairness and polarization; it calculates the will and wisdom of different stakeholders into a set of possible solutions that are most likely to succeed.

For example, if one population group prefers Option A, can live with Option B, and strongly opposes Option C, and another group prefers Option C, can live with Option B, and strongly opposes Option A, a standard vote would result in Option A or C winning, depending on which group was larger. This outcome would lead to a lot of unhappy people. Ethelo will prefer solutions where overall satisfaction levels are higher and support is united rather than split, so in the scenario above Option B would likely win.

The fear that we bring when considering community-based decision-making really comes down to an issue of control. With these new technologies, we can know that whatever happens inside will be safe and supportive. We can let go of the fear and allow the community to decide. That's an exciting and progressive step!

So what's stopping this mindset shift? What are the barriers within your own organization that would limit the scope of your community engagement activities?

Ask your community what they want. Consider the ways you currently engage your community, and try one (or more) of the many online methods. Who knows? It may lead to greater engagement, improved outcomes, and a fulfilling sense of community ownership.

What's stopping this mindset shift?

Lisa Attygalle is Tamarack's director of engagement (on leave until September, 2016) and is passionate about engagement, customer loyalty, and the use of technology to communicate and engage. Possible means approaching situations with optimism by saying "yes," "tell me more," and "let's make that happen!" Reach Lisa at lisa@tamarackcommunity.ca. //