by Kimble F. Ainslie

Myths and Lessons of Online Civic Engagement

Many municipalities across Canada are taking up the challenge of reaching out to citizens online. It seems like a natural extension of their current work keeping in touch with taxpayers, particularly when public attendance at community meetings continues to drop off so radically. Social media is all the buzz these days, and so the online experience seems like the new default communication method for connecting with the public. But, it turns out that going online is not quite the complete solution that municipal managers might have imagined. In fact, we have discovered *a few myths leading to important lessons about online civic engagement*. Municipal managers really need to think through what they want to achieve in discussions with their online constituencies; they need to understand what online method works best; and they need to adopt a wholly realistic attitude about what can be expected from individual contributors.

Myth # 1 – "Going online is a lot easier than setting up community meetings."

This myth will get you into a lot of trouble. Setting up a community meeting is a breeze compared to the complex design issues to be worked through when setting up an online program. (And building an online program is not made any easier by the hordes of software merchants peddling their problematic solutions for community feedback and mobilization. Some communities will soon discover that getting the software cart before the community mobilization horse will be a big problem.)

Here are the program design issues to be considered before going online:

► Are managers really serious about obtaining feedback from the public or is this just a public relations stunt in order to look cool and progressive?

► What do managers want to hear from the public: general preferences and priorities, specific responses on current programs, new program ideas, or something else? Is council on board? Do they see your civic engagement program as a challenge to their basic constituency work? Do managers (and does anybody else) really care about what the public offers? What are managers going to do with the results? Are the results going to be mandates, advisories, or nice-to-haves?

How are managers going to communicate online? The new hype favours social media "interactions" or periodic online polls. If managers are going for these instrumentalities, they are not serious designers of civic engagement. These tools tend to attract the not-so-serious residents in our communities; the folks who are attracted to "quick and dirty" responses; the people who find public policy solutions on bumper stickers. If managers want to attract serious respondents they need to set up an email platform. Email out the questions to registrants of your program and wait for their responses. Make sure to impose deadlines; give participants lots to space to say something (e.g., 500 words); advertise the blazes out the program (best done through local print media – ironically); and set up a website for the registrations. Well before the program comes to an end, find a qualitative market researcher or a friendly political scientist to help

with the coding of each submission. The data text file could be a half million to a million words, so it can be a big job analyzing the data.

Myth # 2 – "Online civic engagement covers all sectors of the community."

Not even close. Exclusive reliance on online communications cuts out at least half of the seniors' population who do not go online. Why is that important? Seniors (> 65 yr.), combined baby boomers (45-65 yr.), by far dominate political discussions in most Canadian communities, and these cohorts are the key voters in every local election.

Who actually participates in online civic engagement? You guessed it: baby boomers and the half of seniors who go online, principally educated baby boomers and well-off seniors. They are the folks who have an interest in local politics and public policy, because they have skin in the game. They pay the property taxes; they use the services; they pay attention to council decisions. Young people are the last ones to participate. Why? While they might own a car and therefore pay attention to the quality of roads, they typically do not own a home and therefore they do not pay property taxes and thus have no real material interest in civic affairs and council decisions. And, while you might

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pick up more young people on a social media page, they typically will have less to say than educated, taxpaying boomers, and what they have to say will be less relevant because they do not pay for – through taxes – what they might advocate.

Myth # 3 – "Online civic engagement always enhances the quality of citizen feedback."

For the most part, online communications are only somewhat, occasionally, and unevenly better than regular constituency inputs. But, online communications do offer the prospect of continuous contact with registrants; and, over the medium and long term, the quality of inputs can be much improved.

Online civic engagement dominated by individual responses is a somewhat uncontrolled, idiosyncratic, and messy affair. If the program achieves a sufficient number of submissions on questions posed, a set of very large focus groups typically unfolds. And, a very large, online, focus group (e.g., N=50-100-200 or more per question) can offer the promise of some disciplined structure in the collective response, and occasionally offer some blindingly prescient insights from individuals. And yet, right from the beginning, very few respondents will participate in all the opportunities offered by managers, assuming the program lasts several months or more. And so, there is the problem of deliberate non-participation: individuals who register for the program and yet cheerily fail to participate. This group can number up to 50 percent of registrants. The typical response on why people sign up but do not participate is as mundane as might be expected: they are "too busy," or they just want to "see what's going on" and "be included in the group." Others find the regularity of questions too much to accommodate.

Another group of actual participants can be a conundrum for managers: people who regularly participate but have little or nothing to say. These folks are joiners, but have no real capacity to communicate anything meaningful on community issues. Their rhetoric is often barely above gibberish, but they want to be part of the discussions anyway. Nobody is saying they should be excluded from the program; but, as part of the "democratic process," they do consume a great deal of time and effort. Indeed, up to 20 percent of all submissions fall into this category of non-responses.

The good news is that 80 percent of submissions are fair to excellent. But, a regular feature of many responses involves a phenomenon called "autonomous responses." In this scenario, respondents answer a question or an implied query within a question that managers did not pose. For example, a question on incenting good environmental behaviour turns into a screed advocating for more state regulation, or banning specific public behaviours, or ginning up more government coercion. Or, in responses to questions on controlling litter or the public use of parks, respondents start advocating options well outside managers' suggested list of options. In effect, they ignore the basic of the question posed and answer their own question(s).

Myth # 4 – "Like the general population, online engagement participants are not very well informed on the issues and should not be trusted with a serious role in public decision making."

Dead wrong. Online respondents (80 percent) are typically rational in the collective; and, on an individual basis, they know their own material interests.

The first thing we notice about online respondents (with the exception of non-responsive joiners) is that they excuse themselves from questions they do not understand and questions for which they have no information or have no experience. On the other hand, they are downright effusive on questions for which they have "collateral knowledge" (not direct knowledge, but knowledge akin to the issue being addressed). In addition, they know their own material interests; they know what's good for themselves personally, in economic, social, environmental, political terms. They are like Robert Lane's "common folk" in his 1962 classic, *Political Ideology*: ordinary people are "fully capable of communicating in rationally categorical and ideological terms and they do so without effort on matters related to politics and public policy." In fact, online respondents regularly use the language of "right" and "left" ideologies automatically in their responses. The ease and volume of voices naturally resorting to ideological language is a constant surprise. And, underestimating the capacity of general public to voice opinions on known material interests will always get us into trouble.

Summary

Is online civic engagement worth the considerable effort to launch and maintain? I think so. Notwithstanding the messiness of respondent behaviour, the gems coming from the public are indeed a treasure. And, if managers are prepared to put work into a proper program design, data analysis, and sharing the results with councillors and community alike, some very useful embellishments and changes to governance and services can be the positive outcome – not to speak of the improvements to democratic life in the public square. *MW*