



Technology, Tools and Techniques to Reach Your Community

Local governments frequently use technology to engage their communities in public meetings and the decision-making process. Many such options are outlined in new resources available from the Institute for Local Government (ILG), the research and education affiliate of the League and the California State Association of Counties.

Benefits of Increased Public Engagement

Increasing public engagement in your community offers many benefits. Engaging the public early in the decision-making process can help local public agencies avoid costly pitfalls and mistakes.

Involving residents and others in the process can generate more support for the final decisions reached by city or county decision-makers. Constituents who have helped shape a proposed policy, project or program typically have a better understanding of the issues at hand and the reasoning behind the final decision. Participation helps generate ownership. Effective communication about the public's involvement in a local decision can broaden community support.

Most California cities have diverse populations, and many communities are experiencing rapid demographic changes. Community composition varies by age, gender, ethnicity, immigrant status and income level. Incorporating technology into standard public engagement channels, such as flyers and mailers, can increase the reach of an agency's engagement efforts.

Exploring Technology Options and Costs

Local governments use a wide variety of technology options in their efforts to connect with their communities. While some technology may be costly, many options are reasonably priced and the range of available choices is broad enough to be feasible for any local government, from large to small. Examine the costs and benefits associated with the options that seem to offer the best fit for your agency's needs.

Related Resources

Visit these links to view other related documents:

- Free resources on public engagement and technology online at www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement-technology.
- *Taking the Bite Out of Blogs: Ethics in Cyberspace* available at www.ca-ilg.org/dealing-blogsphere.
- *Local Agency Opportunities for Website Transparency* available at www.ca-ilg.org/post/local-agency-website-transparency-opportunities.

Maximize communications and outreach methods already in place. All local agencies have outreach and engagement channels in place. Local governments can take advantage of these current vehicles to better engage the public as well. Although many of these options cost only staff time, that is nevertheless a very valuable resource. Communication channels such as newsletters, websites, social media, blogs, local government TV channels and online surveys are vital to engaging the public and can often be better utilized by local agencies. The following table outlines tips on these communication vehicles and examples of local governments that are maximizing these tools.

Technology Tools for Local Governments: A Brief Overview

Tool	Description	Things to Consider	Example
Website	Websites function as venues that cities can use to connect with and engage the public. This includes providing news about community events, updates on programs and projects, public meeting agendas and minutes and general information about what is happening in the city or a specific department.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create visible and inviting ways for people to connect and participate. • Establish a go-to section of the website for specific proposals currently under consideration. • Allow staff to quickly edit and add material in their area of expertise. • Visit top websites to get ideas on how to organize information and invite participation. • Ensure that the site is accessible for people with disabilities. 	www.chulavista.gov/
Social Media	Social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook have large and increasing audiences. A Pew Research Center study found that among U.S. adults nearly 10 percent get their news from Twitter and 30 percent from Facebook. Other popular social media sites include LinkedIn and YouTube.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek out online posts and conversations on topics related to your agency's interests. • Post to your agency's existing accounts where you already have a following. • Use visuals, graphics and maps to add interest to posts. • Keep posts concise. Use links to direct users to your agency website for more detailed information. 	www.facebook.com/CityofRiverside

Blogs and Newsletters	Newsletters and blogs provide residents and local businesses with articles on a variety of topics. Local governments can use these tools to deliver general information or create specific distribution lists (for e-newsletters) or blogs for individual departments, projects or proposals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your agency’s website software to assess its existing capacity for blogs and e-newsletters. • Make sure the notification system does not require duplicate subscriptions. • Consider if the blog should enable comments on posts or use an information-only approach. • Examine whether it is preferable to create a blog for a project or if an existing blog can do the job. 	http://redwoodcitypd.blogspot.com/
Local Agency TV Channels	These channels broadcast live meetings and share other information about cities and local agency departments. Cities can use this as a way to engage the public by including overviews, videos and other information on proposed developments, projects and programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the public access government channel to cablecast city council meetings, election programming, local emergency announcements and other agency events and programs of interest. • Consider working with ethnic media TV channels if appropriate. 	https://www.youtube.com/user/cupertinocitychannel?feature=watch
Online Surveys	Informal online surveys can be developed internally by agency staff with minimal software costs. Properly administered surveys can be a useful tool for gathering public input on budgeting and strategic plan updates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the survey short. • Pre-test the questions with select community members. • Announce the survey through multiple channels. • If possible, include demographic questions (age, gender, zip code, etc.) to help evaluate whether responders generally represent the community’s demographic composition. 	www.monterey.org/en-us/residents/communitysurvey.aspx
Open Data	Information and data are made freely available online in a format that can be opened with commonly used computer applications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency data and computer readable datasets become more accessible for viewers. • Staff should explore which information is of high interest to constituents and could be shared. • Open data provides an opportunity to enhance public trust through transparency 	http://data.cityofsanacruz.com/

		<p>and better involve the public in discussions on the budget and projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data must be provided in accessible and readily understood formats for community use. 	
Code for America	<p>Code for America is a non-profit organization that helps residents and governments harness technology to solve community problems, using a collaborative approach.</p>	<p>Code for America:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds a competitive process for cities to obtain free technical professional fellows for one year to solve civic problems using technology; • Offers free resources for all interested cities and counties; and • Creates new software companies and jobs. 	<p>http://codeforamerica.org/</p>
Crowdsourcing	<p>Crowdsourcing brings external input to an innovation process that was traditionally performed internally. For example, a city may take a function once performed by employees and outsource it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used for a wide variety of purposes from gathering feedback on a particular project or proposal to setting budget priorities and spreading the word about missing persons. 	<p>http://www.engageoakland.com/</p>
Mobile Apps	<p>Mobile apps for smartphones and tablets can be developed for all the services a city offers or can be used for specific projects and proposals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality and colorful e-magazines can be created using website and blog feeds. • Large amounts of agency information or smaller project-specific sets can be presented. • Mobile apps offer interactive options for users to request or report information ranging from public works repairs to crimes in progress and more. 	<p>http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/appcenter/index.html</p>

Emerging Technologies

For local jurisdictions interested in pursuing more advanced options, technology allowing open access to public agency data and the development of mobile apps is now more accessible to local governments.

