Tools for Civic Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Governments that want to engage their citizens via technology have many choices; the challenge for most communities is determining which tools are right for them. This choice is often based on a number of factors including the availability of resources, the community's appetite for engagement, and the impetus of government leadership. While the factors influencing which tools a community should select often vary, the benefits that can be realized from new methods of civic engagement are clear. The following sections highlight key features to consider when selecting civic engagement tools.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Social Media Integration

In many fundamental ways, the tools highlighted in this paper represent a shift in philosophy regarding citizen engagement. This shift draws governments away from the traditional community meetings and budget hearings that are offered in one location at one time to a more accessible framework that allows greater levels of participation.

Image is also important. As communities become increasingly sophisticated in marketing and branding their locations, the way the community is portrayed is also more closely monitored. Nowhere is this brand awareness more pronounced than on social media. Since many communities already have a presence on social media, it follows that community members should be able to use those media to engage their government. Perhaps for this reason, citizen engagement applications are increasingly enabling social media integration.

Citizen engagement generally requires going where the people are rather than asking them to come to you. Integrating with social media enables governments to engage their citizens in a way they are familiar with, while maintaining a consistent brand identity across multiple social media platforms.

Mobile Solutions and Mobile Device Compatibility

Mobile device compatibility is becoming a common requirement for digital citizen engagement tools. This is primarily because mobile applications can enable better access to particular demographic groups — young people and less affluent citizens — in addition to the convenience mobile device compatibility affords. Tools such as Adobe Experience Manager, for instance, help tailor web content to specific devices (e.g. smart phones, tablets) and are increasingly essential in today's digital environment. A 2014 Pew Research Center report[1] noted that 63% of adult cell phone owners use their phones to go online and 34% of all Internet users go online primarily with their phones rather than using a traditional computer. This suggests a growing trend — reinforcing the need for citizen engagement tools to be mobile device-friendly.

Configuration

Most vendors of citizen engagement software offer standardized packages that can meet a community's unique needs. This is especially true of vendors that develop game-like, scenario-based programs such as budget simulations. While most components of a community's budget are unique and require only inputs, some programs provide communities with the option of increased sophistication through additional parameters and variables.

There is also the customization of the project itself to consider. Some virtual citizen engagement tools allow the community to brand the engagement effort for marketing purposes, making it unique and memorable, and thereby increasing its effectiveness.

Websites

Most virtual citizen engagement tools establish independent websites that are linked to a community's primary webpage. Some tools offer sophisticated mechanisms and interfaces to draw data and information from other city websites, while others require manual inputs and operate more independently. City administrators can often use a vendor-provided dashboard or portal to review and analyze information. Some vendors are more heavily involved in the actual engagement project than others — vendor involvement can take the form of low-impact activities such as generating reports , performing analysis, and monitoring discussion boards, to more holistic facilitation and consulting. Engagement tools that offer this added support are typically more beneficial for smaller communities that lack the time, resources, or expertise to manage citizen engagement projects.

E-Mail Alerts

While e-mail alerts and text message updates are less common, they can be easily added to many citizen engagement packages by creating an interface via third-party software. Although typically thought of as a tool for emergency notifications, mass notification applications such as GovDelivery allow communities to notify, survey, and poll community members through phone messages, e-mails, and text alerts. Mobile device-specific tools such as Textizen enable governments to gather detailed information from users through newer smart phones and more traditional mobile devices via texting (SMS).

Online Message Boards

Most citizen engagement tools include some form of online message board or discussion forum. This feature is often the backbone of the larger engagement software package. Message boards are typically used to collect comments and feedback, and to help citizens exchange ideas. Most allow citizens to vote for, endorse, and share comments and ideas they support.

CONCLUSION

While governments have many choices among innovative citizen engagement tools, most go about the task of connecting communities with their government in different ways. Some focus on increasing access to government and information, while others focus primarily on increasing the quality of those interactions. Some seek detailed personal information from participants to gain a sense of who is providing feedback, while others emphasize simplicity as a way of increasing the amount of feedback. Each approach has benefits and limitations, which means that defining the purpose of the citizen engagement initiative is extremely important. Governments need to clearly define their motivation for the citizen engagement initiative before selecting any technological tool — a point that may seem self-evident but is nevertheless frequently overlooked.

