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“It’s time we had a talk.”

The use of online public consultation tools in the Plan Winnipeg Initiative

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Over time,
trust is built
among those in
conversation:
dialogue + time =
action.

TAKEMOTO 2009.

ABSTRACT

A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. Marketers have long known that buzz happens around interesting conversations and people feel compelled to spontaneously contribute to a conversation they find intriguing. The key is making it as easy as possible for this to occur; digital engagement provides the opportunity to create an instant community surrounding interesting dialogue. There is no doubt that digital engagement tools such as blogs, community forums and Facebook are therefore increasingly important opportunities for public interaction within the planning realm. The advent of accessible digital engagement tools to the public can change not only our abilities to engage with our community, but how we plan and the planning profession overall.

An initiative to recreate Plan Winnipeg is underway with a goal to embrace this technological conversation through the development of an interactive online community forum to maximize community and stakeholder buy-in, involvement and input. An emphasis on the process, as well as the outcome, of the development of the new Plan is being made on a scale that has yet to be tried in Winnipeg or nearly any other municipality.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

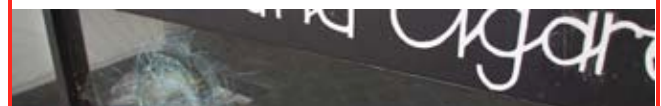
Markets are conversations. A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. Marketers have long known that buzz happens around interesting conversations and people feel compelled to spontaneously contribute to a conversation they find intriguing. The key is making it as easy as possible for this to occur; digital engagement provides the opportunity to create an instant community surrounding interesting dialogue. There is no doubt that digital engagement tools such as blogs, community forums and Facebook are therefore increasingly important opportunities for public interaction within the planning realm. They are known for enabling safe, accessible, affordable debate and discussion and add a dimension that the more traditional public consultation options do not offer. These tools are multi-way dialogues without the potential costs and time associated with face-to-face interactions, while allowing citizens to identify and connect with like (or unlike minded) individuals.

A continuing professional challenge for planners is the incorporation of effective public participation. Even the most successful community methods such as charettes, open space, or visual scavenger hunts often only provide punctuation within larger processes that can lack effectiveness. Reasons for this include: limiting access to information; increased systemic elitism; unnecessary complexity and confusion; ineffective process design; inappropriate meeting layouts and locations; and poor communication strategies. These all reduce the potential success of a planning project, and in turn, the livability of our communities. This is a professional wide problem.

The advent of accessible digital engagement tools to the public can change not only our abilities to engage with our community, but how we plan and the planning profession overall. Michael Dudley, a Winnipeg-based planner and urban studies librarian, is a strong advocate of the possibility of blogging in planning, but his

comments apply equally well to all modes of online communication. Communicative web tools allow planners to “contribute to [debate] in a timely way, as opposed to waiting for the sometimes lengthy publication cycles of standard magazines and journals...because of the social nature of the web, postings are always subject to commentary and refutation, so they are great for initiating dialogue. And as other people can link to your postings...they can be a method for disseminating information to the general public that might otherwise appear only in [specialist] publications” (Dudley 2008). He also notes that blogs in particular can strengthen and clarify planners own internal thought processes given the rapid pace of information change in cities. This is critical in assisting planners synthesize other perspectives with their own while stimulating their professional writing and analytical skills.

PROJECT RENEW NEWCASTLE (PRN)



PRN, in Newcastle, Australia- began life as a facebook group. Before they had a single meeting, they went to Facebook to see if they could recruit interested citizens in supporting a scheme to revive the CBD through small-scale and temporary arts and cultural activity. Within a day they had 100 people, within a week they had a thousand, and now there are over 2000 people in the group. Newcastle is a city of only a few hundred thousand people- so this is a significant proportion of the community. The group was critical in starting a dialogue, demonstrating support and nurturing the idea from mere seeds to a full execution with no budget for PR or communication. The Renew Newcastle project simply could not have initiated their plans without a social networking tool such as Facebook.



FACTS OF THE CASE

Our actions as planners influence the use and development of the public realm. We aim to do this within public processes. Public refers to both the openness with which our actions are undertaken and the community of stakeholders involved.

This time around, a strong emphasis on the public process is being made in the review of Plan Winnipeg. Called the 'Involving

Winnipeggers Campaign,' the public consultation will kick off on Saturday April 25th 2009 with the Mayor's Symposium- A Sustainable Winnipeg. The symposium seeks to raise awareness regarding sustainability, acquire Winnipegger's views on a sustainability strategy for our City and will launch the full public consultation campaign for the new Official Plan. A cornerstone of this review campaign is a 'Barack-style' use of digital engagement which build on the technological "groundswell" occurring- "the spontaneous movement of people using online tools to connect, take charge of their own experience, and get what they need- information, support, ideas, products, and bargaining power- from each other" (Lichtenberg 2009). Cities are recognizing this and a number of Canadian municipalities are jumping on board.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

The use of social technologies for social good. They are tools to connect millions of people, to access accumulated knowledge, to give voice publicly to thoughts and ideas without permission. It is participatory culture- it is alive, inclusive, vibrant and its implications are at once profound and present, unconstrained by time or distance.

