

## Ten Top Tips for Creating an Engaging Online Consultation Space

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**There is much more to a successful online consultation than having a pretty website.**

Yes, a site needs to look smart and deliver the goods design-wise, but with the main objective being to rally community participation it's crucial that you deliver a site based on sound methodology and highly engaging content.

Of course, there is no single element of a site that will galvanise community opinion. It is fair to say however, that sites that have a built-in, bona-fide "care factor" carry a far higher success rate than those that don't.

It's common sense really, and it goes to the heart of any human relationship. Simply put, if you demonstrate respect for your community by putting some thought, effort and creativity into your site, they will thank you; not through words but through the action of getting more engaged in the conversation.

Before we start, it's worth considering the various objectives of a successful online community or stakeholder engagement site:

**The end objective** is in the main, to listen to the genuine opinion of a broad community base. To achieve this, there are a number of objectives that slot into each area:

- **The tone of a site** should be one that is refreshing, friendly, professional and enthusiastic. This will set the best environment to creating the kind of relationship that will engender community participation.
- **The content of the site** should provide text and visual aids that clarifies the issues and motivates participation. This may require some outside of the box thinking and thoughtful consideration.
- **The structure of the site** should position key information at top and keep the page content short, sharp and to the point. Keep in mind that people will be opening the site on computers, each displaying various amounts of "screen area".
- **The design of the site** should be professional and easy to navigate. Ensure that uniformity of font type and size are key considerations.

### 1. **Visceral, concrete discussion topics**

The best sites connect with their target communities by using concrete, emotionally engaging issues that people can get their teeth into and their heads around. A draft management plan in its raw form is not likely to stir community emotion, not even in the most engaged citizen. To cater to the community's interest, reach into the plan's specifics. Tease them out, reshape them and season them so that they can be easily digested by a broad audience.

This first analysis of your project will help you to develop the structure, tone and content of your site.

1. Are you consulting on an issue that is both emotional and tangible? If not, can the content of the consultation be reframed to be both emotional and tangible?
2. If your consultation concerns an issue that is less than concrete – for example a Vision Statement – have you adjusted your expectations regarding the level of community interest and site activity?
3. Have you managed to translate dry content into interesting, relevant content?

## 2. Good bone structure

The screen area that your site visitor first opens lands on is prime digital real estate.

A user will in fact, focus 80% to 90% of their attention on the information that is displayed when they first arrive - too much scrolling and the visitor loses focus.

1. Have you drafted a plan for the kinds of content you would like to load onto site?
2. Have you prioritised the content? Are your most important items at the top of the screen?
3. Have you considered screen area on other computers? Open the site on a laptop. Where does the content sit?

## 3. Pithy copy – Call your community to action

Introducing your site to visitors is like greeting people at the door of an event. People will want to be greeted warmly, be told what they can expect inside and understand what opportunities they will have when they enter.

Set yourself a limit of 200 words to achieve a crisp, articulate introduction that's free from techno babble and government jargon. But while professionalism is important to maintain, don't be afraid to express interest and zeal. The best way to generate enthusiasm is, of course, to be enthusiastic yourself. This will also go a long way to help alleviate a site visitor from feeling uneasy or intimidated.

Along similar lines, good design considers the needs of the user. You do have some control over this, especially in terms of how you set and use your text.

Text that is laid out using a consistent font type and size makes a site not only visually more appealing, but easier to take in and navigate around. Resist the temptation to highlight random words using *italics*, **bold**, underline, *colour*, large fonts in **strange** and *mysterious* ways; it is **unprofessional, distracting and a poor substitute for clean crisp layout and copy.**

The better site examples do not rely on bold or italics to emphasize their point, instead using vibrant, meaningful copy and clear structure to engage their audiences.

1. Is your title a clear “call to action”
2. Does your copy outline why the consultation input is important to your organisation?
3. Does your copy state why the consultation matters to the reader?
4. Does your introduction state how the reader's input will be used?

#### **4. Surveys & Polls – Gather swift opinion**

Using a pointed and precise survey within your online engagement site can harvest community opinion swiftly. The most effective are used as thoughtful communication exercises that canvass questions that will also be of interest to the community. People are more likely to answer your questions if they can see a direct personal benefit; they want to provide their opinion rather than a long list of personal information.

Consider that at least 30% of your questions should pose issues or subjects that will feed back some kind of benefit to the community.

1. Is your survey short? A one question poll is best; any more than eight questions and you will have lost your audience
2. Will the questions you've posed feed into the broader engagement process?
3. Have you asked questions that consider community needs rather than your needs?

#### **5. Video – Deliver an icebreaker**

Adding a locally made video to your site can act as an “icebreaker”, opening a window onto the issue at hand and giving the community an opportunity to eyeball your organisation.

A video adds movement and visual dimension and delivers accessibility to those who won't read the documents.

You don't need to be the next Tarrantino or Hitchcock for it to be engaging. In fact, people tend to like video that has a “built in the back shed” feel to it, and has been created using amateur or even mobile phone based equipment.

But give it a twist. Take the mayor for a coffee and ask him or her questions at the local cafe. Interview a few locals in the street and tape their responses. Again, it doesn't need to be “high art”, but making it less formal and even a little fun can do wonders for audience uptake.

