



Online engagement can encourage greater participation by providing more avenues for people to share their views. They are not as limited by constraints like location, time, mobility and access. As 86% of Australians have access to the internet¹, there is a huge audience available to engage. Many communities are well-represented online.

Why do we need Online Tools?

- Online tools can be used at every stage of engagement, from informing to empowering, over a range of platforms.
- Online engagement encourages everyone to contribute, whereas face-to-face engagement favours the more outspoken.
- Engaging online provides an accessible option for people from a range of communities and abilities to contribute.
- Utilising online tools is generally more cost-effective and requires less time than traditional engagement methods.
- As well as the tools themselves, engaging online allows for the collection of real-time data and analytics that can be useful e.g. best time to engage, location of users, what topics people are researching.

How can Online Tools be used to encourage engagement?

Using the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum for Engagement, online tools can be categorised by their levels of client participation. Some online tools fit distinctly into one category but others, like social media, can be used across multiple categories.

1. *Inform* – provide balanced and objective information.
 - Emails
 - Newsletters
 - Websites
 - Social media channels
2. *Consult* – obtain feedback on plans, activities and decisions and *involve* – ensure concerns and aspirations are evident.
 - Social media discussions
 - Polls
 - Surveys

3. *Collaborate* – partner with clients to make decisions together.
 - Online forums and workshops
 - Social media/instant messaging discussions
 - Document co-creation
4. *Empower* – facilitate client leaderships and control over decision making.
 - Online voting
 - Community discussion forums
 - Video meetings
 - Moderated blog

When using online tools, the largest number of participants typically give the least depth of engagement. This means that while some methods provide a quick, easy way for people to vote or comment, other methods require more commitment and a deeper level of engagement. This does not mean information gathered using a larger audience is not valuable, it just means that care needs to be taken when considering the tools, audience and purpose.

It is also important to consider how clients will be targeted for participation. In some cases, it might be easier to consider partnering with an existing online community e.g. using a local Facebook page to ask a poll question to a specific audience. In other cases, it is better to consider using a traditional method to facilitate the use of an online tool e.g. taking tablet with an online survey to an aged-care facility to encourage older people to engage.

Technical aspects to consider

Some of these tools use existing platforms, and some require additional software. It is always important to consider the following when implementing online tools:

- Cost
- Resources (staff, skills)
- Functionality (ease of use, can they be used for multiple projects?)

Remember that there is no single approach that works for everyone. Identifying audiences and understanding how to create messages that are relevant and meaningful to them is the key to engaging using online tools.

1 - Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017, Household Use of Information Technology (HUIT)
<<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0>>



Other considerations when using Online Tools:

- *Language and communication.* People may have access to the internet but may not have the appropriate language or communication skills to engage. They may not be confident with written English, require translation software, large font or text-to-audio translation.
- *Skills.* Although access to the internet is widespread, not everyone has the skills to confidently engage. Around 60% of Australians rated their computer skills as “poor” or worse. 25% of the population surveyed said they “can’t use computers”². Although online tools can be extremely useful, they need to be used in conjunction with traditional methods to ensure everyone is able to participate.
- *Privacy.* Clients need to have their privacy concerns addressed. They must be aware of what data is being collected and the purpose of data collection. Some online tools e.g. social media, most information is publically accessible. This may not be an appropriate tool for a sensitive topic.
- *Moderation.* When utilising public forums, it is important to have rules in place for appropriate conduct and content. Tools like forums and social media often require a moderator to enforce the rules and guide the conversation. This can be labour intensive.

Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources available to with the decision to use online tools to engage:

[IAP2 Canada - Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation](#)

[Queensland Department of Public Works – Online Community Engagement Guideline](#)

[Bang the Table – 6 Tips for Choosing Community Engagement Tools](#)

[Digital Community Engagement in Australia](#)

[A User Guide to Online Engagement Tools](#)