

USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Time is precious, and people place a huge value on their own time - technology has allowed us to be in control of that. By having the ability to access information quickly, and allow engagement and conversation to be had at a time and date that is most convenient for them, makes the coming together of people more efficient and effective. Covid-19 has played a helpful role in the use of technology for digital engagement and in many cases has enabled the novice user to increase their confidence and become more connected.

This method of community engagement is beginning to supersede the more traditional ways of connecting with individuals, community groups and organisations, not only for the speed of connection and sharing of information but the power it can have in reaching a more diverse and wider audience.

Exploring the variety of ways community engagement can be delivered digitally will help bring you modern and exciting ways to connect with new and existing audiences.



There are many benefits of your club exploring engagement through technology and here are just some of the reasons why;

1. Being more accessible

With online engagement, interaction and connection can happen without people needing to leave their home. This approach can positively support those from more rural communities in Wales, where travelling for a face-to-face meeting maybe more challenging, as well as supporting those who undertake roles outside of the traditional 9 – 5 hours such as farming or those working in the emergency services.

2. Attract new audiences

Maximising modern ways to connect and collaborate may support the club to attract younger people. Traditionally, younger members of the community have not always shared their views on a particular project or initiative, despite them being considered the most digitally responsible generation. An online method of engagement may entice involvement and support in capturing younger peoples' views.

3. Information at your communities' fingertips

Having information readily available online, enables anyone to read up on the clubs' visions, plans and progress. It also demonstrates your transparency. Remember to regularly update information and update across all platforms. Dated information or gaps in communications could result in the community feeling disconnected or disengaged with the club.

4. Cost efficient

Holding face-to-face meetings can be pricey. Whether it's hiring the local village hall or providing refreshments and depending on how many times you want to gather the community together, the outgoings quickly stack up. Digital methods are generally cheaper and could save on club funds.

5. A more sustainable club

Hosting events online rather than ask people to travel into one place, can positively demonstrate your contribution to being a greener, more sustainable club.

Remember

Not everyone has a digital presence and there will be some individuals, community groups and even organisations who do not engage through technology. It is important to recognise this and where possible, explore a combination of both digital and traditional methods. Think about how you could combine the two and ensure everyone is included.



Before you begin to explore technology to support your engagement, there are a few important factors to consider;

Why are you engaging?

- What is your why/your reasoning?
- Is it clear what you want to obtain from the community?

Who is your audience?

- Who do you want to connect with?
- How do they best receive information?
- Who is already interacting with them?
- Are there any barriers to consider?
- Who from within your community can help you?

What resources do you have?

- Do you have the right skills sets within the club?
- Is there a budget to support?
- Who from within your community can help you?

How are you engaging?

- How will you engage?
- Does your engagement enable views and thoughts to be shared?
- How often do you connect with the community?
- How do you want the community to feel at the end of the engagement?

Once you are clear on your vision and purpose and who you want to engage with from your community, you can begin to breakdown the different levels of digital engagement, aligning tactics and technological solutions to each. Helping you to carry out meaningful engagement.



Inform

It is important to begin with informing your members, community groups and organisations what projects or initiatives you are considering but more importantly why. Be clear on your why and the common purpose. The benefit for the wider community will help you connect the club, project, or initiative to the community.

This could be in the format of an online presentation. Either delivered live or pre-record with the recording then housed on the club website. You could invite thoughts and views to be shared via a chat function or a comments section on your website.

You may want to capture what the club does in a small video. Story telling is a great way of getting your messages across. This could be told by club members, volunteers and even existing stakeholders who are already connected to the club.

It could simply be via the more 'traditional' digital methods such as emails, newsletters, and social media posts.

Informing the community demonstrates that you are accountable for what you do and more importantly that you want them to be involved.



Consult

By consulting with your community, you positively demonstrate that you want to gain a better understanding of their needs, thoughts and views and this can be done digitally.

This could be in the form of your club's social media accounts being opened for comments where people can share their thoughts but also being receptive to answering questions that are posed. You may even want to dedicate some time on your social media platform for a live 'ask anything session' whereby committee members or working groups are available for a dedicated period of time to answer any questions people may have about your club, a particular project or initiative.

Online focus groups are another great digital solution. Consider how you will manage questions being asked. You may want to have questions submitted before the live session, or you may decide to have club members monitoring and responding within the chat functions of the platform.

Involve

Keeping the community involved about the progress of the club or the project/initiative is important but getting extended involvement to decision making and relationship building can really deepen the connection between community and club. More importantly it demonstrates that the club is a club for the community and not a club within the community.

You can involve the community via online polls or surveys. Platforms such as SurveyMonkey or Google Forms allows you to capture thoughts and opinions on a much larger scale. Some platforms offer additional services which can enable you to summarise and present the information in tables and graphs.

There may be project plans, site maps or digital visuals, that you are able to show the community, to help them picture the end result and keep them feeling part of the journey.

Collaborate

Joining forces with members, community groups and stakeholders can take place efficiently and effectively through online facilitated workshops. Schedule opportunities for smaller discussions and tasks, enhancing engagement and capturing deeper thoughts and views.

During these types of online sessions, open and continuous dialogue is key and forms a big part of collaboration. This can be created within the workshops or through forums as previously mentioned.

Empower

All of these concepts and ideas help begin to demonstrate to your members, the wider community, stakeholders and organisations that you want them to help shape your thinking, so that the community is at the heart of any development/initiative.

Using technology to reach wider audiences and include others who may not have been a part of this collective engagement before, positively demonstrates your understanding of modern life but more importantly that you want your club to be diverse and truly represent the local community.

Providing people with a platform that allows them to express their thoughts and views will not only give you new ways of thinking of viewing, but also empowers them to continue to be involved in the club's journey.



Top tips on how to best engage and get the attention of your stakeholders

Now you have a better understanding of how to engagement digitally and what different approaches and technological solutions are out there, try and implement these top four tips into your engagement.

1. Know your audience

Have an audience in mind, your community will be vast but if you determine who you are looking to engage with, you can then determine the best way to connect with them. Try to pinpoint how they best engage online and focus on this. Try not to design your engagement for everyone. Design for specific audiences.

2. Seven Seconds

People are exceptionally busy, and it has been stated that if you don't capture someone's attention in seven seconds you may have lost the moment and will need to try again at a later date. How can you ensure that your email title is engaging? How can you ensure that your social media post is direct and to the point?

3. Seven Minutes

It is said that you typically only get the attention of someone for seven minutes. Design your engagement to ensure that it is short, clear and concise. If you need to interact with communities longer, try breaking up your engagement into 7-minute sections. This may work well when you are hosting an open forum or a workshop.

4. Visuals

There is a saying that a picture paints a thousand words. Imagery and infographics quickly and clearly help tell a story. They are also more memorable, use them wherever possible.

Don't forget

Community engagement is a two-way process and you may find yourself becoming involved in community engagement through other individuals, groups and organisations wanting to gain your thoughts and ideas. You may be interacted with, in some of the ways we have discussed here. If you do find yourself in an online discussion forum or completing a poll about another local project or initiative, take some time to reflect on the process and bring back any learnings/ experiences you feel could benefit the club.