Note

[1] Mobile Technology Fact Sheet, Pew Research Centers Internet American Life Project,
http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet/

APPENDIX: CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT SOFTWARE TOOLS

The tools reviewed in the appendix were selected primarily for their applicability to citizen engagement in public-sector budgeting. Budget simulation features aren't available in all the packages reviewed in this appendix, but all contain features that can enhance the public-sector budget development process through direct citizen involvement. This list is not exhaustive; it merely provides an overview of applicable software. GFOA doesn't endorse one vendor over another, and the placement of the vendors within the appendix doesn't represent any sort of ranking. The cost indicators are based on a community of 40,000 residents.

Citizen Participation Cost Scale

Cost are based on an annual software contract in most instances. Most vendors charge relative to the size and complexity of the project, so cost are estimates and may not be indicative of actual price.

		Average Annual Cost
Tier One	$	$0 to $2,500
Tier Two	$$	$2,500 to $5,000
Tier Three	$$$	$5,000 to $10,000
Tier Four	$$$$	$10,000 and Up

MindMixer

MindMixer allows governments to post challenges on a website and invite citizens to offer solutions. By sharing original ideas and endorsing suggestions from others, participants can introduce and support potential solutions in an interactive setting. Citizen photo sharing and graphic interfaces are merged with game-like approaches to resource allocation and prioritization to provide an engaging experience for participants. This tool emphasizes aesthetics and user experience, using weekly e-mail updates and other communication strategies to provide feedback to residents and participants. Regular client training and high levels of client support, in conjunction with client-managed dashboards, allow governments to measure the potential impact of proposed solutions. Citizen feedback is also measured by analyzing important data about community sentiment, such as the average age or gender of participants supporting a given action. MindMixer offers standard packages as well as additional upgrades and support, depending on the size and complexity of the project.

MindMixer		
Cost: $$$$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option	Yes	
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant	Yes	
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings	Yes	
Integration to Support Material	Yes	

Open Town Hall (by Peak Democracy)

Open Town Hall allows governments to maintain control while gathering feedback from their citizens — unlike crowdsourcing. This tool emphasizes civil, legal dialogue through content monitoring and observation. Content is also monitored for relevance, and participants are limited to one comment per topic to prevent the most strident voices from capturing the conversation. Open Town Hall emphasizes human support and expertise as a means of assisting government staff who may be unfamiliar with citizen engagement initiatives. Each problem or challenge is given its own page, and participants can endorse the ideas they support, which causes the most popular suggestions to move higher on the page. Real-time reporting allows administrators to search feedback for key terms and to create word clouds that reflect the most commonly used terms for a given topic. Governments are also able to capture geographic and demographic information about participants.

OPEN TOWN HALL

OpenTownHall		
Cost: $$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option	Yes	
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant	Yes	
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content	Yes	
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		Yes
Integration to Support Material		Yes

Delib

Delib's standard applications and custom software can be scaled to meet the needs of federal and state agencies as well as smaller municipal clients. Its highly structured applications offer numerous functions and can be combined based on project objectives. Delib offers three applications:

- **Citizen Space**, a cloud-based tool for surveys and public consultation. It allows governments to collect, manage, and share public feedback. The software provides a search function, survey tools, and client analysis and report generation. Information can be exported to Excel and SPSS for content management, editing, and research.

- **Dialogue App**, a tool that encourages policy-oriented discussions by allowing citizens to submit ideas and to comment on the ideas of others. Participants can share content via social media platforms, and a client dashboard feature provides governments the ability to manage feedback and generate reports.

- **Budget Simulator**, a smart phone- and tablet-compatible application that allows citizens to work through real-life resource allocation scenarios in a game-like environment. This application includes product training, human support via an account manager, and mid-project review to assess progress and opportunities.

