Texans Talk Transportation: Development of an Online Community, Phase I

*Final report*

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Texans Talk Transportation: Development of an Online Community, Phase I

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Executive Summary

Online communities are virtual gathering places where members interact with other members and administrators of that community through the Internet. Early incarnations of online communities consisted of simple message boards where members could post comments and directly reply to other members’ comments (a format that continues to be extremely popular among online communities). As technology has progressed, online communities have evolved to now include features such as surveying, crowd sourcing, voting on or prioritizing concepts or ideas, and participating in live chat sessions.

Many online communities are considered peer-to-peer communities, characterized as a virtual space created by users for the purpose of communicating with other users regarding a specific interest. There are also examples of online communities that have been developed by the private sector as platforms for gathering customer insights into brand and marketing strategies. Many private-sector companies utilize online communities as brand and product research laboratories, leveraging the flexibility of the online community to quickly and efficiently communicate with customers.

More recently, local and state and federal government agencies have recognized that online communities are effective mediums to gather feedback from their constituents on public policy issues, and they have begun using them for that purpose. This report focuses primarily on online communities that can provide decision makers with insight to help them evaluate the feasibility of developing just such an online community for State of Texas decision makers.

Case Study Findings

Researchers reviewed the following six online communities, including both city- and state-level public-sector online communities and private-sector online communities as case studies:

- Online deliberation study: Seattle, WA
- Kansas Transportation Online Community (K-TOC): Kansas Department of Transportation
- MnDOT Talk: Minnesota Department of Transportation
- Newcastle Voice: City of Newcastle, Australia
- Ferry Riders’ Opinion Group (FROG) and Voice of Washington State (VOWS): Washington State
- NASCAR Official Fan Council: NASCAR

The following sections highlight some of the high-level findings of the case study evaluation. The following themes should be considered for any agency interested in development of an online community.
Importance of Three-Way Interaction

When considering a menu of functionality for online communities, administrators should contemplate including features that provide the ability for members to participate in three-way communication. Three-way communication includes the ability for the agency to communicate with members, the ability for members to communicate with the agency, and the ability for members to communicate directly with each other. An online community that provides this level of interactivity tends to be more engaging. Based on the evaluation of case studies, the more engaging a community, the more participation one can expect from community members. A more engaged community can also result in less need for heavy recruiting and will likely result in more feedback garnered from the community as a whole.

Open versus Closed Communities

The case studies evaluated in this report included online communities that featured both open and closed membership. In the closed communities, the goal was to create a demographically representative sample for surveying, whereas the open online communities sought to create a widely inclusive process—which is a best practice in public involvement. Both options have their pros and cons. A closed online community that is demographically representative is a powerful tool for decision makers, as it will be perceived as more credible by the public. In contrast, an open community allows all stakeholders to participate and can provide an avenue for participation that may not otherwise exist. This new avenue for communication has the potential to tap into segments of the population that cannot or will not participate in civic engagement otherwise.

Online Communities Provide Fast, Efficient, and Cost-Effective Public Opinion Research

One of the principal benefits of an online community is that it provides decision makers with the ability to quickly take the temperature of the public regarding a range of issues. Whereas programming, recruiting, and fielding for a survey in a non-digital manner can be time consuming and require significant resources, a successfully developed online community provides the opportunity for a survey to be programmed, fielded, and analyzed in a fraction of the time of a traditional approach. This ability to nimbly conduct public opinion research opens the door for policy makers to ask questions as policy issues arise and receive real-time, useful feedback. If the recruitment of the online community is intended to create a demographically representative sample of the public, the results from surveys can be that much more useful to policy makers.

Vendors Offer a Range of Options, Including Turnkey Options

A number of the case studies that this report evaluated used vendors that were able to develop a range of management and administration options for online communities. In some cases, such as NASCAR, there was a desire to keep the management of the community internal, and the vendor provided administrators with a platform and training that made the internal management of the community possible. In other cases, such as MnDOT Talk, the agency was interested in the
vendor handling all aspects of the development and management of the community. The vendor that MnDOT used offered a turnkey option that handled all aspects of the community.

In contrast to the turnkey approach is the strategy that VOWS and FROG used, where numerous consultants were used to develop and maintain each part of the community. The case studies seem to indicate that having one vendor handle all aspects of the community is preferable, as the community’s features will be integrated. It may be that a parsed out approach of vendors developing an online community can be less expensive, though the case studies did not seem to indicate this.

*Input from Online Communities Can Inform Positive Changes*

Almost all of the case studies evaluated in this report provide specific examples of online communities informing decision making in a positive manner. Not only are decision makers able to tap into a community to test attitudes regarding policy initiatives, their decisions can benefit from increased credibility if they are informed by members of an online community. The more credible the online community is perceived to be, the more credible the decision will be perceived. If a community is made up of a demographically representative sample of the population, credibility may be increased further.

*Lessons Learned*

The case studies of online communities evaluated in this report provide examples of how online communities inform decision-making processes and provide credible support for decisions made by policy makers. Online communities allow decision makers to quickly learn not only what the public thinks or knows about an issue of importance to decision makers but also why they think or feel that way. More importantly, online communities can also reveal issues of importance to the public that decision makers may not have anticipated. Online community providers that complete the feedback loop by publishing results of their queries and questions to all parties—and how the feedback was used—see the broadest levels of public engagement for the longest periods of time. The value of this ability to quickly query and respond to the Texas public can result in greater public acceptance and support of policy decisions.

The strongest examples of online communities evaluated in this report are those that provide the ability for three-way communication. Three-way communication is defined as including (a) communication from the decision maker or agency to members of the community, (b) communication among community members, and (c) communication from members of the community back to the decision maker or agency. This structure enables a broad range of feedback from community members. Decision makers can query the public on issues they grapple with, community members can raise issues decision makers may not have addressed, and monitored conversations between community members can reveal unanticipated but important issues that decision makers are not aware of.
A hybrid approach to online communities, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, can work to deepen decision makers’ understanding of the public opinion data they receive. While a quantitative tool like a survey can produce data on what the public feels about an issue, a qualitative method like a group conversation in an online forum can provide deeper and more detailed information about why the public feels that way. This same complementary tool set might work in reverse: opinion about an issue that arises in a discussion forum can be quantified with a follow-up survey to discover the breadth or depth of the issue’s importance to the public.

Finally, the nimbleness of these tool sets illustrates how public opinion can be solicited and gathered very quickly. While traditional, in-depth public opinion research can be time consuming and costly, an active online community can be probed and feedback delivered sometimes within a matter of days. As discussions on new policy options or even separate pieces of policy initiatives are debated among decision makers, online communities can be tapped for near immediate input while the conversation is still ongoing, resulting in policies better informed by public opinion.
Introduction

Policy makers are continually faced with constituents that demand increased transparency in the decision-making process, especially with regard to transportation issues. If members of the public do not feel as though they have been provided adequate opportunities to get involved in this process, public skepticism can be a common result. Providing additional opportunities for the most interested and vocal members of the public to provide their input in the decision-making process is an effective approach to increasing transparency in the process. However, policy makers must also ensure that the decisions they make will be in the best interest of, and ultimately accepted by, a broader subset of their constituency. Developing effective communication plans aimed at informing the general public about transportation issues can be challenging, as these policy issues can be extraordinarily complex and multidimensional. Reducing these issues to 10-second sound bites can often diminish the public’s ability to knowledgeably engage in the policy-making process and, in turn, can severely reduce the quality and usefulness of the feedback that decision makers receive from the public. In order to develop effective transportation policy that will positively impact our state’s transportation system, decision makers need to know how policy decisions will be broadly viewed by members of the public throughout the state of Texas. In addition to the voices of engaged advocates, decision makers should have the benefit of receiving, in a structured way, the opinions of a broadly representative group of citizens who reflect the expansive range of political, demographic, and geographic characteristics that define the state of Texas. A demographically representative online community can provide decision makers with the ability to quickly take the temperature of a representative slice of Texans regarding transportation policy decisions and identify informational gaps. This valuable insight can provide decision makers with the ability to gauge public reception toward potential policy changes and make decisions that will be more widely accepted.

Online Communities Defined

One of the most effective forums available for decision makers to quickly understand the opinions and needs of their constituency is online communities. Broadly defined, an online community is a virtual gathering place where members interact with other members and administrators of that community through the Internet. Online communities have taken many forms since their inception. Early incarnations of online communities consisted of simple message boards where members could post comments and directly reply to other members’ comments. This ubiquitous format continues to be an extremely popular format among online communities. As technology has progressed, online communities have evolved. Currently, online communities include features such as surveying, crowd sourcing, voting on or prioritizing concepts or ideas, participating in live chat sessions, and in some cases using subject-matter-related gamification to encourage participation. The possibilities for what an online community is, or can be, are endless as technology continues to create new opportunities for online
interaction. While the objectives of online communities vary, the common trait that online communities share is interaction that takes place over the Internet.

While many online communities are considered peer-to-peer communities, characterized as a virtual space that is created by users with the purpose of communicating with other users regarding a specific interest, there are also examples of online communities that have been developed by the private sector as a platform for gathering customer insights into brand and marketing strategies. Many private-sector companies utilize online communities as brand and product research laboratories, leveraging the flexibility of the online community to quickly and efficiently communicate with customers. Brands such as CNN, Harley Davidson, Heineken, Nescafe, Disney, and NASCAR have all developed various types of online communities with the objective of providing their customers with a forum to directly communicate their product preferences (valuable market research) to product manufacturers. Private-sector companies have found online communities to be an efficient and effective tool for increasing access, building loyalty, and reducing costs. Additionally, evidence from the private sector shows that online communities can provide similar insights at a lower cost than long-term research studies that cost tens of thousands of dollars and take weeks or months to complete (1).

More recently, the federal government has recognized that online communities are effective mediums to gather feedback on public policy issues and has adopted the use of online communities to garner feedback directly from its constituents. Further, the federal government has directed agencies to incorporate online communities into their outreach plans in order to develop a direct line of communication among decision makers and their constituents.

Why Online Communities?

