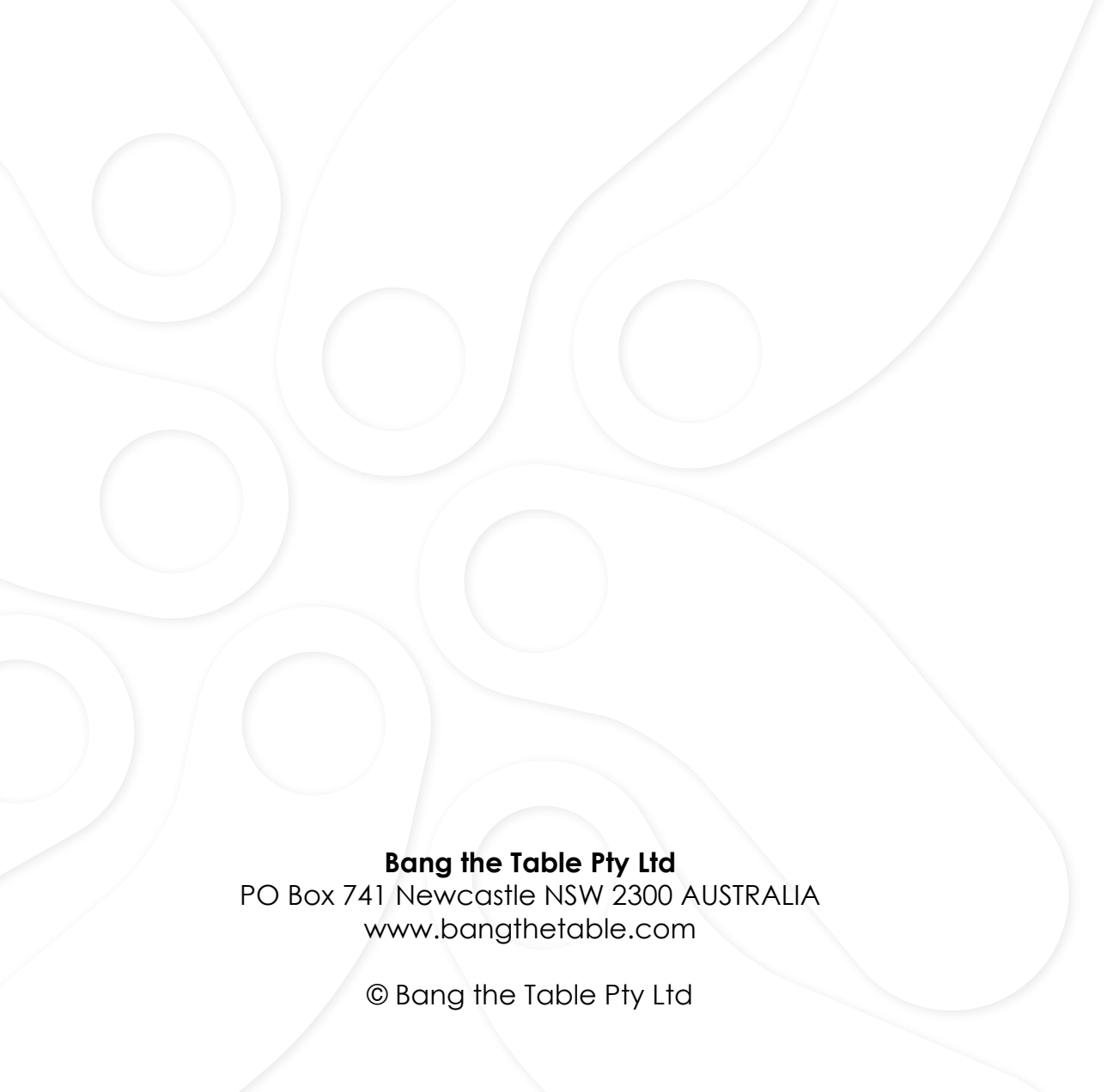


100

IDEAS
TO HELP
ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY ONLINE



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“ What was a winner from our point of view was the simplicity of the actual site for our users. Our community could navigate their way through the site without any particular issues, and that included people of all age groups and all levels of education. ”

Anne Bransdon
Communications Manager
Broken Hill City Council

I'VE

**GOT SOMETHING
TO SAY, BUT I
WANT TO DO
IT IN A SAFE
SPACE.**



Hi there,

This little book has been put together by the Bang the Table team.