*For some great examples of how video has been used as a community engagement resource and tips on how to create a great video visit our blog. [www.corporate.bangthetable.com/blog](http://www.corporate.bangthetable.com/blog)*

You can also use the site to invite video submissions from your community. This can be especially useful in terms of place making exercises. Why not stir the pot of community

imagination and offer a prize to the video that best encapsulates the message? A local art identity could judge the entries.

1. Have you created a video that is less than 3 minutes in length? With such a tight time frame you will both stay on track and on target.
2. Have you posted a transcript of the video in the library on the site to comply with best practice accessibility?
3. Have you made a simple, cheap and effective video using a PowerPoint presentation? Just load up the content and create a voice over using the programs software.

## **5. Photographs – Create a powerful visual pull**

A well chosen photo can dramatically alter how a visitor will relate to your site.

70 – 80% of humans are primarily visually disposed. This means that supplementing your introductory text with a well chosen photo or illustration that visually tells the story will speak to a large percentage of your community.

1. Are your photographs directly relevant to the project?
2. Have you considered how your photographic images related to organisational branding?
3. Have you considered the sizing of your photographs? Are they pushing other content off the screen?

## **6. Documents- Provide rich, satisfying content**

A well stocked library is like a well stocked pantry; rich in all kinds of content that pleases the information requirements for all kinds of visitors. With this analogy in mind, who will be coming to dinner?

Each of the stakeholder groups that you've mapped out in your planning process will invariably hold different interests. This space is where you can serve information that will satisfy and provide them with what they need to make the best decision that they can.

Large reports can also be chunked into specifics that make it easier for your community to navigate through. For some this may be demographically based, for others it may be segmented geographically, for others it may be issues or amenities oriented.

Equally, if you have a lengthy management plan or something similar, why not give it some community heft by translating into an uncomplicated PowerPoint presentation replete with interesting pictures and straightforward explanations.

Your community will appreciate your effort (even if they don't say so).

1. Have you broken larger documents down into bite sized chunks?

2. Have you loaded your site with as much information as you can get your hands on?
3. Have you linked any documents that are referred to elsewhere in the site for ease of use?

## **7. Key Dates – Step out the consultation process**

Displaying the opening and closing of your online consultation, plus the offline events, gives people a timeframe to work within and a context for how their online input will feed into the overall community engagement strategy.

1. Have you advertised the opening and closing of your consultation?
2. Have you advertised the dates of your other offline engagement events?
3. Have you considered adding in project milestone dates?

## **8. Visual Aids - Double your relationship building efforts**

A richly supplied video and picture library encourages visitor participation by delivering the “physicality” of the site, aspects that include gestures, eye contact and “voice”. In simple terms, it makes your ideas and thoughts “visible”.

A visual aid library can help stimulate discussion by enlivening the tone. Clear pictures multiply your audience's level of understanding and can reinforce your objectives, clarify points and create excitement.

Studies by educational researchers suggest that approximately 83% of human learning occurs visually, and the remaining 17% through the other senses - 11% through hearing, 3.5% through smell, 1% through taste, and 1.5% through touch.

Researchers tell us that we remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, and 50 percent of what we both see and hear.

Poorly selected or inadequately executed visual aids will distract from your key messages.

1. Have you restrained yourself from loading visual aids that don't inform the process further?
2. Have you loaded photos and videos that are locally made and help to inform the project – graphs to support numerical information, maps, and design alternatives?
3. Have you thought outside of the box and loaded up cartoons, animations or otherwise to help stimulate discussion?

## **9. FAQs – Map out the site territory**

In our experience the FAQs are one of the least viewed areas on a site. People want to develop their opinions using their own research. We do know that most people will download documents and watch the site videos long before they read your tailored project FAQs.

With this in mind, consider using the FAQ function as an opportunity to guide people through the use of the site. Questions you might answer might be:

1. Will we find out the results of the engagement and if so, when?
2. Who is in charge of moderation and what are the rules?
3. How do I keep my identity private?

## **10. Discussion questions – Invite your community to join the circle**

This is when your consultation opens out to the community domain.

The online visitors have been warmly welcomed to the online space, they have been handed a map to guide them through (the introduction and FAQs), browsed the content to help develop their opinions (document library), been visually engaged and stimulated (video and photos), and know when the final opportunity to have their say will be and where (Key Dates).

If the site has done its job visitors will feel primed to answer the questions that you've posed.

Now is not the time to damage that relationship by asking your community to comment on the generalities of a plan that is hundreds of pages in length. Your visitors will leave in droves, feeling bemused and unsatisfied. So instead, ask questions that are interesting to them and make sense to you.

Deciding what these questions are may require a two stepped process (at least). First, by boiling a large document down to its bare bones to identify the key areas of community interest and secondly by prising the interest areas open to see how they relate to people on a day to day basis. Your job is to identify the impacts of your proposals on your stakeholders, not to bury the impacts in a voluminous and turgid tome. This process will leave you with the key ingredients that can then make up a series of relevant questions.

Using this process, write out as many questions as you possibly can think of, then prioritise and create a shortlist of between three and six

1. Have you identified the key areas of interest of your community?
2. Have you repurposed the questions so that they are directly relevant to your community's interests?
3. Will their input be valuable to your final or living document?