

The beginner's guide to

digital community engagement



What you will learn in this guide

This guide will walk you through the basics of digital community engagement and is meant to serve as a resource for beginners and seasoned practitioners alike. After all, setting a solid foundation for your community engagement initiative is key to its success.

- **The theory:** what is community engagement, and why does it matter?
- **A strong roadmap** to help you set up your engagement strategy
- **Best practices** drawn from our collaboration with 300+ local governments across the world.

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Introduction: the benefits of community engagement

Rather than relying on the input of a handful of decision-makers, a digital community engagement platform helps foster more inclusive, participatory, and responsive governance and communities.

Digital community engagement will:

- Help you reach a bigger and more diverse audience, at a lower cost. Digital engagement helps you reach people who usually wouldn't have the time to attend a town hall meeting or workshop, such as families with young children, professionals with busy schedules, or people living in remote areas.
- Get more buy-in and public support for decisions. If community members feel as if their ideas and opinions are heard and considered, they'll be more likely to support the decisions made (and participate again in the future).
- Increase efficiency and responsiveness. Rather than processing thousands of paper surveys or making sense of ideas scribbled onto sticky notes, you'll be able to analyze your community's input with the click of a button. This means you can spend more time on substantial engagement and responsiveness.
- Achieve higher quality decision-making. By having a stronger pulse on what your community truly cares about, you'll be able to prioritize your time and resources more effectively.

Getting inspired to launch your community engagement project? Before you do, make sure you have a tangible project in mind. Community engagement should never be an afterthought. Whether you're identifying priorities, shaping plans, or allocating resources, engagement should deliberately be built into the process to ensure its success.





The roadmap to digital participation

Don't leap without looking. This roadmap will guide you through the process of preparing and setting up a digital engagement strategy that is tailored to your community.

1

Consider your resources

To set up a successful engagement project, you'll need time, budget, and a dedicated team. This means ensuring strong internal support (from policy-makers, management teams, and your comms teams) and enough people to be sufficiently responsive to community feedback. Moreover, make sure your team is committed to working with the results of your engagement process. Community members are experts by experience, and it's crucial to value their feedback as such.

Clarify your goals

Are you identifying problems, devising solutions, or making decisions? Before launching, define what your main goals are, as those goals will inform the tools and methods you might use to achieve them. Do you want community members to share their ideas (ideation), allocate resources (participatory budgeting), or vote on different scenarios (poll)?

2

Decide who you want to reach

Consider the different segments of your audience and identify the best ways to reach them. In doing so, be aware of those groups who have been traditionally underheard within your community. Getting their voices around the table is crucial for representative decision-making.

3

Devise a communication plan

To get people engaged, you'll have to get the word out there. Choosing the right channels to spread your message is vital. Consider your existing communication channels, such as your website, local newspaper, social media, or newsletters. Combining online and offline channels ensures you reach a wider audience.

4



5

Plan reporting

To make the most of your engagement efforts, you'll have to decide which data will be most important to report to which stakeholders. Our platform's backend helps you keep track of engagement rates, demographic data, and key insights, and report it back to decision-makers in a clear, cohesive way. Thanks to our Natural Language Processing technology, the CitizenLab platform helps you cluster similar ideas, pull out common themes, assign them to different departments, and directly provide feedback to participants on the platform.

Collaborate wisely

To reach a wider audience, consider which external stakeholders or local community leaders you can involve directly. For more youth engagement, you might need to work with the school district or local youth groups. Similarly, consider involving religious or cultural leaders, local organizations, businesses, or influencers.

6

7

Identify your tools

Depending on the type of feedback you're looking to receive from your community, decide on the tools and methods that might help you reach your goals. The most popular methods are:

- Input collection (gathering written input or asking your community to pin ideas on an interactive map);
- Budget game (including your community in the allocation of public budgets);
- Initiatives (opening a continuous dialogue with your community through a digital "idea box");
- Scenario planning (presenting different options for your audience to comment and deliberate on);
- Polling or surveys (collecting your audience's questions on predefined questions).

To dive deeper, consult our guide on the 6 most popular engagement methods.

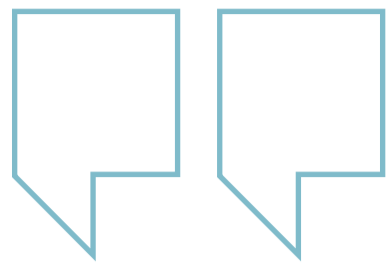
Combine offline and online methods

Online community engagement platforms provide local governments with a single hub to collect, share, and discuss community feedback and ideas. By complementing these online methods with more traditional offline strategies, and vice versa, you create a more inclusive participation process.

