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INTRODUCTION

The notion of “building engagement” is frequently discussed by local government officials. As technology has evolved to open up new ways for residents to learn about issues and voice their opinions, there’s a recognition that successfully harnessing this potential is critical. Echoing this sentiment, 98% of local government leaders who responded to Vision’s “What’s Next in Digital Communications” survey felt engagement was “essential” or “important” to their agency, and 100% said it would have a significant impact on local government operations by 2020.

However, despite the near universal interest, only 5% considered their agency to be “outstanding” at engaging residents.

We want to help. In discussing engagement with local government officials across North America, we have compiled steps to help focus outreach efforts and examples of agencies who are getting it right.

STEP 1. DEFINE “ENGAGEMENT”

As with any campaign, you must first take a step back and think about what you are specifically trying to achieve. Engagement may take on a number of forms in different circumstances depending on the issues at hand. Making a blanket statement that you would like to “engage the public” is an extremely difficult goal to achieve because it lacks focus.

Get specific. Are you looking to:

- Build followers on social media?
- Get feedback on an important policy change?
- Promote participation in an event?
- Demonstrate transparency around a development project?
- Communicate accurate information about a divisive issue?



STEP 2. SET GOALS

Once you have defined what you would like to achieve, set a goal to help measure the success of your efforts.

For example:

- Adding 100 new Twitter followers in April
- Receiving 50 survey responses about the policy change
- Having 500 people attend the festival
- Getting 25,000 page visits on the project update page
- Reducing inbound call volume about a specific question/issue by 10%



STEP 3. IDENTIFY & UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

As you plan your strategy, you will want to spend some time thinking through the audiences you will need to reach in order to achieve your goal. Most likely, you will need to connect with several different groups of people.

For purposes of this exercise, think about your top three audiences and the common traits they possess:

- Age
- Profession
- Income
- Neighborhood
- Marital status
- Interests, fears and goals

Grouping audience segments by common traits – and creating “personas” to identify them – can

help you refine your message and tactics. For example, if you were trying to reach suburban moms ages 30–45 who care about school safety, you could write up a description of this persona and give her a name, like Heather Homemaker. Then, as you develop your approach, ask: Would Heather want to attend this meeting? Would Heather be interested in this Facebook post?

When crafting that persona be sure to remember those “inner” qualities as well as demographics – because they can make a huge difference when it comes to behavior.



Consider this example. A city wants to engage their older adults to learn about how services can be improved to make the community more attractive to retirees. Let's take the steps we've outlined and see how the strategy plays out. Since we've already defined engagement and goals for this topic, we dig right into the audience portion.

1. Identify the Audience: In this case, there are three key groups that would have a perspective on the issue:

- a. Group 1 (45 – 65):** People beginning the process of determining where to live during retirement. Persona name: Greg Lewis.
- b. Group 2 (65 – 75):** People entering retirement and recipients of some services. Persona name: Barbara Cooper.
- c. Group 3 (75+):** People who have been retired for a period of time and have likely used a wide range of services. Persona name: Rose Ellison.

2. Understanding the Audiences:

a. Group 1:

- i. Messaging would need to be “softened” as most would not consider themselves of “retirement age.” Greg doesn't picture himself as an old guy, but he is starting to plan for his future retirement.
- ii. Digital and social media channels highly appropriate. Greg is very active on Facebook and occasionally checks Twitter.



b. Group 2:

i. Some email/eNewsletter and Facebook (primary social media channel for that demographic). Barbara checks her email frequently on an iPad and checks Facebook occasionally to see what her grandkids are posting.

ii. Mostly print pieces. Barbara prefers to receive important information in the mail.

c. Group 3:

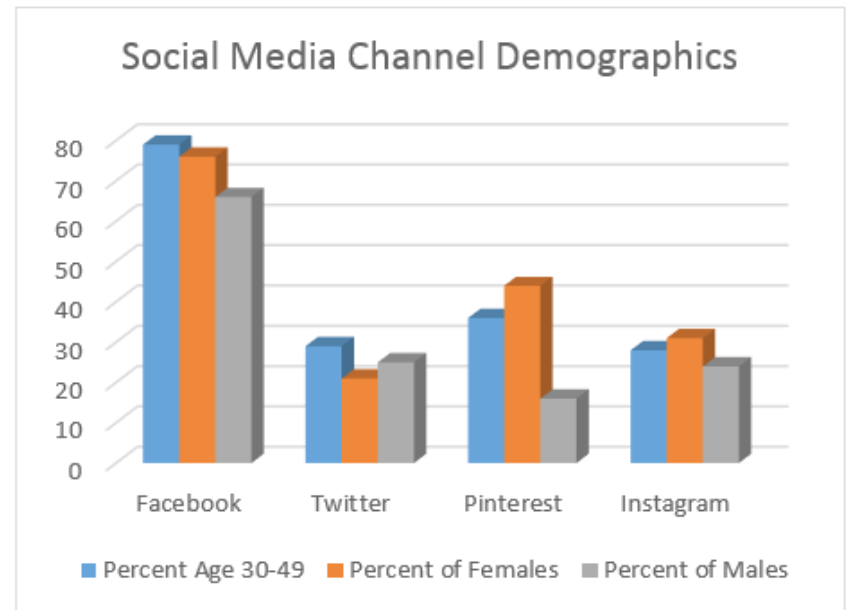
i. No digital. Rose isn't comfortable using a computer.

ii. Large print materials. Rose's eyesight isn't the best, but she always checks the mail.

iii. In-person meetings during the day. Rose is happy to see her friends in person but can't travel too far or at night.

iv. Mobility challenges. Rose has arthritis so meeting places need to be accessible for someone with a cane.

Though it will take some time, thinking through the unique needs and perspectives of the audiences you are trying to reach will help focus your efforts and make them more successful.



Source: Pew Research Center

STEP 4. PLAN MULTI-CHANNEL OUTREACH

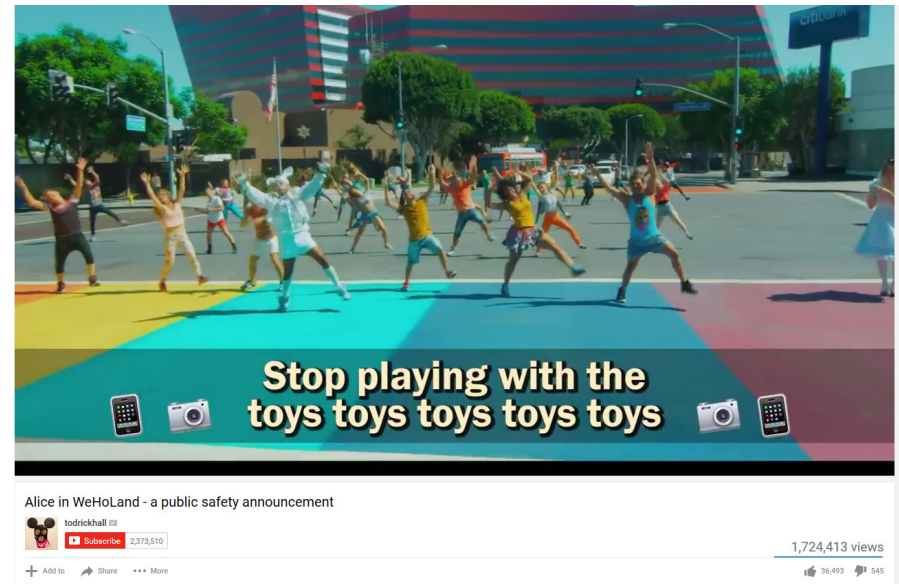
Once you have your audiences and channels identified, it's time to think through your outreach plan to keep all channels coordinated. Remember, test each channel tactic against your personas to understand if it is worth pursuing.

Website	Social Media	Engagement Tool	Blog
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Banner on home page ■ Information page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facebook feature 1, 2 and 3 weeks before event ■ Facebook promoted and 1 month before event ■ 1 tweet on topic daily for week before event ■ YouTube promo video posted 1 week before event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Post topic 1 month before event ■ Publish results 1 day before event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Post blog outlining issue 1 month in advance of event ■ 1 reminder blog the day before event

STEP 5. EXECUTE, MEASURE AND EXPERIMENT

As important as it is to plan and deploy your strategy, it's just as important to assess its effectiveness and make improvements. The City of West Hollywood's Digital Media Coordinator tried partnering with local influencers to improve their reach. He explains their thought process, "Let's partner up with these influencers and we can release these PSA's on their YouTube channels. These are people with massive subscribers and followers on social media." The results were impressive. "Things like the municipal elections and our Pedestrian Safety videos literally got millions of views." After that, partnering with influencers became an integral part of the city's outreach strategy.

Like West Hollywood, consider how your outreach and engagement can evolve over time.