<http://www.speakupwinnipeg.com/>

OurWinnipeg™

It's Our City, It's Our Plan, It's Our Time

The review of Plan Winnipeg is underway with a goal to embrace this technological 'groundswell;' the City is tentatively calling the process 'A Call to Action'. This initiative includes the development of an interactive online community forum to maximize community and stakeholder buy-in, involvement and input throughout the review. An emphasis on the process, as well as the outcome, of the development of the new Plan Winnipeg is being made on a scale that has yet to be tried in Winnipeg.

The interactive community forum is innovative for Winnipeg for a number of reasons, including the scale of the public involvement, the technological tools being utilized and the diversity of the team members who are designing, coordinating and implementing the engagements. The online tools that will be found on the site have the advantage of educating and communicating complex planning concepts and plans easily to citizens, generating excitement and awareness surrounding an initiative, increasing public and stakeholder participation (the City of Markham involved over 5,000 residents in their 'Click with Markham' campaign to develop a new strategic plan) and assist in creating consensus for future decisions and visions.

ACTIONS AND INTERACTIONS

There is a 9-month timeframe for the 'Call to Action' process, including the development of the workplan in March, the online launch at the end of April, the possibility of working group charrettes at the end of May and June, and the possible inclusion of Metroquest workshops throughout the process. The process involves both proven and innovative methods to share information and raise awareness, seek public input, facilitate interaction and gather ideas. A number of municipal precedents were examined to provide fodder for the design of this process, including: Calgary (for their public consultation process and integrated target-setting visions), Burlington (for their strategic plan 'Future Focus Seven'), Chicago (for their online community involvement) and Barack Obama's website and utilization of social networking tools. As the site will not be launched until after this case-in-point is completed, there are number of elements which are confidential to the City and therefore cannot be highlighted in this report.

The purpose of the new site is to act as a hub to engage citizen participation in city plans. This will be accomplished by displaying a series of plans/issues which people can interact with and see the results. There are two phases currently planned for the online participation.



PHASE ONE (2 levels)

Level 1: a homepage with a blog and a grid-based calendar displaying titles and short descriptions of events. Features may include: celebrity and local citizen live-streaming videos with questions of the day and commentaries; boxes highlighting best practices from other cities; online community options such as Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Flickr, Delicious and Digg; and blogs run by our very own City of Winnipeg planners.

Level 2: Detailed pages for each of the six sections, with elements such as: blog entries, calendar entries, 'What I'd Like to See' tool (similar to Twitter), and comment sections.

PHASE TWO (3 levels)

Level 1: Homepage unchanged

Level 2: New section detail pages shaped by user feedback from Phase One and open to further input; sections will also be further categorized into individual Plan elements

Level 3: Element detail page with a specific plan for each section (i.e. rapid transit)

The City project members are diverse and include the director of Planning, Property and Development, a PLU manager, the Plan Winnipeg coordinator, 3 planners, one provincial liaison and one web designer from the city. There are four contributors from other departments for each of the six identified sections- including a lead, support, consultant and a Plan Winnipeg interface/ contact.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

The internet offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government...Bypassing national representatives and speaking directly to one another, the people of the world will use the internet to form a political unit for the future (Morris 2001).

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES

Successful online engagement is primarily related to social, cultural, organizational and, of course, technological issues. Fundamental to this project is how the technology being employed can help and hinder engagement and community building. Being clear about what the City and community wants to achieve and how they will use technology to achieve these goals is critical. As the launch of this initiative has yet to occur, oft-discussed outcomes of digital engagement are highlighted here. Wenger (2001) outlines a number of critical technological issues which are key and are being applied to the 'Involving Winnepger's Campaign.'

Rhythm: presence and visibility. Organizing time and space is challenging in online environments. A regular rhythm of events and rituals can be used to define community. Rhythm is especially important for time-limited events, such as a 12-week consultation process. Rhythmic events for the campaign include daily videos, milestone events, a communal calendar with reminders of upcoming events....

Identities and roles. Participation in the community develops people's personal identity, and commonalities and differences develop and should be encouraged in order to maximize diversity. Personal portals personalize the experience for participants and a 'front porch' facility (personal publishing space) can strengthen both personal and communal identities.

Community development, maturation and integration. A community evolves over time in terms of how member unites, how they interact, and how communal knowledge develops. It is crucial to design multiple levels and types of participation- allowing people to have different relationships with the community. Possibilities for contributions are diverse and have varying levels of time and resource requirements.