Every year more and more American adults are using the Internet. The Pew Research Center conducts annual polls on adult Internet usage in America, and as of January 2014, 87 percent of American adults use the Internet, up from less than 50 percent in 2000 (2). As shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the Pew Research Center’s results on Internet usage over time, Internet usage has steadily increased throughout the past two decades (3). The Pew Research Center also found that 39 percent of American adults have recently contacted a government official or spoken out in a public forum via online methods about an issue that is important to them. Furthermore, political engagement on social networking sites is especially common among the youngest Americans, who are less likely to engage in civic activities otherwise (3). In addition to the fact that the vast majority of American adults use the Internet, it has been shown that using online communities for public opinion research is often more cost effective, more accessible, faster, and more nimble than traditional research processes (4).
Online Communities Provide Flexibility for Ad-Hoc Research

Online communities are proven commodities in conducting efficient and cost-effective public opinion research. Furthermore, the flexibility of this quick and nimble approach to public opinion research provides decision makers with the ability to conduct research on an ad-hoc basis. For example, an online community would be an effective tool to help policy makers better understand which strategies are the most effective in educating citizens about hot-button issues, such as transportation funding. The 2014 Texas Transportation Poll (TTP) revealed a significant knowledge gap among Texans about how transportation is funded—nearly 50 percent of respondents incorrectly stated that the motor fuels tax is a sales tax, and less than 1 percent of respondents knew the correct amount of the motor fuels tax (5). In this instance, an online community could provide leaders with a platform to help identify the types of mediums and messaging strategies that are most helpful in increasing public understanding of transportation issues in Texas by testing those messages and mediums. A traditional approach to testing these messages could be to use focus groups, which would require the arduous process of recruiting participants, traveling to sites, and conducting the focus groups in person throughout the state. Conversely, an online community can be much more efficient in terms of the time it takes to conduct this public opinion research, as an online community that is fully developed is capable of providing immediate feedback from a group that is demographically representative of the entire state of Texas.
Report Methodology

Online communities are powerful tools that can quickly and nimbly gauge the opinions and ideas of constituents in order to inform transportation policy and decision making. In order to evaluate how an online community will benefit Texas decision makers, this report reviews the existing literature to establish what research has been conducted about the emerging role of technology in public involvement and policy making. Next, the report documents the components of developing, administering, and maintaining online communities. Researchers reviewed the components that are necessary to build online communities and interviewed vendors who specialize in the development of online communities. This document also presents case studies of online communities developed by several public agencies, as well as an online community developed within the private sector. The case studies discuss the motivation for developing the online community; the tools and features incorporated; the vendor(s) used; and the administrative details, recruitment techniques, and project outcomes. The report ends with a conclusion and a set of next steps for consideration.
Literature Review

Given that 87 percent of American adults use the Internet (2), it is apparent that technology has and will continue to shape the way that the public communicates with each other and with the government. This new medium for communication provides decision makers with an opportunity to expand the strategies that are used to educate and engage with their constituencies. The following section will provide an overview of what the current literature has established regarding the effect of emerging technologies on public engagement in transportation planning and policy decision-making processes.

Benefits of e-Government Strategies

Government agencies are increasingly adopting Internet platforms that enable two-way interaction as opposed to simply featuring a web presence with static content to disseminate information. This form of digital communication has the potential to increase participation in public engagement processes (3). The first effort made by government agencies to utilize the Internet for two-way interaction is known as e-Government, or Government 2.0. E-Government technologies for citizen participation can take many forms and serve a variety of roles, such as Facebook for community organizing, Second Life for virtual workshops, and virtual open houses and online communities for garnering input in online spaces (6). The use of the Internet to conduct public opinion research and garner participation in other government-led activities allows citizen engagement according to the discretion of citizens’ individual schedules, often leading to more thoughtful responses and in some cases reducing the cost of participation (7). In addition, the use of technology-based data collection and sharing conveys an image of decision makers as innovative and open to public feedback (8).

Providing opportunities for members of the public to engage with their decision makers via e-Government mediums has been shown to make government more responsive, accessible, transparent, responsible, efficient, and accountable (9). For example, a transparent planning process is more likely to lead to public acceptance of project outcomes (10). This has been evidenced in digital-based approaches to public meetings, which have been found to lead to greater knowledge, commitment, and satisfaction than traditional public meetings (11).

Self-Selection Bias

One of the hallmarks of successful public involvement processes is participation from a representative sample of the broader public in order to avoid overweighting of individual or special interests. However, an ongoing challenge in any public engagement setting is self-selection bias and representation, which is a result of citizens with the highest personal stake or investment in a particular issue being the most willing to participate in public engagement efforts. One of the benefits of online communities is the option to develop a community that is set up as a demographically representative survey panel. A survey panel is a group of citizens who have agreed to be a part of a semi-permanent community and to respond quickly to inquiries.
from decision makers. When recruiting for a survey panel of this type, careful attention is paid to the selection of individuals to ensure that the community is demographically representative of the region the community is meant to represent. This approach is effective in avoiding issues of self-selection bias.

**The Digital Divide**

One notable concern of online public engagement is the digital divide. The digital divide is the gap between the 87 percent of American adults who are online and the remaining 13 percent who are not (12). Recent surveys provided insight into the segments of the population who are not online, including:

- 41 percent of American adults age 65 or older.
- 25 percent of American adults who earn $30,000 or less per year.
- 44 percent of American adults who do not have a high school diploma.
- 21 percent of American adults who live in rural areas.
- 13 percent of American adults who live in urban areas.
- 13 percent of American adults who live in urban suburban areas (12).

This research serves as a reminder that outreach and public opinion research efforts that take place online must account for this divide, and recruitment efforts need to focus on ensuring a demographically representative population of participation. In addition, online outreach and public opinion efforts are intended to complement, rather than replace, traditional public engagement methods. That being said, the digital divide continues to narrow as Internet usage among American adults continues to grow every year (3).
Components of Online Communities

The term “online community” is a catchall expression that is used to describe a wide range of interactions among community members within a virtual setting. An online community can be as simple as a website with a chat feature or as complex as a website that includes a unique user login and password where members have the option to interact through surveys, brainstorming, voting, and participatory mapmaking in order to inform transportation decision making. This chapter will take a closer look at the components that make up all of the many parts and pieces of an online community. In order to evaluate and document the many components that must be considered in constructing and maintaining an online community, researchers developed the following six distinct categories that explore the building blocks that represent all of the components of an online community. Note that not all online communities incorporate all of the components below, but the best examples of online communities include the following components:

- Web interface (as distinct from a downloadable app).
- Interactive tools and features.
- Community member recruitment and retention.
- Survey programming and design.
- Analysis and reporting for community member input.
- General community administration.

In order to evaluate the components of online communities, researchers conducted informal interviews with vendors of online communities in order to understand the range of component types and vendor types. Researchers focused on vendors that provided both turnkey and modular approaches to developing, maintaining, and managing online communities. Turnkey vendors are capable of building online communities from start to finish, whereas modular vendors are capable of providing only some of the components necessary to the development and maintenance of an online community. The following four vendors were interviewed:

- Communispace (www.communispace.com): Communispace provides a turnkey approach to online communities and specializes in the development and maintenance of online communities for public-sector clients.
- Vision Critical (www.visioncritical.com): Vision Critical also provides a turnkey approach to online communities. It specializes in the development and maintenance of online communities for both public- and private-sector clients.
- Ideascale (www.ideascale.com): Ideascale specializes in creating virtual spaces for online engagement and creates online communities that are not as expansive in scale as
Communispace or Vision Critical. The function of Ideascale’s communities is primarily to organize members of the public to come together and brainstorm ideas (crowdsource) regarding a range of civic issues.

- Granicus (www.granicus.com): Granicus’s online communities specialize in providing a space for local governments to disseminate information and for members of the public to provide feedback by submitting ideas and voting on ideas. Similar to Ideascale, Granicus’s online communities are not as expansive as those developed and maintained by Communispace or Vision Critical. Granicus’s online community prototype is called SpeakUp, and it is used in numerous communities throughout the United States.

Discussion of Components of Online Communities

Components of an online community are thought of as the building blocks to the development, maintenance, and administration of online communities. Each building block is unique, but when combined, they culminate in a fully functional online community. The following is a discussion of what each of the building blocks generally consists of, including insight provided by interviews with vendors.

Web Interface

The web interface is the foundation for an online community, as it is the virtual home for all of the activities in which community members participate. The web interface comprises all of the details (discussed below) that must be considered when creating the web presence of an online community. The following details are based on the findings from discussions with vendors regarding the development and maintenance of the web interface for online communities.

Website Design and Development

The vendors interviewed all indicated that they specialize in the design and development of websites for online communities. Developing a web presence that is attractive and easy to use is paramount to the success of the community. All vendors are capable of assisting or managing the branding and development of the online community’s website.

The design and development of the website includes the determination of whether the site is publicly viewable or whether access is restricted to individuals with user names and passwords. One major consideration in the development of online communities is whether users must undergo a registration process to join the community. The vendors interviewed all provided insight into the different options for member access to online communities. One option is for the community to be closed, and members of the community can join by invite only. These users must generate usernames and passwords. Another option is to leave the community open to all members of the public but to require interested members of the public to create a unique username and password. When users register in order to join online communities, the community may ask for personal information about the community member (e.g., demographic, geographic, personal preference) in order to create profiles for the community members. These profiles can
be used to provide context to survey results (e.g., noting geographic characteristics of community members who answer a question a certain way). Additionally, the information that is captured at registration may be kept private, or may be used to create a public profile. In some cases, members of communities are allowed to choose how much information they are willing to share about themselves within the community. The website design should take into account the goals of the community when deciding whether a community is open or closed, and whether to require community members to register.

**Data Access and Security**

All vendors use cloud hosting solutions for all community data that are provided by users, whether the data are provided through interactive activities, personal identification information, or login information. Cloud hosting includes data encryption and secure access to authorized users, which is appropriate for most business applications. In some cases, vendors might modify security protocols to ensure higher levels of data protection and encryption if data are extraordinarily sensitive. Several vendors were familiar with and sensitive to data privacy regulations for governmental agencies. For example, vendors might prevent access to or remove personally identifiable data before they can be viewed by the program sponsor.