Delib		
Cost: $$$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		Yes
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		
Message Board/Idea Sharing		Yes
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		Yes
Integration to Support Material		Yes

Textizen

Textizen offers standard texting compatibility with nearly all mobile phones, allowing governments to create citizen surveys quickly and easily — in less than 10 minutes. This tool is built around the notion that a simple, straightforward means of providing feedback will increase citizen involvement and produce high participation rates. Textizen also provides follow-up capabilities that allow governments to collect additional information, both quantitative and qualitative, based on initial surveys and ongoing, opt-in communication strategies. The administrative dashboard for this tool visualizes results in real-time and allows for detailed analysis. Textizen has been used for participatory budgeting, districtwide input for long-term transportation planning, community visioning, surveying business owners for economic development needs, understanding attendee demographics at public events, and live polling during public meetings.

Textizen		
Cost: Project Pricing Only	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		
Social Media Integration		
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		
Message Board/Idea Sharing		
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		
Integration to Support Material		

Crowdgauge

Crowdgauge, developed by Sasaki Associates, gained notoriety after it was used in a national study in partnership with the Denver-based non-profit organization, PlaceMatters. Funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and other sources enabled PlaceMatters and Sasaki Associates to develop this software to assist communities in comparing multiple budget and prioritization scenarios. Educational in nature, this game-like scenario evaluation tool allows participants to identify their priorities and see the impact of various budget choices on the overall budget. It yields data about citizen preferences and the tradeoffs they find acceptable. Crowdgauge collects relatively detailed demographic and geographic information on participants to provide insight about which sub-categories of citizens support a given position. The software is entirely open source and licensed under the permissive MIT license. Organizations that have used Crowdgauge include: Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium Initiative, New River Valley, VA, and Oklahoma City, OK.

Crowdgauge		
Cost: $	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option	Yes	
Social Media Integration		
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		Yes
Integration to Support Material		Yes

Citizen Participation Suite (from Granicus)

Smartphone and iPad compatible, the Citizen Participation Suite makes it possible for governments to webcast public meetings, post ideas and potential solutions to a centralized webpage, comment on and support ideas posted by others, and vote on the ideas they feel best address a given challenge. This fully hosted, cloud-based solution offers surveys, integration with social media, and integration with other Granicus products such as public meeting agenda management tools. The Citizen Participation Suite also offers analytical tools including standard reports aimed at identifying a community's sentiment on a particular topic.

GRANICUS

Granicus		
Cost: $$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings	Yes	
Integration to Support Material		Yes

IdeaScale

Ideascale focuses on crowdsourcing and linking comments shared on social media to existing government data to compile basic written feedback. For example, when citizens ask questions about municipal services on a city's Facebook page, the post is logged and archived on a central IdeaScale page, along with related posts, and it can be automatically entered into the city's 311 service request system. IdeaScale is fully accessible via most mobile devices and tablets. A number of federal agencies have used IdeaScale as a citizen feedback platform.

Ideascale		
Cost: $$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys		
Budget Simulator		
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		Yes
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content		Yes
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		
Integration to Support Material		

Crowdbrite

Crowdbrite involves citizens through place-based charrettes (or multi-stakeholder deliberations) by allowing them to post virtual sticky notes on a project's canvas, which often take the form of maps, photographs, or design sketches. The software works on mobile devices and tablets, and it allows participants to upload written comments, photos, and videos through the sticky note function. Users can vote on ideas and see results and analysis in real time. Designed to support both in-person and virtual charrettes, this software is intended primarily for "location-specific-discussions" such as capital projects, although it can also be used for priority allocation-oriented discussions such as budget planning. Crowdbrite software is supported by standard, live vendor training of clients.

Crowdbrite		
Cost: $$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		No
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant		
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content	Yes	
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		
Integration to Support Material		

EngagementHQ (from Bang the Table)

Bang the Table is an engagement-focused technology firm that offers two applications to address citizen engagement: The BudgetAllocator offers standard budget simulation and resource allocation comparison, while EngagementHQ offers content moderation and multimedia (e.g. video upload) storytelling by participants. Users can comment in forums or simply click agree/disagree buttons, and the vendor can categorize and manage comments. There is also a question and answer tool that allows citizens to ask questions directly to elected official; answers can be public or private. Surveys and polls are available, as well as a mapping feature for location-specific issues. The suite allows users to create issue-specific newsletters and an opt-in e-mail list. All information collected and disseminated belongs exclusively to the client. A document library is included for sharing relevant files and information with the public, as well as an event calendar and third-party tool and application interfaces. The software collects geographic and demographic information to help governments understand who is giving feedback. It also provides an FAQ widget that captures the most common questions asked about a specific project or issue from other websites.