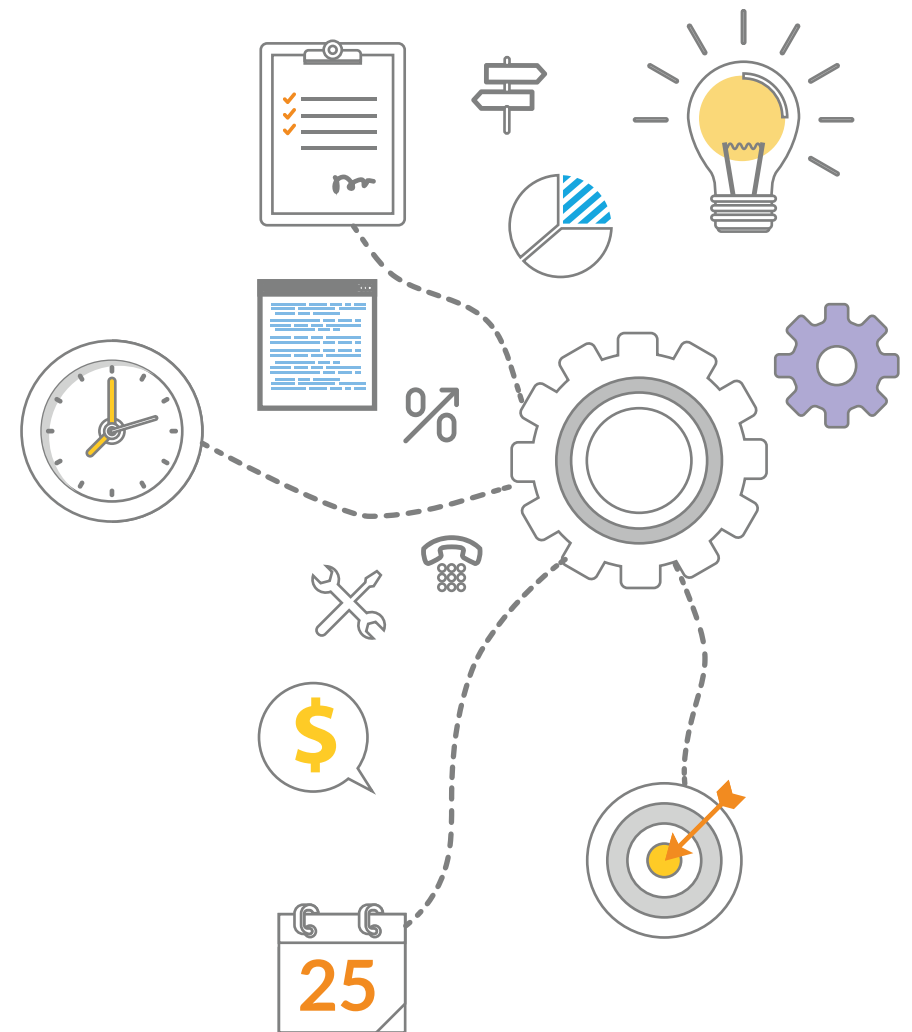


Are there local celebrities or influencers that can help make your campaign go viral? Test new channels, look into partnership opportunities and investigate fresh tactics that can bring your message to the audiences you seek. Remember, everyone likes things that are funny and cute. Is there a way that you can entertain while you reach out?

STEP 6. KEEP THE CYCLE GOING

To maximize your chances of success, take the time to define engagement, set goals, identify your audience and execute your strategy. Plan to measure success and evolve tactics on an ongoing basis, even if you reach your initial goals.

After you've successfully engaged, don't forget to share the results of your agency's outreach with constituents. Publicizing results through your website, engagement tool and social channels will reinforce and encourage future participation. With concerted effort, engagement will move from being a fuzzy concept to an ongoing process that reaps ever-increasing rewards for your community.





ABOUT VISION

Headquartered in El Segundo, Calif., Vision is a national leader in government website development with more than 700 government, non-profit and education clients in U.S. and Canadian communities with populations that range from less than 1,000 residents to more than 5 million. For more than 20 years, Vision has created cost-effective solutions that increase government efficiency, transparency and interactive communications with citizens. The company's powerful, easy-to-use visionLive™ content management system continues to evolve with feedback from hundreds of municipal clients. In 2016, Vision was named to Government Technology magazine's GovTech 100, a listing of leading companies developing innovative or disruptive offerings to improve or transform government. For more information please call 888.263.8847 or visit visioninternet.com/inforequest

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