**Data Ownership**

All vendors interviewed confirmed that community data are fully owned by the project sponsor and are accessed by the vendor only when authorized by the sponsor, typically to perform data backups or analyze the data as needed. Similarly, data are destroyed and not retained as required by the client. All vendors interviewed highlighted that sponsor data are not sold or otherwise shared with any third parties. However, other vendors offering similar tools and services that were not included in this review might have agreements to share or sell data with third parties, so contracts with vendors should be evaluated carefully before implementing a community program.

**Network/Hardware Requirements and Scalability**

Researchers asked about the technical constraints regarding the fluctuation of the size of online communities (scalability). All vendors explained that there are very minimal network and hardware requirements in the development and maintenance of online communities. The vendors indicated that the proprietary software used by their companies provide continuous updates to improve stability and usability of their interface. Scalability is not considered an issue, and vendors all communicated that it would not affect performance of the web interface or other community functionality.

**Mobile Optimization**

Of the vendors reviewed, all except one provide full mobile accessibility for the communities they develop and maintain. Mobile accessibility is a top priority when developing the web
interface for an online community, as it is imperative that community members have the ability to access the community from all mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets.

**ADA Accessibility**

All vendors acknowledged that the web interfaces that they develop make accommodations for persons with disabilities in order to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

**Interactive Tools and Features**

The activities that community members participate in via online communities are considered tools. Interactive tools and features are a key component to consider when developing an online community. Selecting the range of tools used is an integral part of building a community that allows members to communicate both with the community sponsors (e.g., department of transportation [DOT], legislature) as well as with each other. It is widely considered a best practice in public involvement to include as many opportunities for members of the public (or community members in this case) to engage with decision makers. The interactive tools and features provide these lines of communication both to and from decision makers. The following is a range of examples of interactive tools that online communities can provide. It should be noted that discussions with vendors revealed that all of the vendors have experience developing and maintaining all of the tools discussed in this section, with the exception of the development of survey panels, which is discussed in further detail below.

**Blogs**

Blogs are tools that are used in online communities to disseminate information to community members. While blogs are an important and useful way to communicate information to community members, they do not provide the opportunity for real-time two-way interaction among community members, and the inclusion of these tools should be used only in combination with additional interactive tools. Providing a comment feature on blogs does allow additional interactivity, though the interactivity will not be in real time.

**Discussion Boards and Crowdsourcing**

A discussion board is an interactive tool that allows members of the public to post a comment, idea, or question, and then other members of the community have the opportunity to provide their input. This tool or technique is also called crowdsourcing. This interactive tool is one of the most widely used and powerful tools available in online communities. The ability for members of a community to create discourse of their own regarding policy issues presents the opportunity for new ideas and new opinions to surface. Community administrators have the option of participating or monitoring the input, but the ideal process is to allow members of the community the opportunity to feel as though they can contribute to the conversation without fear of being told they are wrong, or that their input is not valued. Often, this tool is most effective when
community members feel as though the process is a grassroots operation, without the oversight of administrators or decision makers.

Crowdsourcing and discussion forums can take a variety of forms. In some cases, community members can both respond and vote on a topic. For example, one community member may enter an idea to place a highway below grade level in order to recapture land above to create parks and development. Other community members can vote whether they like or dislike the idea, while also voicing their opinion. This process can be very empowering to community members and can also provide invaluable input for decision makers to reflect upon when making policy decisions.

**Social Media Integration**

Many online communities can be built to allow cross-platform functionality, allowing users to connect their online community account with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, reddit, etc. This tool can be used to provide members with the ability to further interact with the community outside of the community’s web interface. Options could include allowing sign-in through an existing social media outlet like Google Plus or integrating images from Instagram. Note that this is a feature that is not typically used in closed online communities.

**Participatory Geographic Information Systems**

A participatory geographic information system (GIS) or participatory mapping is a tool that allows members of the community to use online maps such as Google Maps to point out locations where issues exist, where they have a special interest, or where specific improvements have been made. This interactive tool is considered cutting edge for online communities, and vendor interviews revealed that very few of their existing clients had integrated this tool into their online communities. Participatory mapping is a way to gain geographically specific input from community members and is generally an activity that is popular among community members.

**Surveys**

Surveying is one of the most commonly used tools in online communities and is a very effective way to garner specific input. There are two types of surveys that online communities incorporate:

- **Quick polls**—Quick polls are brief surveys that are often used to spark interest and debate among online community members. Quick polls create input that can be considered useful, such as a quick read of where people stand on a particular issue. However, quick polls are not the equivalent of a statistically valid opinion poll, which relies on random sampling to generate a statistically valid representation of the views of the broader public.

- **Survey panels**—Creating a survey panel where membership is closed and members are recruited so that the community is demographically representative of a geographic area allows researchers to conduct surveys where the results can be considered statistically valid. These types of surveys require more attention to recruiting and retention of
Recruitment and Retention of Community Members

The primary distinctions as well as the pros and cons of open versus closed communities were discussed above. If an online community is a closed community with the desired objective of being demographically representative, the effort involved in recruiting and retaining members of the community is considerably larger than that for communities that are not demographically representative (whether open or closed). The recruitment process for a demographically representative community includes convening a panel based on specific characteristics, whether demographic, socioeconomic, or geographic. The scope of how complex the recruitment process is depends on the type of analysis that is intended to be performed on data generated from these communities. Vendors such as Communispace and Vision Critical are anchored in the market research industry and have vast experience with the recruitment for and development of survey panels for public opinion research.

If the goal of an online community does not include being demographically representative, recruitment of members focuses more on the publicizing of the community. All vendors expressed expertise in the ability to drive membership through email lists, social media, and other promotional outlets. Additionally, regardless of whether a community intends to be demographically representative or not, keeping members of the community engaged with the subject matter is imperative to retaining community membership. Additionally, researchers spoke with vendors about approaches to engaging and retaining community members. Based on vendor feedback, keys to ongoing success of an online community include the following:

- Having engaging content, such as content that affects community members directly.
- Using a language that stakeholders understand. This means communicating with the community members in a language that they prefer and avoiding technical jargon that can be off-putting to members of the public.
- Providing motivating content and activities to engage community members. This is imperative to creating an environment that experiences rich engagement from community members.
- Closing the loop with community members to let them know their feedback was valuable and either helped shape a solution or was considered if not ultimately accepted as part of a solution.
- Building a relationship with community members, which might involve moderators staying engaged and following up with community participants on a daily basis, or fostering conversations and dialogue among community members.
• Building trust in and with the community by explaining how research is used, who has access to survey results, and how private data are protected.

**Survey Design and Programming**

If an online community includes fielding surveys as an interactive tool to engage with community members, an important component of the project will include survey design and programming. Survey design focuses on the process of creating the questions that are asked of community members. The process of designing survey questions for administration to online community members starts with the identification of survey topics that are of interest to stakeholders and sponsors. The survey design must take into consideration (a) the sample (all community members or a subset thereof), (b) the type of analyses that will follow, and (c) how the results will be presented.

Alternatively, survey programming focuses on creating a survey that is easy to complete in the context of the community. This activity must consider the sequencing of questions and the visual design of the survey instrument.

The turnkey vendors interviewed are capable of designing and programming surveys for online communities. One of the vendors, Ideascale, does not provide survey design and programming as part of its services, but representatives explained that they often partner with Survey Analytics to provide this service to the online communities that they develop for their clients.

**Analysis and Reporting**

Online communities enable the collection of a vast quantity of public opinion data through a range of interactive tools that produce both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data analysis is a well-known product of survey panels and can provide a range of insight that can be demographically stratified in order to drill down to specific populations’ opinions on any issue. While quantitative analysis is a well-known commodity, qualitative analysis is lesser known and can produce extremely helpful insight. Qualitative analysis and sentiment analysis can be conducted on community input generated through crowdsourcing, discussion forums, and open-ended questions in order to further understand not just what the issues are but also why they are issues to begin with. Questions to consider include whose role it is to analyze and report public opinion data that are produced in the online community, and how often this analysis and reporting should be answered. Turnkey vendors provide a range of analysis and reporting services with the flexibility to provide clients with either raw data or a complete report. Clients of turnkey vendors have more flexibility to conduct some or all of their own analysis and reporting, or rely on the vendor to conduct this analysis while they provide the higher-level analysis such as determining the policy implications of the reports.

**Community Administration**

The final component to consider is the general administration of the online community. This category is a catchall for everything related to community administration, including updating website design, moderating and monitoring responses (and perhaps filtering inappropriate or
disparaging input when necessary) on forums to ensure appropriate content, developing materials for discussion forums or quick polls, and working with vendors to ensure the wellbeing of the community. In conversations with online community and software vendors, researchers learned that the administration of online communities can be extremely time consuming depending on the scope of the community.

Components of Online Communities: Lessons Learned

This section will highlight some of the lessons learned from the evaluation of the components of an online community.

Turnkey versus Modular Approach to Building Online Communities

The range of services that vendors offer in developing, administering, and maintaining online communities provides the option for clients to use a modular or turnkey approach to creating online communities. The primary benefit of using a modular, compared to turnkey, approach is that the client has increased ownership and flexibility over every facet of the community. For example, if a client liked the web interface that one vendor offered but preferred the recruitment process that a different vendor specialized in, he/she could work with both vendors to build the community. Additionally, this approach provides the flexibility for some of the components of the online community to be handled internally (such as data analysis). Conversely, the drawback of working with multiple vendors to build an online community is the potential that there will be a lack of cohesion from one component to the next, which could have negative effects on user experience. For example, if a community member has to leave the online community website interface to take a survey on a new website, it could create the feeling of inconsistency. Further, the management of several vendors can be labor intensive and might significantly increase the internal effort necessary to maintain and manage the community. The benefit to working with one vendor who offers a turnkey solution to building an online community is the high likelihood of cohesion among the different components of the community, though the opportunity to customize some of the components may be limited.

Community Structure and Features Will Impact the Cost of the Community

At a conceptual level, it is difficult to predict potential costs related to the development, administration, and maintenance of an online community, but vendors were able to point out some of the main factors that typically have the greatest influence on cost:

- Size of community. This cost factor includes the cost to recruit members for the community, including periodic refreshing of community membership and re-recruitment due to natural attrition and replacement of membership turnover.