After hosting something like 200 consultations for over 80 organisations since 2007, we've had our fair share of experience.

It's this experience that has helped us to develop our "100 ideas" handbook.

We've written it with the time poor in mind – the time poor being our most important online audience. And we've tried to walk the line; creating a resource that will help you get up and running online, without weighing you down with too much information.

We hope it will prove useful for people working across a range of sectors; community engagement, public relations, communications, Government 2.0 Strategy and project management.

A few of our ideas are controversial, many are common sense; we hope all will help you navigate across this new and burgeoning field of online community engagement.

If you're looking for more detail, there's a good chance you'll find it on our website at www.bangthetable.com or on our blog - www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com.

More questions? Drop us a line at support@bangthetable.com.

We'd love to hear from you.

The Bang the Table team



1

REASONS TO ENGAGE ONLINE

There are many reasons to engage your community online. Here are just ten.

- 1** In 2010, 93% of Australian homes had internet access. No other engagement technique can offer this level of **accessibility**.
- 2** The majority of people just don't have the time to get active in their community. Online engagement makes it **convenient** for people to get involved.
- 3** Online engagement provides an accessible option for getting people **involved in your conversations**: busy people like working parents, younger people, shift workers and mobility impaired people.
- 4** Online engagement tools can **crack open long-term issues** and bring more people into your conversations.
- 5** The online environment provides a **secure space** for people to learn and test assumptions, positions and options.
- 6** The relative freedom of an anonymous online environment **removes the barriers** of aggressiveness, loudness and power that can stifle debate at community meetings.
- 7** Online engagement systems are **cost effective and efficient**. You can contact more participants directly, at less cost.
- 8** Online engagement can change an organisation's culture by improving organisational **transparency and responsiveness**.
- 9** Online engagement means you can help **manage the conversation** before it manages you.
- 10** Online engagement tools support **"community ownership"** at all levels of the engagement spectrum; from "inform" through to "empowerment".

2

PLANNING

Planning to engage online requires a disciplined thought process just like any other form of strategic planning.

- 1 Map your project.** What will it change and what are the impacts?
- 2 Identify your stakeholders.** Who will be directly affected by the project? Who will be interested?
- 3 What is the engagement objective** for each stakeholder group throughout the various project phases? Is it to inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower?
- 4 Measure your success.** How will you know you've done a good job? Will you use qualitative or quantitative tools? Will you measure the number of comments, visitors, unique ideas or something else?
- 5 Detail specific goals for each measure.** While it's easy to get excited about the prospect of huge numbers of people flocking to your site, it's important to be realistic from the outset. The site's visitor numbers will actually reflect a mix of the target market's size, the marketing efforts, and the project's natural "appeal".
- 6 Plan your promotion.** How will people hear about it? Conduct market research to find out where your target audience gets their information. Your response rate will be higher if you can direct market to them via established channels.
- 7 Prepare "rich content" for your site.** It's not good enough to prepare a 300 page report and expect your community to wade through it. Think about videos, slideshows, image galleries and breaking your documents into bite-sized chunks.
- 8 Think carefully about the questions you want to ask.** Make them as visceral, concrete and specific as possible.
- 9 Decide how you will interact with your community.** Forum facilitation can be time consuming; determine your resourcing levels beforehand rather than on the run.
- 10 Keep in touch.** At the outset, tell your community how their thoughts will be used and when and how you will be getting back to them on the consultation's outcomes.

**I'VE
GOT SOMETHING
TO SAY, BUT
I'M A BIT LESS
MOBILE AT THE
MOMENT.**



“ We found that the consultation opened up to people of all kinds, including people who had lower levels of literacy, or couldn't debate their opinion. We took that as meaning that the forums were a truly democratic space. ”

Claire Hatch
Director
Cultural Value

3

CONTENT

Great content will make or break your consultation process.

It's not good enough anymore to print out a 300 page draft plan and leave it in the Council foyer for people to browse through.