Open Data

Open data refers to making information and data freely available online. The data must be presented in “usable form,” which generally consists of a clear visual format and easy access via commonly used computer software. Local agencies can use this approach to post information such as maps, data sets, tables and documents. This allows residents and other interested parties to view and analyze the data. Many cities throughout California are using open data platforms for a variety of purposes that include sharing census redistricting data and geographic information systems (GIS) and establishing local budget priorities.

Local government agencies that have implemented open data cite several benefits:

- **Increased transparency.** If all information is open and accessible to the public, it helps convey that the agency’s operations are transparent;
- **Time and cost savings.** Open data can save local jurisdictions some of the costs and staff time associated with requests for public records; and
- **Checks and balances.** Because open data allows all community members access to the same information, it can create a checks and balances system to identify if data has been manipulated.

Other things to consider include:

- **The need for education.** Agency staff and officials may need to be educated on the meaning of open data and how its use can affect and benefit their particular jurisdiction.
- **Local governments have limited resources.** Because of this, it’s necessary to present a compelling case for why open data is important. It can be helpful to identify a champion — for example, the city manager, chief information officer or a city council member — to build support from other departments and elected officials.
- **Governance structure.** Once the decision to implement open data has been made, the local government will need to establish policies and procedures to ensure the quality and uniformity of the data.

The City of Santa Cruz (<http://data.cityofsantacruz.com/>) and the City of Sacramento (<http://portal.cityofsacramento.org/OpenData>) provide two examples of how local agencies are offering residents access to open data.

“In addition to increasing transparency and accountability — which can lead to greater trust with constituents — open data can enable innovators to build useful applications, analysts to find helpful insights and innovators to create derivative value. Done right, there is little downside and a high-value upside.”
Palo Alto Chief Information Officer Jonathan Reichental

Mobile Apps

Once your agency has its data, such as tables and budget information, in a usable form, agency staff can convert this information into mobile apps. These apps can be developed for all the services a city offers, bundling large amounts of information, or can be used for specific departments, projects and proposals. Uses can range from municipal services and cultural attractions to civic engagement. It is always important to keep the user in mind and focus on the information the user needs or seeks.

With increasing numbers of people using smartphones, many local jurisdictions are developing mobile apps for their residents. For example, San Diego County has developed an app center (www.sdcounty.ca.gov/appcenter/index.html) to provide residents access to county information and services, such as fire and police and reports on beach water quality, while on the go. The City of Elk Grove (www.elkgrovecity.org/ask-elk-grove/mobile.asp) also offers an app that allows residents to obtain city news and information on public meetings and events and submit non-emergency service requests.

Code for America

Code for America (<http://codeforamerica.org/>), a nonprofit organization, focuses on how technology can help governments operate more collaboratively and efficiently. Local agencies can partner with Code for America through programs such as:

- Fellowship — links technology volunteers with local agencies to build apps and inspire innovative thinking;
- Brigade — connects volunteers and government employees to help sustain open data infrastructure; and
- Peer Network — allows government officials and staff to share resources, best practices and open data policies.

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is the practice of engaging large groups of people, including online communities, to obtain input. It can be used for a wide variety of purposes from gathering feedback on a particular project or proposal to setting budget priorities or spreading the word about missing persons. Several for-profit and nonprofit vendors have developed crowdsourcing technology designed with local government in mind. These platforms are becoming an increasingly popular method for connecting with community members who might not otherwise participate through traditional means, such as city council meetings or public hearings.

Crowdsourcing platforms typically use vibrant graphic design and offer sophisticated statistical analysis of inputs. Some might think of these efforts as online town hall meetings where ideas are shared and the most popular ones can emerge. Engage Oakland (www.engageoakland.com/) and the City of Salinas (www.peakdemocracy.com/portals/164) offer innovative examples of such efforts.

One potential concern about online engagement is the voluntary and often anonymous nature of the participation, which may not be completely representative of the entire community. While this issue is perhaps most frequently raised about crowdsourcing, it also applies to other communication channels.

Conclusion

With increasing numbers of people using online platforms to get news and information, local jurisdictions have additional opportunities to reach and connect with their communities. The options outlined here should be used in conjunction with nontechnical, traditional engagement and outreach efforts as part of a comprehensive approach.

Interested in Learning More?

The Institute for Local Government will be offering a free webinar “Technology, Tools and Techniques to Improve Public Engagement” on June 18, 2014, from 10:00 to 11:00 am. Panelists will discuss:

- Ideas on how to use technology to get the word out and encourage more participation in the public engagement process;
- Methods of coordinating digital engagement with in-person meetings and typically traditional forms of outreach to generate more ideas and input from the community;
- Tips on how to use this input to enhance local agency decision-making; and

- Examples of cities and counties that are reaching and engaging new audiences.

To register, visit www.ca-ilg.org/post/technology-tools-and-techniques-improve-public-engagement.

About the Institute for Local Government

ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement visit www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement. If you would like to access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/post/technology-tools-and-techniques-reach-your-community.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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