- Number and type of activities. Activities in communities typically range from a few per month to a few per week. An activity can be a simple survey, an in-depth survey, a follow-up or demographically targeted survey, or the active discussion of a topic. Complex activities require more time and effort to program, administer, and analyze.
• Incentive expenditures. Some clients provide a financial incentive to community members (e.g., monthly gift cards to stay actively engaged in a community, which can be tied to interactions such as posting issues, responding to issues, and responding to surveys). For example, one vendor provides a $10 gift card monthly to members who sign into the community and participate in one survey per week. Incentives may also include randomly awarding prizes to active community members. Some vendors have also developed non-financial reward systems that provide medals or badges for certain achievements within a community. Note that in Texas, state law governs how state entities are allowed to participate in incentive programs.

• Reporting needs. Reporting varies depending on the type of activity and the needs of the client. Some clients require only a summary of the data, while others request executive summaries, graphic presentations, or detailed reports.
Case Studies

In evaluating the potential of an online community to serve as a reference panel for decision makers, the research team reviewed six online communities, including both city- and state-level public-sector online communities and private-sector online communities, as case studies. The evaluation of online communities presented in this section looks at a variety of online community typologies, exploring the impetus for forming the online community, tools and features available, administrative details, recruitment techniques, and project outcomes.

Seattle, Washington: Online Deliberation Study

Background

In the early 2000s, Seattle, Washington, and its surrounding region faced a severe transportation funding crisis. The region had several critical transportation improvement projects that needed funding. To pay for the projects, the state and regional legislature created a proposal for a public referendum that would increase taxes in order to fund projects that were deemed high priority. In 2007, the measure was defeated 56 percent to 44 percent. Prior to that vote, a group of researchers from the University of Washington conducted a study in which they invited members of the public to discuss the proposed transportation projects and brainstorm alternative options for those projects in an online setting. This early conception of an online community tested the ability for members of the public to deliberate online about a complex and controversial topic (13).

The 31-day project was launched in November 2007. Participants were told that the pilot would have no bearing on the official ballot proposition but would instead be used to explore the value of online deliberation for future applications. The opportunity to engage a group of citizens who would actually be voting on a matter of public policy was the trigger for the experiment, rather than the desire to apply the results to a decision or outcome. Researchers wanted to understand the nature of the deliberation, and how the process was perceived by the participants (13).

Recruitment

Recruiting was done through posted advertisements on online community notice boards, email list-serves, and other online forums, as well as word of mouth, and resulted in a self-selected group of participants, a method known as snowball sampling. Participation was exclusive to residents of the Seattle region and excluded anyone directly involved with the official ballot proposal. The resulting group was a non-representative sample, and the group was an open community, so membership fluctuated as individuals came and went. The initial questionnaire was completed by 189 participants, and the final questionnaire by 76. The study provided participants with a small monetary reward, which they received after the conclusion of the study (13).
Tools and Features
The online community took the form of a discussion board and was set up as a simple blogging website with the ability to comment, reply, and rate others’ comments. The website was open to all members of the public, who could join by logging in and participating at any time. A discussion moderator ran the conversation by rolling out the discussion topics in five separate steps, over the course of the 31 days. Discussion topics related to the actual transportation projects that were up for vote. The project also included three questionnaires administered in the first, fourth, and fifth weeks of the study (13).

Administration
The project was administered by researchers who were funded by the National Science Foundation as part of the Digital Government Program. Because this project was conducted as a combination of numerous PhD dissertations, student researchers managed all aspects of the project (13).

Outcomes
The goal of the study was to determine whether online deliberation within an online community is a promising approach to citizen participation in public policy decisions. In evaluating whether online communities have the potential for this level of deliberation, researchers analyzed the communications of the 133 participants and asked them about their experiences. The communications themselves tended to be slightly lengthier than typical online discussion posts. Most (62 percent) were approximately one paragraph in length, and more than half of the posts received, on average, three reply posts. Researchers characterized much of the posting as storytelling rather than offers of evidence and reported that long conversations were typical for clarifying values, while shorter ones were common for clarifying facts. A majority of participants expressed optimism for online deliberation and said the experience helped them understand the policy decision better and gave them an appreciation for different perspectives (13).

Researchers concluded that this strategy revealed that direct democracy (online deliberation) may be a helpful complement to representative democracy (voting), and can be implemented at different points in the policy-making process (brainstorming, identification of alternatives, analysis of alternatives, deciding between alternatives, etc.). Logistically, online communities may facilitate participation by people who might not be able to attend meetings in person since this study showed a high level of participation during the lunch hour. One limitation that participants reported was that they missed face-to-face conversation (13).
Kansas Department of Transportation: Kansas Transportation Online Community (K-TOC)

Background
The Kansas Transportation Online Community (logo shown in Figure 2) was one of the nation’s first government-sponsored statewide online communities. K-TOC was launched in 2009 as a way for the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) to facilitate a conversation about transportation among Kansans. The goal was to provide a forum where citizens and policy makers could communicate directly about state transportation issues. Senior leaders at KDOT championed the project, recognizing the value of an online presence for KDOT to enhance government transparency and communication. KDOT leadership wanted to tap into the conversations that citizens of Kansas were having about transportation in order to better understand how to make publically accepted transportation decisions. KDOT relinquished control of K-TOC and migrated the community to a Facebook page of the same name in 2011.

![K-TOC Logo](image)

Figure 2. K-TOC Online Community Logo.

Recruitment
K-TOC was developed primarily as a discussion forum as opposed to a survey panel. Recruitment for this type of community is less focused on achieving a demographically representative sample as opposed to attracting as many participants as possible. The recruiting efforts used for K-TOC included word-of-mouth advertising, posts on the KDOT webpage, articles in the KDOT monthly newsletter, and daily email updates. In addition, no incentives were offered for membership.

K-TOC was an open community, so anyone with an interest in transportation issues in the state of Kansas was invited to join and contribute. The resulting membership included private citizens as well as a wide range of transportation professionals, including public works directors, airport managers, transit operators, city and county engineers, commercial freight operators, road supervisors, and short-line rail operators. In addition to K-TOC, which was developed for members of the public, KDOT also hosted an internal community called KPN-1. A screenshot of the web interface of KPN-1 is shown in Figure 3. KPN-1 allowed the various departments and bureaus at KDOT to collaborate and share information.

The initial membership goal for K-TOC was to reach 300 members within three months of the community’s launch. K-TOC exceeded many of KDOT’s initial expectations, with 80 new users registering within the first 24 hours after going live. Within one month, participation in K-TOC surpassed its three-month goal of 300 members by 167 percent, recruiting more than 500
community members. When the group migrated to Facebook in 2011, K-TOC membership was up to 1,000 members.

Figure 3. Kansas Department of Transportation’s KPN-1 Internal Online Community.

**Tools and Features**

K-TOC was developed and managed by Leverage Software, which merged with Telligent Systems in 2011. Leverage Software developed a turnkey community for KDOT as it designed, developed, and launched K-TOC with guidance and oversight from KDOT. The primary functionality of K-TOC was a discussion board where members could customize their profiles, create blogs, and interact with each other in messaging forums. Discussion topics ranged from driver safety, transportation funding, and economic development to bike and pedestrian policies. K-TOC also featured daily transportation news, KDOT project updates, an event calendar, photos, and videos, and it featured a location for members of the public to submit comments and questions directly to KDOT. K-TOC was also home to an ongoing conversation about T-LINK, the governor’s task force charged with developing new approaches to transportation. In addition to discussion forums, K-TOC also included surveying functionality, but surveys were only conducted as an occasional strategy to increase engagement, as opposed to public opinion research. Figure 4 shows a screenshot of the K-TOC web interface.
Administration

KDOT hired one full-time staff member to manage the online community with the support of Leverage Software. The KDOT social media manager was charged with recruiting new members, organizing posts, and sharing the results of the online community with decision makers. In addition to the staff time for the KDOT social media manager, the KDOT communications director also spent roughly 40 hours per week during the development phase working on the project. The cost for Leverage Software to develop K-TOC was approximately $60,000, which included the design and development of the community from start to finish. After launch, KDOT contracted with Leverage for approximately $15,000 per month for ongoing maintenance and technical support.

Outcomes

KDOT’s early adoption of an online community increased the agency’s ability to disseminate its message directly to the public and receive feedback. While K-TOC was an early incarnation of this type of engagement, it was less successful at creating a highly engaged community than what was envisioned. The majority of the posts in the community were developed internally at KDOT, with few posts being made by community members. In 2010, membership was close to 1,000, but active membership (members who logged in once per year) was less than 200.

Figure 4. Screenshot of K-TOC Web Interface.
Even with the lack of robust engagement, KDOT was happy with the tool provided by Leverage Software. Patrick Quinn, former KDOT social media manager, credited Leverage Software for the success of K-TOC, explaining, “The right vendor makes all the difference” (14).

The K-TOC online community was the first of its kind for state transportation agencies in the United States, paving the way for the newer generation of online communities such as MnDOT Talk in Minnesota and Newcastle Voice in Newcastle, Australia. The K-TOC online community was appreciated by KDOT leadership for its ability to provide two-way interaction between KDOT and the community as well as among community members themselves. Officials at KDOT viewed their action as a bold approach to engaging with citizens in an earnest effort to increase government transparency. The goal of the community was to create a dialogue regarding transportation issues in order to increase transparency, and as an early adopter, K-TOC was successful.

Information for this case study was compiled through an interview with Julie Lorenz, former director for public affairs, KDOT.

**Minnesota Department of Transportation: MnDOT Talk**

*Background*

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) launched the MnDOT Talk (logo shown in Figure 5) online community in 2009 to encourage an open dialogue among Minnesotans to better understand their transportation-related needs and issues. The MnDOT Talk online community is a nimble platform for quickly gathering public input, complementing other research and public engagement methods undertaken by the department of transportation including longitudinal tracking and market research. MnDOT Talk provides MnDOT with more timely and unique feedback for planning and decision making and fills a gap for decisions not easily supported by traditional research methods.

