

## Ten Golden Rules of Online Community Engagement

This “Tips Sheet” is a slightly edited and updated version of a blog post that appeared on our blog ([www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com](http://www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com)) in September 2008. It presents some of our early learning from some 20 online community engagement projects.

1. The most important lesson so far is that if you engage on line you must back your consultation with robust statistics relating to visitor numbers and behaviour otherwise you will never know what sort of response you have really had. Not everybody comments at a public meeting and they don't in an on line forum either.
2. Think about the questions you ask. 'What are your comments on the overall community welfare budget' is likely to elicit little more than a yawn but 'budget constraints mean we have to close the childcare centre' brings people's attention to an issue they can instantly relate to.
3. Publicity, Publicity Publicity! If you don't tell the community it's there, they cannot be expected to find it. Use the traditional media, mail-outs and local networks as well as links, social network sites, and any other means to ensure that your community find the consultation
4. Provide relevant information in a format that is easy to read. A 10 page PDF is a good way to communicate to people in an office as they can print it out and read it. It is a hopeless way to communicate with a mechanic accessing the consultation on his iphone during a tea break. 1 page summaries are much better, photos are great, videos are fantastic.
5. Set out the parameters of the discussion upfront. This includes moderation rules, closing dates, how this sits with the decision process and what feedback people should expect.
6. Don't get sucked in to debate. Set facts straight, answer basic questions but don't get drawn in. While you're at it make sure your colleagues have clear internal protocols for interacting in the consultation.
7. Track the traffic that the consultation is attracting and consider follow up publicity if you are not satisfied that sufficient numbers have viewed the consultation. Remember, in most cases, visitors, not comments, is the truest reflection of success.
8. Consider initiatives to target certain sections of the population. Bass Council used Bang the Table to target non resident property owners and wrote to them directly. A local member of Parliament targeted young people and worked with schools to get feedback on youth unemployment issues.
9. Use social networking sites like Facebook groups and community forums to get the message out to issues groups in the community.
10. Be consistent in your use of online consultation so that over time your community grow used to participating in this way. Like most things in life, online participation will be treated with caution by some people until they get used to it.