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Case Study: The City of Lancaster, PA facilitates tough conversations with community engagement



We asked the community to give us feedback on how to spend the funds, and they came back and said, ‘Well, let me tell you!’ The process forced us to ask for input on the content versus just the final plan – people weren’t just asked to review a long document, they were able to give feedback on the process, and contribute ideas and content – that got them so much more engaged.”

Milzy Carrasco, leader of Lancaster’s Mayor’s Office and Department of Neighborhood Engagement (DoNE)

The City of Lancaster used online, offline, and blended approaches to ensure their diverse population was well represented in the City’s new engagement initiatives, which ranged from policing to mobility planning. This inclusive approach increased participation, including within traditionally under-heard communities.

To ensure the community would find their way to the online platform, the city met with local stakeholders in schools, places of worship, housing authorities, after-school programs, and local businesses to ask them to get involved. They used their active social

media accounts to promote the project, but complemented these efforts with offline engagement opportunities to ensure reaching people who lack the digital tools to participate online.

By merging online and offline engagement options, the platform launched with 13x the participants compared to the “usual suspects” who attend town hall meetings. Today, the platform has over 2,100 registered participants contributing ideas, input, votes, and comments. What’s more, a large percentage of these new participants belong to minority groups and are usually underrepresented in these conversations.



Worksheet | putting the theory into practice

To apply the steps of the roadmap to your unique local context, consider the questions listed below.

1. Consider your resources

- We have a budget of \$ _____ for this project.
- The teams we need to get on board internally are:

<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

- Who will be dedicated to streamlining the process and ensuring responsivity and transparency?

- What information do you already have? Have your community members already been surveyed on this topic or a very similar one? How old are the results, and what do they indicate?

2. Clarify your goals

- The main goal of this community engagement project is (select one):
 - Priority setting
 - Option analysis
 - Collecting ideas
 - Budget allocation
 - Quick feedback

- Set your timeline:

- This is when we want to launch: __ / __ / ____
- This is when we wish to wrap up: __ / __ / ____
- These are the steps we need to take in between:

<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

3. Decide who you want to reach

- Define your main audience. If you're not looking to engage your entire community, get as specific as possible in terms of age, gender, cultural background, ethnicity, location, and other key indicators:

- How can you meet these people where they are? Jot down a few ideas of places this audience tends to frequent, both online and offline:



4. Devise a communication plan

- Which communication channels do you currently have at your disposal? Select all relevant options.

- Social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Nextdoor...)
- The city website
- Newsletters/mailings
- Local newspapers/press
- Other: _____

- How will you communicate about your launch? What about progress? And how about closing the feedback loop and communicating results after the process is finished?

5. Plan reporting

- Which data do you think your stakeholders will be most interested in getting updates on?

- How will you share these interesting data points with your key stakeholders?

6. Collaborate wisely

- Which local community leaders or external stakeholders can you engage? Consider nonprofits, schools, government agencies, urban developers, and religious/cultural leaders:

7. Identify your tools

- Look back at your answer to question 2 and see which method suits your goal the best:

- a. Priority setting
- b. Option analysis
- c. Collecting ideas
- d. Budget allocation
- e. Quick feedback

8. Combine offline and online methods

- For every method you're planning to use, consider an offline alternative. For example: complement an online survey with a printed one, or organize an in-person workshop to complement an online input collection project.



A few practical tips to get you started



When it comes to your timeline, balance is key. While you want to avoid dragging a project out so long it loses its momentum, you should also give your community enough time to participate – and your team enough time to analyze the input.



To make sure everyone can access your participation platform, including people without digital devices or high-tech skills, you could make tablets available in public libraries or your City Hall, or offer in-person options that your team will upload the results of yourselves.



If you're struggling to decide in which phase of the policy cycle to integrate your engagement process, remember this rule of thumb: engage your community as early and as often as possible.



Make sure to catch people's eye! Experiment with visuals, infographics, and (mind)maps, and think of a catchy URL for your platform.



Setting up a one-off engagement project helps you get the answers or insights you need on a specific topic or plan. But to use your community's collective intelligence to its fullest potential, consider how to embed community engagement as a continuous part of your decision-making process.

Case Study: Philadelphia reimagines its public spaces with the help of community engagement



After an initial documentation of community context and preferences for Philadelphia’s iconic South Street, the city quickly learned that the memories and human stories are what made the street so special. If the community and civic decision makers were going to rally behind plans for more permanent people-centered changes to South Street, those human stories would need to be more visible.

Encouraged by this insight, Philadelphia decided to take a tailored, hybrid approach to collecting those stories: love letters.

The Love Letters to South Street intervention asked residents, business owners, and visitors to share their memories of South Street in the form of love letters. These stories were collected both on the city’s digital platform and offline, on sidewalks, during open streets weekends, and even during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new plaza.

The 70 collected stories were then visualized in a colorful virtual memory map, powered by CitizenLab’s online engagement platform.



Get started with digital community
engagement in your city!

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