![MnDOT Talk Online Community Logo](image)

*Figure 5. MnDOT Talk Online Community Logo.*

*Recruitment*

MnDOT Talk is a closed community made up of approximately 600 Minnesotans who have been selected to create a demographically representative sample of Minnesota’s population. Half of MnDOT Talk’s current members are from the Twin Cities metro area, and half are from the remainder of the state. Communispace handles all recruitment for the panel, administering an ongoing sample census screener that considers both demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, income, ethnicity, and location, and attitudinal characteristics, such as feelings toward government. Members agree to participate for at least a year. MnDOT offers small incentives to
motivate members to stay engaged in the community. An example of MnDOT’s incentive program is that regular contributors who log on and take each of the weekly surveys are rewarded with a $10 Amazon gift card each month. These incentives are very well received by the community, as reflected in satisfaction surveys. Inactive members are first sent a reminder email and then replaced on an annual basis. Approximately one-third of members are replaced annually through attrition or non-participation.

**Tools and Features**

MnDOT created a request for proposals (RFP) when it initially decided to create an online community. MnDOT considered the proposals of several vendors before selecting Communispace Corporation to host the MnDOT Talk online community. MnDOT wanted a full-service vendor with demonstrated experience in public engagement that could provide a web platform and survey panel that was ready to use. In addition to building and launching the online platform, Communispace administers surveys, recruits new members, and creates reports on behalf of MnDOT. Staff members of the MnDOT Customer Relations Department work closely with Communispace to develop survey topics and reports. MnDOT staff then report the findings to decision makers at the agency level and policy makers at the state legislature. The Communispace model provides “three-way communication,” allowing MnDOT to communicate with members, members to communicate with MnDOT, and members to communicate directly with each other. MnDOT also conducts research on behalf of other state agencies, allowing Minnesota to leverage the investment made into the online community across the state for a variety of research.

**Administration**

Karla Rains, director of customer relations for MnDOT, championed the development of MnDOT Talk with the goal of increasing community engagement around transportation issues. MnDOT staff members provide guidance and oversight for the community, but they rely heavily on Communispace for management of day-to-day activities of MnDOT Talk. Members of the online community are engaged weekly in online interactions such as discussions, brainstorming sessions, surveys, and chats. Figure 6 shows a screenshot the MnDOT Talk online community web portal.
MnDOT uses the online community primarily as a research tool rather than as a community relations tool or for advertising. This differentiates the online community from other public engagement techniques such as using social platforms like Facebook or Twitter. In order to maintain the ability to provide quick survey analysis and to keep the community cost effective, MnDOT does not weight the responses received via the online community. This makes the online community’s survey reporting more nimble but less precise than other research methods. MnDOT utilizes the online customer community as a hybrid between quantitative and qualitative research methods, most suitable for use as a guide to inform MnDOT on the thoughts of customers on transportation-related issues.

MnDOT’s annual budget for MnDOT Talk for FY 2013–14 was $300,000. This includes member recruiting, surveys, support, and reporting. The number and frequency of surveys, size of the online community, degree of reporting, and the level of service are all key functions that determine the costs of the online community. Much of MnDOT’s budget goes toward the process of recruiting a demographically representative sample of Minnesotans. MnDOT leaders feel that the convenience and quick turnaround provided by the online community justifies the expense.

Outcomes
Feedback received through MnDOT Talk has directly informed several state transportation policy changes. Public sentiment gathered from the MnDOT Talk online community leads to greater understanding of citizens’ needs and ideas. The following are examples of instances
when feedback collected from MnDOT Talk directly informed the decision-making process, as well as other positive outcomes of MnDOT Talk.

**Fines Double in Work Zones**

When Minnesota state legislators were faced with the challenge of deciding how to protect the safety of state workers in construction zones, they identified raising the fine for speeding in a work zone as a strategy to deter drivers from exceeding the limit. What they did not know was how much they needed to increase the fines in order for members of the public to seriously consider whether they would choose to speed in a construction zone. MnDOT Talk polled the community on a range of sign concepts related to warnings for speeding in a construction zone as well as how high a fine would have to be in order to make community members seriously consider slowing down. MnDOT found that reporting the fines on the sign was most compelling to drivers and that $300 was a fine high enough to make the majority reconsider speeding in work zones. This information was shared with legislators, leading to an increased fine of $300 for speeding in a work zone as well as new signage that clearly showed the newly increased fine amount.

**Roundabouts**

Monitoring the conversations that occur organically between members of the online community has provided MnDOT with unique insights they would not have been aware of without the online community. An example of this occurred regarding roundabouts. By monitoring the online community forum discussion boards, MnDOT discovered there was widespread public misperception about how to properly use roundabouts. This finding led to a statewide education campaign about the safety benefits of roundabouts and proper driving behavior in a roundabout.

**Transparency and Public Trust**

MnDOT Talk also engaged community members in a conversation about government transparency. Feedback received from the online community helped MnDOT develop a list of the topics of highest interest to citizens regarding agency transparency. Members of the online community highlighted the following points as areas in which MnDOT should be highly transparent:

- Where transportation funds come from and how they are spent.
- What the departmental goals are and progress toward those goals over time.
- How projects are prioritized and by whom.
- What the project timelines are.

This study on transparency led to the development of the Get Connected website, which directly incorporates the top priorities of citizens.
**Zipper Merge**

MnDOT worked with state highway engineers to troubleshoot a problem with merging during lane closures on the highway. When confronted with a lane closure, most drivers would get over as soon as possible, leaving hundreds of yards of open roadway in the yet-to-be-closed lane and causing unnecessary queuing on the highway. Targeted questions and conversations with the online community helped MnDOT researchers understand how citizens interpreted the lane drop–merge scenario and how to address the issue of queuing, leading to a statewide education and communication campaign about the zipper merge, as shown in Figure 7.

![Figure 7. New Educational Campaign Signage to Encourage the Zipper Merge.](image)

**Snow and Ice**

The MnDOT snow and ice 511 system alerts Minnesotans to travel conditions within their area. Public comments directed to MnDOT outside of the online community indicated that the rating system for weather conditions was inadequate and too subjective. MnDOT looked at other state’s categorical descriptions and tested new language within the online community, leading to a more detailed and descriptive rating system that reflected the experience of driving in winter weather conditions. After a Thanksgiving weekend snowstorm in November 2014, MnDOT checked back in with the online community and confirmed that the new categories accurately defined the winter driving experience.

When information gathered from the online community is incorporated into a public action, MnDOT sends out the press release with a thank you message to community members for their participation. In this way, MnDOT closes the loop of public engagement by informing MnDOT Talk community members of how their feedback informed state transportation decisions, further boosting public support for the state transportation agency and the decision-making process. MnDOT typically receives positive feedback from the online community members following the press release, demonstrating to MnDOT that there is no more powerful engagement technique than showing the community how its input directly informed a decision or policy.

MnDOT Talk is one of the very best examples of an online community developed by a state agency. The examples cited above are just a sample of the many successes that the community has had in helping inform the decision-making process. The closed status and resulting
demographic representativeness of the community is an aspect that makes MnDOT Talk effective, as the results from the community can be easily reported as representing the needs and opinions of the state as a whole. This increased credibility makes MnDOT Talk the gold standard for online communities developed by the public sector.

*Information for this case study was compiled through an interview with Karla Rains, director of customer service at MnDOT.*

### City of Newcastle, Australia: Newcastle Voice

**Background**

The Newcastle Voice Community Reference Panel (logo shown in Figure 8) was launched by the Newcastle City Council in 2008 with the goal of increasing the breadth of community engagement by including a wider cross-section of residents and taxpayers in the city of Newcastle, Australia. As with many jurisdictions in the United States, the city suffered from limited turnout (or turnout from the same few interested residents) at public meetings and wanted a tool to further engage with the silent majority. The council also specifically sought to improve the quality, timeliness, and representation of information for council decision making. Additionally, the council was interested in providing better access to resources for residents to educate themselves about civic issues such as transportation policy and planning.

![Newcastle Voice Online Community Logo](image)

**Figure 8. Newcastle Voice Online Community Logo.**

The Newcastle Voice online community is part of a larger effort on behalf of the City of Newcastle to increase public influence over decisions through a variety of community and stakeholder engagement efforts. Several local mandates encourage community engagement, including the New South Wales Local Government Act of 1993, which states that members of the public may influence council decisions by participating in council community engagement activities. The City of Newcastle adopted a City Engagement Charter in 2012, which provides a set of guiding principles to assist the council in community engagement activities and guide the development of the Community Engagement Policy, which was established in 2013.

**Recruitment**

Newcastle Voice is an open community with membership recruited from the public using both online and in-person methods. Newcastle used various strategies for recruitment, including telephone recruitment drives, bus shelter advertising, direct invitations to community members sitting on council committees, approaching community organizations for speaking engagements, Facebook outreach, newspaper advertising, in-person recruitment at libraries and community
centers, as well as recruitment initiatives in public schools. Any Newcastle resident or taxpayer who is at least 16 years old can join Newcastle Voice. Newcastle Voice has offered small incentives to members in the past to boost membership but does not offer incentives on a regular basis. Upon joining the community, members are asked to complete a screening survey where they are asked a variety of questions regarding demographics including age, race, sex, household size, employment status, and behavioral questions such as interests and current level of civic engagement. Members of the community are asked to take the screener survey annually in order to renew their membership.

Current membership in Newcastle Voice is over 2,700. Community members represent every suburb in Newcastle and all the various cultures and races that make up Newcastle. Members are evenly distributed among men and women, and over half are working full time. While the community is extremely inclusive, it is not a demographically representative sample of the City of Newcastle. This has raised criticism from some members of the city council who would like the community to be a demographically representative sample, as opposed to being an open community. Newcastle Voice administrators do typically weight surveys by age, gender, and location.