- 1** **Websites are neither books nor Council reports.** When preparing text for your website, write punchy copy that makes the benefit of getting involved in the discussion very clear. Every word counts; too many words and you'll lose your audience.
- 2** **Chunk your documents down** into bite size, downloadable and printable pieces. Your community might not thank you, but they won't complain either.
- 3** If you're consulting on a very large document, **include both a short and long summary.** Your community will be able to get the information they need without having to dig too deep.
- 4** **Load your documents up in a couple of different forms** (i.e. doc, .txt, .pdf, .html.) This makes them accessible for people using screen readers and the like.
- 5** Use **"Frequently Asked Questions"** to answer issues about the consultation process and your statutory obligations. You can afford to be more technical here.
- 6** **Video** is the single most effective medium for getting across complex ideas. You can use video to talk about the rationale for your plan, to invite people to participate, to discuss specific "hot" issues, or give the community a voice using voxpops.
- 7** **Slideshows** are a great way to break information down into bite-sized chunks. Take the key messages from your summary document and put them into a slide show with supporting imagery.
- 8** **Stimulate people's imagination** using slide decks of images. This works when getting people to think about a project's present, past or future potential.
- 9** **Make your discussion topics as concrete, emotional and specific as possible.** The majority of people will respond far better to specifics than to broad strategic questions.
- 10** Take your new rich content – video, slideshows, image-decks – and embed them in your discussion forum. **Make your information as readily available as possible.**

4

PROMOTION

If your project is to have a chance of success, people need to know about it.

In this respect, online community engagement is no different from traditional methods.

- 1** Place a **prominent link** to your consultation site on your corporate website. This will drive around 30% of your traffic.
- 2** **Pick a short and easy to remember URL.** Make sure it appears on all your collateral, media releases and in any editorial pieces you get in the local paper. This will account for another 30% of your traffic.
- 3** Make sure your consultation is **easily found by search engines.** Use appropriate key words in your project description and let the world know about it through social networks like DIGG and Twitter.
- 4** **Put a letter about the consultation in with your next rates notice.** Advertise it in the local school newsletters. Hand out bookmarks at the library.
- 5** **Hand out leaflets** at public events, in the mall, at public transport stops.
- 6** **Find local groups with a web presence** (including Facebook Groups) and ask their administrators to post a link to your consultation.
- 7** **Direct email your entire staff and relevant local organisations.** Ask them to pass it on to friends and family.
- 8** **Display signage** at local libraries, cyber cafes and any other places where people access the web. Ask them to make your consultation their default home pages.
- 9** **Talk to local schools** about integrating the consultation process into appropriate lesson plans.
- 10** **Engage online repeatedly** to build a community of people you can direct market to every time you launch a new project.

5

ACCESSIBILITY

Consultation accessibility has many facets.

For a person without computer skills it has one meaning, for a person without sight another entirely.

- 1** Be 100% sure your site is **W3C and WCAG compliant** (look to the international Website Accessibility Guidelines for further information: www.w3.org).
- 2** **Integrate your online process** with other traditional engagement methods. The online tools will help broaden your engagement experience.
- 3** **Ask the library** to make your project site the default home page on their computers and take the time to train up the local librarians. They can then help the community access and comment on your project site.
- 4** **Install Internet “kiosks” in public places.** Restrict net access to your project and perhaps a couple of other local service providers. Your project should *always* be the default homepage.
- 5** Have computers with **Internet access at all your public events.**
- 6** **Hire a local Internet cafe for a day** or purchase a “bank” of Internet-only laptops. You can create your own “project Internet cafe” as part of a drop-in-centre.
- 7** **Work with local community centers** to promote education and access for older people.
- 8** **If you're concerned about broadband access, don't use video.** Instead, break up large documents into chapters and divide maps into manageable A3 sheets.
- 9** **Web access laptops are getting cheaper all the time.** If you're undertaking ongoing stakeholder engagement with a small group of people without computer/internet access, why not purchase a laptop for them? This gift would say “thanks for being involved”. You would also be leaving them with the skills and capacity to engage in the future.
- 10** **Use your consultation as an opportunity to make a profound difference to a few people's lives.** Treat it as a capacity building and skills development exercise and train your stakeholders in civics, computer and Internet use and English literacy.

“ Using EngagementHQ has meant that we are engaging the community more effectively than ever before. Of course we'd tried traditional community engagement methods in the past – you know, public meetings, face to face – but we'd never gotten the numbers that the online forum is pulling in for us. It's the first time we've used online and it's been great. ”

Simon Adcock
Project Manager

I'VE

**GOT SOMETHING
TO SAY, BUT LIKE
I'M GOING TO A
PUBLIC MEETING!**



6

ANONYMITY

While there is some debate around the topic of anonymity, we firmly believe in its value. Anonymity removes barriers, breaks down power relations and frees up individual expression.

