

Eleven Ways to Overcome Internet Accessibility Concerns

We are sometimes asked about the “accessibility” of the internet as a legitimate tool for community engagement. The inference being that not everybody has access to the “net”, so is it an equitable technology. The first response is that, in Australia at least – and I would imagine most other countries that are likely to read this – internet access is fast approaching saturation point. I posted a blog last month that reported Sensis findings that 84% of Australian households now have access to the internet, up 6% on the previous year. Of those, 73% have broadband access! I would humbly suggest that this is pretty fantastic coverage, particularly for such a big country with such a small population. There are few, if any, other engagement technologies than provide such ready access to the engagement process for the vast majority of the population.

Nevertheless, equality of internet access remains an issue for some population cohorts, particularly older people, poorer people, and new migrants with less affluent backgrounds. So, here are eleven ideas to help overcome internet accessibility as a “barrier to entry” for your stakeholders.

1. It is rarely, but occasionally, a good idea to use online community engagement in isolation from other techniques, so... integrate your online processes into your broader engagement strategy. Your online tools can compliment, broaden and deepen the experience gained from traditional methods, improving their effectiveness and reach.
2. Train up your librarians to help the community use your web site (if you are a Council or have a strategic alliance with one), and make sure the project site is the default home page on the computer;
3. Install internet “kiosks” in public places – restrict net access to your project and perhaps a couple of other local service providers (Council, Government agencies, NGOs), but make sure your project is always the default home page;
4. Make sure you have computers with internet access at any of your public events – open houses, public meetings, kiosks etc.
5. Purchase of “bank” of internet only laptops (they’re not terribly expensive in the context of a major project, and can be used over and over again) and create your own “project internet cafe” as part of a drop in centre.
6. Work with local community and youth centres to promote access – perhaps at specific designated times or events;
7. Hire a local internet cafe for a day – make an event of it, publicize free net access but make it conditional on contributing to your consultation;
8. Talk to the local schools about integrating your project into their computing or perhaps “civics” course
9. Web access laptops are getting cheaper all the time – if you want to do ongoing targeted stakeholder engagement with a smallish group of people without computer and internet access, it might be worth your while purchasing one for them. The “gift” of the laptop could be the “thank you” for taking the time to be involved. You would also be leaving your stakeholder with new skills and capacity to engage in future.
10. Treat your consultation as an opportunity to make a profound difference to a few people’s lives by treating it as a capacity building and skills development exercise - train your stakeholders in civics, computer and internet use, and English literacy. Use your project as a learning environment.
11. If you are concerned about broadband access, then don’t use video and load up documents in nice small chunks. Break up large documents into chapters, and divide maps into manageable A3 sheets.