**Tools and Features**

Newcastle Voice is operated on the Vision Critical Sparq platform. The City of Newcastle went through a vendor recruiting process in 2008 and chose Vision Critical as the firm to develop the online community. Newcastle Voice is primarily a survey panel, where members of the community are asked to take short, frequent surveys about a range of civic issues. The community’s functionality beyond taking surveys is sparse (only a comment box to leave a message for administrators), though there is a link to an interactive mapping tool located outside the community. The participatory mapping tool allows users to pinpoint a location where they would like to post an idea, such as building a park bench or starting a community garden. Their idea then shows up on the map with all of the other users’ ideas. Users can view idea details and vote whether they like or dislike the improvement. Note that since this feature is not part of Newcastle Voice, anyone can use it, not just members of the online community. Newcastle Voice administrators are interested in officially integrating this type of geo-located crowdsourcing into the online community in the future. Figure 9 shows the home page for Newcastle Voice.
Newcastle Voice was initially started on a three-year trial basis, after which the Newcastle City Council saw the value in the online community and made it a permanent part of the city’s public engagement efforts. The City of Newcastle’s Customer Service Department is charged with operating Newcastle Voice and has two full-time Newcastle Voice staff members who administer the online community.

Newcastle Voice staff manages all aspects of the online community and relies on Vision Critical for support only when needed. Newcastle Voice administrators program and field all surveys and develop all survey reporting. The Vision Critical Sparq platform provides great flexibility for community administrators, as it can weight survey data post-collection.

Short surveys (fewer than 10 questions) are fielded once a week on average, though occasionally as many as seven surveys have been fielded within a month. In an effort to be as inclusive as possible, Newcastle Voice also has roughly 300 offline members who prefer to receive mail surveys rather than online. The average response rate for survey engagements is around 30 percent, depending on the subject. The Vision Critical Sparq tool also allows Newcastle Voice administrators to target select groups for surveys based on information learned in the screening survey so they do not overburden community members.
The overall cost of developing, managing, and maintaining Newcastle Voice is approximately $260,000 Australian dollars (AUD) annually, which equals approximately $200,000 USD. This includes supporting two full-time administrators for approximately $160,000 AUD total (approximately $120,000 USD); a software budget of roughly $70,000 AUD per year (approximately $54,000 USD); and an operating budget of $30,000 AUD (approximately $23,000 USD). The operating budget is used for recruiting new members, buying merchandise, and sending staff members out to community events to advertise the online community. Initial capital costs to develop the community were estimated to be $70,000 AUD (approximately $54,000 USD). To ensure that the entire city government benefits from the investment made into Newcastle Voice, administrators encourage other city departments to utilize the community panel.

Upon the creation of Newcastle Voice in 2008, key performance indicators were developed to evaluate the online community’s success at enhancing the city council’s engagement practices. Specific performance indicators are tied to public opinion gauged from the yearly screening and customer satisfaction survey as well as metrics that measure the level of engagement.

**Outcomes**

Newcastle Voice is widely viewed as a successful example of innovative public engagement. The work that the City of Newcastle has conducted with its online community has been recognized as a best practice for the way in which the council has embedded community consultation into council operations. In 2010, the City of Newcastle was awarded the Local Government Shire Association’s Dougherty Award in the category of Excellence in Communication.

Newcastle Voice closes the loop of public engagement by sharing the results of surveys and engagements with the online community and the general public, in addition to the council. Raw data from surveys are publically available on the website, and more refined results are shared in a monthly newsletter. An ongoing difficulty faced by researchers is the time lag between public engagement feedback and the resulting action by the council due to the long life span on many projects. For example, community feedback received in 2010 helped inform the plans for a coastal project that is being implemented in 2014. Following up on these projects via the newsletter is seen as one of the biggest ways of showing the impact the online community has on decision makers in Newcastle.

The City of Newcastle has engaged a wide cross-section of the community through Newcastle Voice, enabling the Newcastle City Council to interact with the 2,700 community members on community issues and opinions that inform council decisions. The City of Newcastle website features the results of numerous engagements where insights drawn from the online community have informed decision making. Due to the local code of conduct, council members are not currently permitted to directly address the online community. The new Lord Mayor of Newcastle is said to be interested in eliciting community feedback, which should foster greater connection between the online community and Newcastle decision makers.
Every year, the council reviews the satisfaction of the community reference panel and publishes the results online. The council also uses results from the panel satisfaction survey as a key performance indicator for the annual operations budget. In 2013, 79 percent of respondents were satisfied with the community overall, though less than half (45 percent) of respondents believed the community has made a difference to the way the council operates. Members report being most satisfied with being able to express their opinion, being informed, and being involved and are most dissatisfied with surveys, the impact of Newcastle Voice, and communication.

Administrators at Newcastle Voice are coming up with innovative ideas to improve upon their online community, including better integration of the participatory mapping tool within surveys, more interaction between the community and Newcastle Voice and with other community members, and more of a social media approach such as an hour where community members can live chat online with decision makers. In addition, administrators are interested in increasing the performance tracking of the community by further integrating their key performance indicators into the evaluation of the community. Currently, community administrators have not used their performance indicators to measure the success of the community as much as they would like to, though there are plans to further integrate the indicators within the activities of the community in order to effectively track their success.

While Newcastle Voice does not provide some of the additional functionality of some of the other case studies evaluated, the City of Newcastle’s commitment to the online community and to including the public in the decision-making process has led to the creation of a successful community. Administrators recognize that there is room for improvement in terms of additional functionality and performance tracking, but the case study is an example of creating an inclusive community in order to give voice to the silent majority.

*Information for this case study was compiled through an interview with Ashlee Cook and Natalie D’Arcy, Newcastle Customer Service Department employees and managers of Newcastle Voice.*

**Washington State: Ferry Riders’ Opinion Group (FROG) and Voice of Washington State (VOWS)**

*Background*

This section presents two examples of online communities developed by the Washington State Transportation Commission (WSTC). This ongoing project, which includes the management of both communities, began with a legislative directive from the 2007–2009 session that the WSTC gather opinions and preferences of ferry riders to better inform the policy and fiscal decision making for the Washington State Ferry (WSF). WSTC cited the need to provide a way for disenfranchised citizens to be heard at a time when government must make critically important investments in transportation infrastructure (15).

In 2007, WSTC was receiving complaints about the ferry system. In response, the commission chair solicited the volunteer help of a retired marketing expert to reach out to ferry riders and
discover whether those complaints were representative of the majority of ferry riders or whether there was a silent majority with different opinions about the ferry system.

After the success of the initial paper survey and willingness expressed by participants to complete follow-up surveys on the issue, WSTC authorized the creation of an online survey panel known as the Ferry Riders’ Opinion Group (logo shown in Figure 10), a community that remains active to this day (15).

In addition to being directed to survey ferry riders, WSTC was also directed by the legislature to start conducting statewide transportation surveys. A statewide survey was fielded in 2011 using the traditional paper survey methodology. The success of the statewide survey, along with the successful implementation of the FROG online community, led to the legislature directing and funding the development of an online community called the Voice of Washington State (logo shown in Figure 11) in December 2012. VOWS was primarily developed as a platform to field the statewide survey but was also intended to create a forum to increase two-way interaction among Washington residents and decision makers.

Recruitment
FROG is an open community where anyone interested in participating is welcome to join. Recruitment for FROG began onboard the ferries themselves when recruiters rode ferry routes and asked riders if they would be interested in participating. Recruiters collected names and email addresses and sent out invitations via email. Recruiters also solicited membership through email campaigns, press releases, website postings on the WSTC and WSF websites, and smartphone quick response codes placed on posters in ferry facilities. Currently, there are approximately 18,000 active members of FROG. Active members are identified as having completed at least one survey within the past year (15).

The VOWS online community is also an open community, recruited from the general public with a statewide public relations effort. In launching the program, WSTC provided articles and stories to media outlets and contacted 400,000 registered voters via email to announce the program. WSTC also conducted postcard mailings and recruit-a-friend campaigns in counties with low participation. Other partners such as AAA and the Washington State DOT advertised VOWS on their websites as well. Currently, there are 30,000 active members of VOWS. Active members are identified in the same manner as in FROG. There are no financial incentives for participants.
in VOWS or FROG, as WSTC perceives that the use of public funds for this purpose could be controversial (15).

**Tools and Features**

WSTC uses Survey Analytics to develop and implement the web platform and survey panel. An additional consultant manages the day-to-day activities including panel recruitment, survey programming, and survey implementation for FROG. The FROG online community acts only as a survey panel, as it does not offer any functionality outside of the ability to take polls. The web interface (shown in Figure 12) provides a link to contact the FROG project manager, as well as the ability to change personal profile settings and take surveys.

![Screenshot of FROG Online Community Web Interface.](image)

The VOWS online community is unique in that the survey panel function is separate from other functions of the community, which is managed by two separate vendors, Survey Analytics and Ideascale. For example, when members of VOWS are asked to take a survey, they are contacted by email with a link to the survey. They are then directed to a web platform developed by Survey Analytics where they can complete the survey. There is no additional functionality on this website; when the survey is complete, users exit the browser. Figure 13 shows a screenshot of the web interface for the VOWS survey panel.
While separate from the survey panel, VOWS also has additional functionality in a separate web portal that was developed and is maintained by Ideascale. In this part of the online community, members have the ability to join discussions as well as crowdsource ideas and vote on them. Because VOWS is a statewide community, there are seven regional discussion forums. Ideascale works with WSTC to post questions and discussion topics relevant to each of the regions, providing opportunity for subjective public input and discussion. Figure 14 shows a screenshot of the VOWS discussion forum web interface.

Figure 13. Screenshot of VOWS Survey Panel Web Interface.
Administration

For both FROG and VOWS, WSTC has a consultant that manages the day-to-day aspects of the community. This consultant acts as an intermediary between WSTC and the numerous vendors that are used for each community. For surveys developed for FROG and VOWS, WSTC uses an outside vendor (EMC Research) to program the surveys, as it believes using an outside market research company removes potential accusations of biases or hidden agendas. The consultant acts as an intermediary and coordinates among WSTC, the research agency, as well as Survey Analytics and Ideascape. The web interfaces are developed such that the intermediary consultant can perform the majority of the operational and administrative tasks involved in running the online communities, with support as needed from Survey Analytics and Ideascape. In addition, this intermediary consultant manages the majority of the recruiting activities for FROG and VOWS.
The Washington Legislature mandates that WSTC report its survey findings regarding WSF every two years. Given this mandate, WSTC fields one comprehensive survey to FROG members every other year. In the off years that WSTC does not field the comprehensive ferry rider survey, it fields smaller, more topical surveys to keep members of the community engaged. WSTC is also mandated by the legislature to ask ferry rider opinion about the following areas: recreational use, walk-on customer use, vehicle customer use, freight and goods movement demand, potential operational strategies, and pricing policies (15).