- 1** Anonymity **removes a major barrier to entry for most people.** How do we know this? The proof is in the pudding. Over 95% of our forum visitors choose a username that protects their anonymity.
- 2** Anonymity **breaks down power relationships between participants.** We've observed conversations between 50 year olds and 13 year olds that would never take place face-to-face.
- 3** Anonymity **removes power relations** between the forum visitor/commenter and the consultation manager.
- 4** Anonymity **removes the possibility of any bias due to prejudices** regarding sex, ethnicity or age.
- 5** Anonymity allows an individual to **express an opinion without the fear of intimidation.** It greatly reduces the ability of anyone to bully or humiliate others in the forum.
- 6** Anonymity **allows an individual to express an opinion that might be contrary** to that of their employer.
- 7** Anonymity **allows an individual to express an opinion that their position in life** may not otherwise permit.
- 8** Anonymity **ensures that the consultation's analysis focuses entirely on the text,** not the personality. The logic of the argument becomes paramount as opposed to the emotion behind it.
- 9** Ensuring that a person's user name is the same as their legal name would require such a high onus of proof that **95% of people would be put off joining your conversation** in the first place.
- 10** Even if a site did enforce legal name usage, **there are those who would break the rules and use a pseudonym** anyway. Such actions within the first few minutes of sign up can create a negative mindset, leading to ongoing negative behavior.

7

MODERATION

Moderation is the process of checking comments made on your forums to ensure they fall within your site rules.

- 1 Automated moderation** is when software does the job for you. It's limited to checking comments for bad language and can help identify spam.
- 2 Pre-moderation** is when each comment is read before it goes live to the site. It's often used as a knee-jerk reaction to an inflated perception of risk and is poor community engagement practice. It betrays a lack of trust in the community.
- 3 Post-moderation** is when each comment is read within a reasonable period of time *after* it goes live to the site. Providing moderators are checking the forum regularly, post-moderation is perfectly safe.
- 4 Community moderation** is when the community nominates the comments that they feel should not be on the site. The final call still lies with the moderator on whether it should or should not be removed.
- 5 Independent, third party moderation** is the best way to remove suggestions of bias or censorship in your moderation.
- 6 Moderation rules** can vary from forum to forum depending on the audience, but the basics are to keep things clean, respectful and on-topic. Make these clear at the outset and stick to them.
- 7 Editing a community member's comments either before or after they go live** leaves you open to suggestions of censorship and is poor practice. It's best to either delete or accept them.
- 8 Be sure to let the commenter know** if, when and why you have removed one of their comments.
- 9 Remain open to the argument** that you've got it wrong and that a comment is actually legitimate and should be re-instated.
- 10 Consistent, active, independent, visible moderation** considerably lessens the probability of high impact, unwelcome material being posted onto your forum.

8

FACILITATION

Deciding when, how, how often, or indeed if, you should get involved in your forum is an important strategic decision. Forum facilitation and management can be time consuming and resource intensive; consider it carefully.

- 1** **Forum management** is as “hands-on” or as “hands-off” as you wish to make it. Think through your willingness to apply resources to the task and be consistent.
- 2** There are a **number of different models of forum facilitation** or management. These range from “no interaction” through to “deep immersion”.
- 3** The “**no interaction**” **model** is preferred by most government organisations. However, if you have the time, budget and resources, you could get more involved and post corrections, answer questions or ask your own follow up questions.
- 4** **Think about whether you want to enter the conversation** as yourself or as an anonymous representative of your organisation, for example as a Project Coordinator.
- 5** **Nominate who is responsible** for responding to comments ahead of time.
- 6** **Don't get sucked into a debate** with an individual on the forum. There's little to be gained from arguing with a community member.
- 7** **Don't feel that you have to answer all or even any questions** that are posed on the forum. These can be dealt with en masse in your consultation report.
- 8** It's okay not to get involved in the discussion at all. However, from the outset, **make it clear that the forum is a space for community-generated conversation** and that your organisation is listening.
- 9** If you have the resources, **engage an external facilitator** to dig deep into the underlying rationale behind visitor's comments and positions.
- 10** **Regularly update** the resources on your site in response to the questions and issues that are being raised in the forum.

9

REPORTING

If you're using your forum for any kind of research - including community consultation - you'll need both qualitative and quantitative reports on the discussions.