Bang the **Table**

Bang the Table		
Cost: $$$$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		Yes
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant	Yes	
Message Board/Idea Sharing		Yes
Moderate Content		Yes
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings	Yes	
Integration to Support Material	Yes	

OpenNorth

OpenNorth is a Canada-based non-profit that focuses on providing context for numbers, attempting to explain legislative jargon in plain, easily understood terms. OpenNorth is integrated with social media and includes analytical tools. OpenNorth's two major applications are Citizen Budget and Represent. The Citizen Budget application provides a standard budget simulator interface as well as client discretion regarding the items included. Participants can share their proposed budgets via social media and e-mail, and comments can be submitted along with the proposed budgets. The Represent application provides the contact information of Canadian elected officials and a module that helps users submit a legally binding information request (e.g., FOIA in the United States). This tool is open source.

OpenNorth		
Cost: $$$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option	Yes	
Social Media Integration	Yes	
Mobile Device Compatibility	Yes	
Project Manager/Consultant	Yes	
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content		
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		
Integration to Support Material	Yes	

e-Deliberation

Focused primarily on event-based participation (e.g., one time, one issue), e-Deliberation allows participants to self-select or be invited to events. Project managers ensure equal stakeholder representation before finalizing event participant rosters. Average events require roughly 24 hours of participation spread over several days. This tool makes use of divergent as well as convergent thinking (e.g., sub-teams for given topics) and is designed to go beyond collecting ideas and sharing information to actually helping large groups of people make decisions. Users go through a series of process steps based on best practices in large group decision making. Process steps can be augmented based on issue complexity and desired outcome. Events can be entirely online or a mix of online and in-person. The tool seems best-suited for small groups of extremely engaged citizens or experts and ideal for determining strategic approaches to broad community challenges. Average event sizes include a minimum of 15 participants and a maximum of 80. The minimum duration of an event is six hours, with a maximum of 30 hours.

e-Deliberation™
A Meeting of the Minds

e-Deliberation		
Cost: $$	Standard	Optional
Polling/Surveys	Yes	
Budget Simulator Option		
Social Media Integration		
Mobile Device Compatibility		
Project Manager/Consultant	Yes	
Message Board/Idea Sharing	Yes	
Moderate Content	Yes	
Video Stream/Archive Budget Hearings		
Integration to Support Material	Yes	

ENGAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING

The following vendors are used primarily for large scale capital projects, improvements, and community planning:
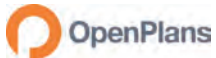

EngagingPlans (from Urban Interactive Studio)

MetroQuest

PlaceSpeak

Shareabouts (from OpenPlans)

REFERENCES

Adobe Experience Manager, enterprise content management,
   http://www.adobe.com/ca/solutions/web-experience-management.html

Citizen Participation, Granicus, http://www.granicus.com/solutions/citizen-participation/

Textizen, https://www.textizen.com/

CrowdGauge, http://crowdgauge.org/

Crowdbrite, http://www.crowdbrite.com/

Delib, http://www.delib.net/

Bang The Table, http://bangthetable.com/category/engagementhq/

EngagingPlans, Urban Interactive Studio, http://urbaninteractivestudio.com/engagingplans/

IdeaScale, http://ideascale.com/

MetroQuest, http://metroquest.com/

MindMixer, http://www.mindmixer.com/

Open North, http://opennorth.ca/

OpenPlans, http://openplans.org/shareabouts/

PlaceSpeak, https://www.placespeak.com/

Peak Democracy, Open Town Hall, http://www.opentownhall.com/

GovDelivery, http://www.govdelivery.com/

e-deliberation, https://www.e-deliberation.com/home-anon