WSTC fields one comprehensive survey per year through VOWS, which can take up to 45 minutes to complete. WSTC fields additional smaller polls (fewer than 10 questions) as the need arises, but they try to limit the number of surveys to three or four a year. Because VOWS and FROG share the same platform, the databases for both programs can be combined when a particular topic calls for input from both groups.

FROG and VOWS began as an in-house project on a shoestring budget, administrated by a volunteer retiree. Seven years later, the total combined annual budget for both communities is $300,000.00. This budget covers all of the out-of-house expenses associated with the development, maintenance, and management of the online communities.

Outcomes
FROG is considered to be very successful from a decision maker point of view, as it provides desired data from a statistically valid sample very quickly. The online community has provided input that has directly informed several important decisions. The following are two examples of decisions that were informed by input from the FROG online community.

Fare Discount for Small Cars
In attempting to understand the palatability of peak-period pricing, WSTC found that while riders did not support price hikes during peak periods, they did support a 30 percent fare discount to drivers of cars smaller than 14 feet long. This policy incentivizes ferry riders to drive smaller cars, which enables WSF to load more cars on each ferry ride. This reduces delays at ferry terminals and decreases the number of trips that each vessel has to make. Trends have shown an increase in small vehicles since this policy was enacted, though it is noted that it is too early to draw any conclusions on the long-term effects of this policy change in the short term (15).

Approval of Capital Surcharge
The legislature approved a $0.25 capital surcharge on each fare that is purchased to ride the ferry after survey data from FROG showed that riders would support a surcharge if it were dedicated to a special capital account. The surcharge was enacted and the collected surcharges are placed in a special ferry capital account that is dedicated to funding replacement vessels (15).

Like FROG, VOWS has been generally viewed as positive by decision makers, and it has assisted in decision makers’ ability to make informed policy changes. Because VOWS has not been active as long as FROG, there are fewer examples to draw from. One example that
demonstrates the usefulness of VOWS to decision makers is based on a question about taxation and revenue generation with regard to what people are willing to pay versus what is needed. The exercise revealed a large gap between funding needs and taxpayer willingness to invest. This outcome made it clear to decision makers that education on transportation funding needed to be given elevated priority moving forward (15).

FROG and VOWS focus on developing a large community to take large and infrequent longitudinal surveys in order to understand how perceptions and opinions change over time. The online communities have robust membership and continue to achieve results with positive feedback from decision makers. While FROG and VOWS are less interactive than some other communities, such as MnDOT Talk, where members of the community can login and participate every day, they offer the ability to produce great amounts of public opinion data each year, and these data are extremely useful to legislators in their role as policy makers. In addition, the Ideascape portion of VOWS allows for high levels of interaction, though it appears as though the engagement in that part of the community is not as robust as the survey panel.

Information for this case study was compiled through an interview with Reema Griffith, executive director of Washington State Transportation Commission, and Bill Young, owner of Research Assurance and manager of FROG and VOWS.

**NASCAR Official Fan Council**

*Background*

In 2008, the NASCAR market research team recognized the need to get more timely insight on market trends. The market research team felt as though it was getting bogged down with slow traditional research and tracking mechanisms that were not nimble enough to keep up with the fast-paced consumer environment of NASCAR. In addition, NASCAR was concerned that as the sport grew and the fan base expanded both in North America and globally, there was a risk of alienating the core fan base. These realizations led to the development and launch of the NASCAR Fan Council (logo shown in Figure 15) in 2008. NASCAR’s primary goal for the Fan Council from a customer satisfaction standpoint is to send a clear message to the fan base that (a) NASCAR is listening to its customers, and (b) NASCAR fans will have a voice at the table.

Figure 15. NASCAR Fan Council Logo.
Recruitment

NASCAR handles all member recruitment for the Fan Council internally. The goal of recruitment for the Fan Council is to include as many avid fans of the sport as possible. While the Fan Council is extremely inclusive, as evidenced by its current membership of 12,000 members, it is a closed community. NASCAR fans must be invited to join by Fan Council administrators. NASCAR initially recruited membership to the Fan Council by inviting fans who were currently engaged with NASCAR through their existing digital arenas such as the NASCAR.com database and email lists. Membership to the Fan Council is sought after by fans, and there is currently a waitlist to join the community, so NASCAR does not have to offer incentives or actively recruit membership in order to maintain an engaged community.

In order to preserve the high level of engagement that the Fan Council currently enjoys, all members of the community are required to complete an initial and annual profiling survey. The profiling survey is the longest survey that NASCAR fields, and it can last 20–25 minutes. The profiling survey asks a range of behavioral questions, such as the following: How many races do you watch on television? How many races do you attend in person? Who is your favorite driver? Who is your cell phone provider? Community members are given one month to complete the profiling survey each year (or when they are invited to join the community), and if they do not complete the survey, they are purged from the community. It is notable that NASCAR is not rigid on this rule; if a member misses the profiling survey time period but reaches out to NASCAR and is interested in maintaining his/her membership, NASCAR will let him/her rejoin, as long as he/she completes the profiling survey.

Tools and Features

NASCAR uses the Vision Critical Sparq platform for the Fan Council. The Sparq platform afforded a turnkey approach to the development of the Fan Council, as the platform provides the web interface and survey panel all in one tool. The primary functionality of the Fan Council is for members to complete surveys. While community members have the unique ability to customize their individual portals to add links to their personal social media accounts and develop quick polls, the Fan Council does not include any other additional functionality, such as crowdsourcing or official discussion boards that are organized by community administrators.

Administration

The primary factor that motivated NASCAR to use Vision Critical as its vendor was the flexibility Vision Critical offered in developing a tool that NASCAR could administer internally. NASCAR manages all aspects of the Fan Council and relies on Vision Critical only in a support role as needed. NASCAR’s ability to manage its online community internally is based on the fact that Vision Critical’s Sparq platform is very straightforward and easy to use. In addition, Vision Critical offers training courses for its customers so that it is reasonable for any company or agency to manage many or all of the functions of the community internally.
The NASCAR Fan Council surveys its members in a variety of manners. During the 39-week race season, NASCAR fields what it calls a race-day survey. These surveys are primarily focused on customer satisfaction, as the first question is always open-ended and asks, “Is there anything on your mind you’d like to share with us about NASCAR?” The surveys are always 10 questions or fewer, and the final question is always “Did you like this survey?” The race-day surveys ask a mix of questions regarding members’ opinions about various aspects of the sport, as well as more traditional market research questions. Due to the size of the community, only half of the community’s membership is randomly selected to take race-day surveys.

In addition to race-day surveys, NASCAR will field additional surveys that are more closely focused on market research topics throughout the year. The annual profiling survey that members take provides NASCAR with the ability to select specific subsets of its community to survey for market research purposes. It is notable that the Vision Critical Sparq interface also allows NASCAR to perform additional analyses such as crosstabs on any number of profile characteristics post data collection in order to better understand the behaviors and interests of small subsets of the Fan Council.

On average, members of the Fan Council are asked to complete two to three surveys per month, and overall, NASCAR fields about 60 surveys a year through the Fan Council (note that not all members are always selected for all surveys). NASCAR experiences extremely high response rates of 50–60 percent from members of the Fan Council, depending on the survey. It is not uncommon for popular surveys (more focused on customer satisfaction) to see even higher response rates. Figure 16 shows a screenshot of the NASCAR Fan Council home page.

![Figure 16. Screenshot of the Official NASCAR Fan Council Welcome Page.](image-url)
Outcomes

The Fan Council has enabled NASCAR’s governing body to reconnect with NASCAR’s most avid fan base. The NASCAR Fan Council is extremely popular with fans, as evidenced by the waiting list to join the community. NASCAR’s implementation of the Fan Council has been widely recognized in the market research industry as a shining example of how to increase fan support and brand loyalty while conducting market research. In addition, the Fan Council has decreased NASCAR’s market research spending by 80 percent while actually tripling the amount of research being conducted.

The success of the Fan Council led NASCAR and Vision Critical to win the Forrester Groundswell Award, granted for listening to customers and generating business results through the innovative use of social media (16).

In addition to the recognition received by the market research industry for being an exemplary example of using technology to increase engagement with the customer base, input from the Fan Council has also informed several significant changes within the sport itself. The following are examples of instances where input from the Fan Council directly informed the decision-making process at NASCAR.

**Double-File Restart**

The mid-season switch to the double-file restart in 2009 is an excellent example of feedback from the Fan Council directly informing a decision made by NASCAR leadership. Before the rule change, when there was a stop in a race for any reason (safety, weather, etc.), the drivers would restart in a single-file formation. Feedback from a race-day survey fielded within the Fan Council suggested that fans felt that the single-file restarts created a lack of excitement due to the distance between racers. It was communicated by members of the Fan Council that it is more exciting to watch cars racing in closer proximity to one another. NASCAR decided to switch restarts to a double-file restart in order to create a more exciting racing environment for fans. Not only did NASCAR make this change based on input from the Fan Council, it made the change mid-season, communicating to Fan Council members that leadership is listening to them. The restart format change has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the Fan Council.

**Spoiler Change**

Another decision that was made by NASCAR based on input received from surveys fielded within the Fan Council was the switch from “wing” type spoilers to regular spoilers. Fan Council members indicated that they were interested in seeing NASCAR drivers race more aggressively with one another. The wing type spoiler creates less down force on the rear of the car, resulting in higher speeds but less vehicle stability. This spoiler type resulted in racers driving less aggressively with each other (less bumping), especially in the corners. Based on input received through race-day surveys, NASCAR made a mid-season change back to the rear type spoiler, which is higher and creates more down force on the rear of the racecars. The result is that cars are slightly slower, but the improved stability allows cars to race more aggressively with one
another. NASCAR made an additional change to the spoiler height (raised another .75 inches) in 2014 to continually improve the fan experience based on input received from the Fan Council.