- 1** **Quantitative reporting** of forum visitation patterns is critical. It will help you compare its performance against your expectations and other engagement strategies.
- 2** The **raw numbers from your report are useful in understanding and explaining the level of interest in your project** i.e. visitor numbers, number of comments, number of registrations, etc.
- 3** **Investigate the ratios between key indicators.** For example, the ratio of registrations to visitors can give you an instant feel for the level of engagement around an issue.
- 4** Your IT department may try to convince you that **Google Analytics (GA)** can give you everything you need in the way of quantitative analytics. It can't.
- 5** **GA was designed for people who are interested in making their websites commercial.** While some of its features are useful, it can't give you the information you need to analyse your consultation outcomes.
- 6** **Big numbers don't necessarily mean success.** For example, if you measure success by community satisfaction with your draft policy, then large numbers of comments may point to policy failure.
- 7** **Small numbers don't necessarily mean failure.** For example, large numbers of visitors but very few comments can indicate a general level of satisfaction with your proposal.
- 8** If you get lots of visitors but only a few who criticize your proposal, this could indicate that you're dealing with a **noisy minority**. While this doesn't mean you should ignore their views, it does mean that they should be taken into a broader social context.
- 9** If you get lots of visitors, a high rate of conversion to registrations and a heap of comments, chances are you have a **very "hot" issue** on your hands.
- 10** **Tag your comments** by "quality", "leaning" as well as "topics" for a richer understanding of the conversation.

I'VE

**GOT SOMETHING
TO SAY, BUT
WHEN DO I HAVE
TIME TO GET
TO A PUBLIC
MEETING?**



“ Bang the Table is constantly revising and updating its features because they specialise in the online space. It really does give people a convenient opportunity to express themselves and can help everyone learn something new. ”

Max Hardy
Director
Twyfords Consulting

10

FOLLOW UP

How do you feel when you go to a lot of effort to do something for someone and they don't even say thank you? Many government departments forget to even say thanks.

- 1 For most of the community, government is an impenetrable, confusing black hole. **Good quality feedback** can go some way to overcoming this.
- 2 Following up with your community **demonstrates your respect for participants.**
- 3 Following up with your community **demonstrates your transparency as an organization.**
- 4 **Keeping your community and stakeholders in the loop** makes it easier to seek their opinions during subsequent rounds of consultation.
- 5 An initial **“Thank you for your involvement”** action can be as simple as sending out an email, postcard or letter.
- 6 But then you need to provide a detailed or summary **report of the outcomes of your consultation process.**
- 7 Once the consultation report has been considered by your decision-makers, provide **a report back to the community on the suggestions** that have been adopted, which haven't and why.
- 8 **Colour your reports** with plenty of graphics, images and quotes from the consultation.
- 9 **Prepare your reports in a number of formats** (Word, PDF, HTML, RTF) to ensure that they are as accessible to the widest possible range of people.
- 10 And remember; most people won't read a report, but **they might just watch a video.**

Our story

Bang the Table was established in 2007 by Dr Crispin Butteriss and Matthew Crozier.

Having worked in the Australian and UK public sectors for around 30 years collectively, they were painfully aware of the need to bring a larger audience into the debate about public policy. They had both been in the position of running or speaking at unproductive “town hall” style community meetings which provided little benefit for the community or the change proponent (whether government or private sector). These meetings were, and remain, typically attended by a few people who were either passionately interested in the subject at hand, vehemently opposed to it, or had heard about the free tea and biscuits and had come along for a sticky-beak.

Of course providers of community engagement services have become more and more sophisticated in the techniques used to engage the community. The IAP2 website provides an excellent resource in this regard. However, no matter how sophisticated, all non-web based methods of engagement have significant barriers to participation: either you have to break your busy routine to attend an event – more often than not on the weekend or after work – or you have to write a submission.

As long as these barriers to participation persist, then we will only hear from a minority of the community – usually the same people each time we consult. These people are to be applauded for the effort they put in to participating in our community but they are by no means representative of the rest of us. Bang the Table is about accessing the silent majority and providing them with an opportunity to participate at a time and place of their own choosing.



“

There's a saying that without data you are just another person with an opinion. Bang the Table gives you hard data on the numbers of people participating in community debate and the ability to demonstrate that the loudest voice does not necessarily reflect the majority view.

In one case the “high volume” of opposition turned out to be just two people... a fact revealed by the flexible, transparent consultation model set up by Bang the Table.

”

Chris Ford

Managing Director
Ford Comm Consulting

For more information please visit
www.bangthetable.com or visit our blog
www.onlinecommunityconsultation.com

For further questions, drop us a line at
support@bangthetable.com.au