The screenshot displays the homepage of the 'SpeakUp Winnipeg' website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, ABOUT, CONTACT, LOGIN, and ABOUT OUR CAMPAIGN. The main header features the slogan 'IT'S OUR CITY. IT'S OUR PLAN. IT'S OUR TIME.' and the 'OurWinnipeg' logo. Below the header, a large red banner contains the text 'WHAT IF CITY PLANNING WAS A LOREM IPSUM SIT?'. To the right of this banner is a section titled 'WHAT DO YOU THINK?' with a sub-question: 'Can Winnipeggers do more to reduce the amount of waste being sent to landfill sites?'. Below this is a 'SEE THE POSSIBILITIES' section with three bullet points: 'Sustainability-minded architects begin plan on Toronto's new downtown...', 'City Building is more than buildings in the city of Montreal. Over 2000...', and 'This new terrace expansion dollar will do...'. Further down, there is an 'EVENTS' section listing various events such as 'Mayor's Symposium: A Sustainable Winnipeg' and 'See us at Hockey Night in Canada presents...'. A 'SCENE IN WINNIPEG' section features a photo of a woman and the text 'WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU'RE WINNIPEGGED? A VIDEO CAMERA AND TEAM TO CAPTURE THE CITY THEY LOVE!'. Below this is a 'SPEAKUP TOOLKIT' section with the text 'WHAT TO SPEAK UP ABOUT? EQUIP YOURSELF WITH FACTS AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT'. At the bottom, there is a 'RECENT POSTS' section with three items: 'Sustainability-minded architects begin plan on amount of Toronto's next downtown terrace expansion...', 'City Building is more than buildings in the city of the a Montreal. Lorem ipsum sit amet...', and 'This new terrace expansion dollar will do...'. The website also includes social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

The site design for SpeakUp Winnipeg launched on April 25th 2009.

Two-way webbing. For too long, software tools on the web have been about letting the few publish and the many read. Blogging and storytelling are the most accessible ways for most of the public to participate. They are concrete, temporal, convey understanding, have direct and unfiltered communication of one to many, and people tend to be receptive rather than reactive when reading personal stories.

Potential issues to overcome, often associated with online participation:

- Inconsistency of website design and user experience
- Information overload
- Asynchronous dialogue
- Institutional skepticism
- Adequate representativeness and quality

LESSONS LEARNED

The exponential growth in use and the subsequent decline in prices associated with use, make the Web more accessible than ever. Though it has always been an information repository, it is now the largest in the world. This fact, combined with the analytical tools once only used as desktop applications, make it a place to not only gather, store and retrieve information, but to extract additional meaning from this information in near-real time as the data becomes available. The digital citizen need to possess skills that citizens of previous generations did not have to think about- including those of media literacy. Logical and rhetorical skills were taught in the past; a new rhetoric of participatory discourse, including agreed protocols of public deliberation, will be required for the digital citizen.

Digital engagement tools are therefore necessary additions to the toolkits of urban planners. They can help us do our jobs more effectively, use less resources, and provide the opportunity for more equitable planning outcomes with the broader audience we are now afforded. The implications digital engagement have for increased democratic participation is enormous; it has been said that the tendency to prepare policy through traditional negotiation results in inadequate opportunities for citizens to obtain access to information and demand

accountability. It is essential to allow more citizen groups- rather than particularly resourceful lobbyists- to participate in the design of their own environment. Digital engagement can do this, as well as improve the contact between political citizens and decision-makers.

It is important to recognize that in order to attract people to get involved in online consultations and discussion, it is vital that government and representatives demonstrate their commitment to listening to and learning from the contributions that are made and to respond to them in a timely way and transparent way. As countless citizens log on and speak out, the challenge to elected representatives and municipal participants is clear. There are vital issues to consider, not least of which will be the resources that will be required to handle increased participation.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT VIA TWITTER

A crowd of more than 10,000 young Moldovans materialized seemingly out of nowhere on April 8th 2009 to protest against Moldova's Communist leadership, ransacking government buildings and clashing with the police. The sea of young people used their generation's tools, gathering the crowd by enlisting text-messaging, Facebook and Twitter, the social messaging network. The protesters created their own searchable tag on Twitter, rallying Moldovans to join and propel events in this small former Soviet state onto a Twitter list of newly popular topics, so people around the world could keep track.



Photo Credit: New York Times 2009

AUTHORS

Kaeley Wiseman has just finished her coursework for her MCP at the University of Manitoba and hopes to defend her thesis in August 2009. Brett Shenback is a University of Manitoba graduate from the MCP program, 2007, and is currently working with the Land Use Division at the City of Winnipeg. Ian Hall is also with the Land Use Division at the City of Winnipeg.

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