**Championship Format**
In 2014, NASCAR announced a new format for the NASCAR Sprint Cup (championship). The new format features an elimination type tournament-style playoff for drivers that qualify for the Sprint Cup. The new championship format was years in the making, and NASCAR started extensively conducting research through the Fan Council in order to gauge members’ reactions to different ideas for the championship format. Ultimately, the format that was rolled out in 2014 was thoroughly vetted through the Fan Council, helping to dictate the final format of the championship. This is an example of the Fan Council gaining the trust of decision makers at NASCAR. Overhauling the championship format is a significant change and could very easily alienate NASCAR’s fan base. NASCAR leadership’s trust in the Fan Council to provide feedback on the new format resulted in a change that the leadership is highly confident in, due to the community’s track record of representing the true interests of the fan base.

The NASCAR Fan Council has proved to be an invaluable tool for NASCAR’s ability to conduct cost-effective market research and, most importantly, ensure that the organization’s fan base is pleased with the state of the sport. The Fan Council is an outstanding example of how providing direct lines of communication among stakeholders and decision makers can lead to extremely positive impacts and stands out as the gold standard for online communities in the private sector.

*Information for this case study was compiled through an interview with Erin Broszkowski, NASCAR senior manager of consumer research and manager of NASCAR Official Fan Council.*

**Case Studies: Lessons Learned**
This section will highlight some of the high-level findings of the case study evaluation. The following themes should be considered for any agency interested in development of an online community.

**Online Community Functionality and Three-Way Interaction**
This report reveals the evaluation of a range of online communities with a variety of functionality. One common thread among the online communities evaluated is the presence of polling. In almost all cases, the primary purpose of the community is the creation of a survey panel. This best practice for online communities is an invaluable aspect of an online community and should be one of the first features considered when building a community. However, additional functionality such as discussion forums, chat rooms, participatory mapping, and other interactive functionality should be considered in the development of any online community, as these features provide numerous avenues for members of the public to provide feedback and create a more engaging community that will have a better opportunity of success (both in recruitment and community output).
When considering a menu of functionality, administrators should contemplate including features that provide the ability for members to participate in three-way communication. Three-way communication includes the ability for the agency to communicate with members, the ability for members to communicate with the agency, and the ability for members to communicate directly with each other. An online community that provides this level of interactivity tends to lead to a community that is more engaging. Based on the evaluation of case studies, the more engaging a community, the more participation one can expect from community members. A more engaged community can result in less need for heavy recruiting and will likely result in more feedback garnered from the community as a whole.

**Open versus Closed Communities**

The case studies evaluated in this report included online communities that featured both open and closed membership. In the communities where membership was closed, the goal was to create a demographically representative sample for surveying, whereas the online communities that were open were interested in creating a widely inclusive process—which is a best practice in public involvement. Both options have their benefits and detractors. A closed online community that is demographically representative is a powerful tool for decision makers, as it will receive a higher level of perceived credibility from the public. In contrast, an open community allows all stakeholders to participate and can provide an avenue for participation that may not otherwise exist. This new avenue for communication has the potential to tap into segments of the population that cannot or will not participate in civic engagement otherwise.

**Online Communities Provide Fast, Efficient, and Cost-Effective Public Opinion Research**

One of the principal benefits of an online community is that it provides decision makers with the ability to quickly take the temperature of the public regarding a range of issues. Whereas programming, recruiting, and fielding for a survey in a non-digital manner can be extremely time consuming and require significant resources, a successfully developed online community provides the opportunity for a survey to be programmed, fielded, and analyzed in a fraction of the time of a traditional approach. This ability to nimbly conduct public opinion research opens the door for policy makers to ask questions as policy issues arise and receive useful feedback. If the recruitment of the online community is intended to create a demographically representative sample of the public, the results from surveys can be that much more useful to policy makers.

**Vendors Offer a Range of Options, Including Turnkey Options**

A number of the case studies that this report evaluated used vendors that were able to develop a range of management and administration options for online communities. In some cases, such as NASCAR, there was a desire to keep the management of the community internal, and the vendor that was used provided administrators with a platform and training that made the internal management of the community possible. In other cases, such as MnDOT Talk, the agency was interested in the vendor handling all aspects of the development and management of the
community. The vendor that MnDOT used offered a turnkey option that handled all aspects of
the community.

In contrast to the turnkey approach is the strategy that VOWS and FROG used, where numerous
consultants were used to develop and maintain each part of the community. The case studies
seem to indicate that having one vendor handle all aspects of the community is preferable, as the
community’s features will be integrated. It may be that a parsed out approach to choosing
vendors to develop an online community can be less expensive, though the case studies did not
seem to indicate this. A more in-depth look at these two approaches will be discussed in the tools
evaluation.

*Input from Online Communities Can Inform Positive Changes*

Almost all of the case studies evaluated in this report provide specific examples of online
communities informing decision making in a positive manner. Not only are decision makers able
to tap into a community to test attitudes regarding policy initiatives, their decisions can benefit
from increased credibility if they are informed by members of an online community. The more
credible the online community is perceived to be, the more credible the decision will be
perceived. If a community is made up of a demographically representative sample of the
population, credibility may be increased further.

*Frequent Short Surveys Keep Members of a Community More Engaged*

One of the challenging aspects of developing an online community is understanding how to
make the community engaging enough to keep members active without overburdening the
community members. MnDOT Talk and NASCAR’s Fan Council each give community
members the opportunity to engage within the community with each other through activities such
as message boards and crowdsourcing, but they expect that members of their community will
complete two to four surveys a month. Administrators of both communities emphasized the
importance of keeping surveys short.

*Incentives Help but Are Not Necessary*

There is no standard regarding whether providing incentives for participation in online
communities is necessary. Some of the online communities evaluated in this report used small
incentives to keep members of the online community engaged, while others provided no
incentives. While there is certainly no harm in providing small incentives to assist recruitment
efforts, the majority of the case studies underscore the notion that there are members of the
public who are motivated to participate because they are interested in the opportunity to provide
feedback directly to decision makers. Additionally, some case studies also touched on the fact
that using incentivization with public funds can be viewed as controversial.

*Performance Metrics Should Be Developed to Ensure Online Communities Are Cost Effective*

Surprisingly, none of the case studies in this report consistently used performance measures to
evaluate their online communities. The Newcastle Voice developed performance measures based
on participation but had not consistently used them as a measuring stick for success. With public involvement efforts, understanding what a performance measure is actually measuring can be difficult. For example, when measuring participation, evaluating the number of comments received on a topic may not be the best way to gauge whether the process is successful, as a lack of comments could mean that participants were happy and had nothing to say, or were unhappy and too flustered to contribute. In many cases, evaluating this qualitative field in a quantitative manner can be counterproductive. However, the evaluation of online communities is an area that should be researched in order for administrators to understand participation and performance over time and, most importantly, to attempt to develop a standard by which the cost effectiveness of the communities can be established. Due to the lack of guidance from case studies, further research in this area is needed.

The Perceived Success of the Community Will Rely on Completing the Feedback Loop

Communicating the ways in which community members’ input has informed decision making is extremely important to the public perception of an online community. After conducting its most recent yearly customer satisfaction poll, the Newcastle Voice found that only 45 percent of community members felt like the input developed through the online community informed decision making. Newcastle Voice has since amped up the way in which it shares its reporting in an attempt to change that perception. VOWS also received criticism from community members who felt that they were contributing a lot of time on surveys but were frustrated that they were not being informed of the results. VOWS has since started sending the final reports to all community members regardless of whether they completed the survey and has also amped up communication efforts surrounding the release of reports in order to ensure that members of the community feel as though their input is being meaningfully considered. Each of these efforts contributes to the transparency and accountability of the implementing entity.
Conclusion

The case studies of online communities evaluated in this report provide powerful examples of how online communities inform decision-making processes and provide credible support for decisions made by policy makers. Online communities allow decision makers to quickly learn not only what the public thinks or knows about an issue of importance to decision makers but also why they think or feel that way. More importantly, online communities can also reveal issues of importance to the public that decision makers may not have anticipated. Online community providers that complete the feedback loop by publishing results of their queries and questions to all parties—and how the feedback was used—see the broadest levels of public engagement for the longest periods of time. The value of this ability to quickly query and respond to the Texas public can result in greater public acceptance and support of decisions.

The strongest examples of online communities evaluated in this report are those that provide the ability for three-way communication. Three-way communication is defined as including (a) communication from the decision maker or agency to members of the community, (b) communication among community members, and (c) communication from members of the community back to the decision maker or agency. This structure enables a broad range of feedback from community members. Decision makers can query the public on issues they grapple with, community members can raise issues decision makers may not have addressed, and monitored conversations between community members can reveal unanticipated but important issues that decision makers are not aware of.

A hybrid approach to online communities, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, can work to deepen decision makers’ understanding of the public opinion data they receive. While a quantitative tool like a survey can produce data on what the public feels about an issue, a qualitative method like a group conversation in an online discussion forum can provide deeper and more detailed information about why they feel that way. This same complementary tool set might work in reverse: opinion about an issue that arises in a discussion forum can be quantified with a follow-up survey to discover the breadth or depth of the issue’s importance to the public.

Finally, the nimbleness of these toolsets once established means that public opinion can be solicited and gathered very quickly. While traditional, in-depth public opinion research can be extremely time consuming and costly, an active online community can be probed and feedback delivered sometimes within a matter of days. As discussions on new policies or even separate pieces of policy initiatives are debated among decision makers, online communities can be tapped for near immediate input while the conversation is still ongoing, resulting in policies informed by public opinion.
Considerations for Implementing Online Communities

The findings presented in this report reveal the following key questions that would need to be addressed in greater detail during subsequent research in order to envision and develop an online community for Texas:

- What are the goals and objectives of the online community?
- What is the size of the online community, and should it be open or closed?
- What tools and functionality will be incorporated into the online community?
- How will roles and responsibilities be identified and assigned?
- How will the success of the online community be measured on an ongoing basis?
- How will researchers identify the scope of the online community, and what vendor(s) will be involved?
References


