# POLCO

*Developing a Communications Strategy for the 21st Century*

**Contemporary community engagement**

When civic engagement is done right, there can be great collective insight, empowering data, and streamlined staff effort. But the availability of modern tools seem to always lag behind those which citizens desire and, as the almost 70% of the adult population[1] on social media increasingly prefers online engagement, it can be hard to receive meaningful input. When we fail to get broad, representative, civil input, we see the unfortunately all-too-familiar sequence:

*A few squeaky wheels intimidate others at city council or town hall meetings - the silent majority remains silent. Then cities spend time and resources trying to re-engage the silent majority through various communication channels, but the fractured communication leaves residents confused and not participating. The lack of participation fails to generate data that could deliver insights about resident ideas or needs, or balance the vocal few. In the end, the squeaky wheels and organized interests get their way.*

Fortunately, we've seen this cycle broken in dozens of cities across the country and compiled these case studies to share how they did it. In general, we find there are four keys to achieving healthy engagement online.

The first is meeting people where they are online - making interactive content easily accessible through email, social media, or on sites or mobile apps that residents already frequent. This ensures we hear from a broad, representative group of residents.

The second element is providing relevant background materials to inform the respondent during any engagement. Particularly for surveys or feedback, this background information contextualizes topics and questions, making results and data more useful to staff and decision makers.

Third, to the extent that online comments or discussions are utilized, they must be structured to ensure they are civil and informative. There are a number of small changes that can be made to standard comment structures (i.e. Facebook) that truly result in meaningful, civil input.

The final element is resident verification. Verifying participants ensures those we are hearing from are who they say they are, and that no one can "stuff the ballot box" of online engagement. This also means that online accessibility is not traded for citability, because we can now have the ease of online engagement with the verifiability of in-person engagement. This validity further encourages participation among residents.

The case studies that follow are from municipalities of various sizes, urban and rural, coastal and inland. Their objectives varied from wanting more participation, more informed participation, more balanced participation, citable sentiment data, saved staff time, transparency, or simply good government. We hope you enjoy.

1   http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/

**Bar Harbor is a town of about 5,000 people, located on Mount Desert Island near Acadia National Park in Maine. Year-round residents are treated to beautiful scenery, a high quality of life, and excellent public services. Tourism is a primary industry and the community consistently strives to support its economic benefits while preserving Bar Harbor's small town environment.**

Prior to Polco's association with the Town of Bar Harbor, there was never a lack of citizen input. On issues ranging from land development to parking, residents used town meetings and online forums to voice opinions. While successful in getting input, audiences were typically unpredictable and in many cases, not reflective of the overall community demographics. The most vocal participants sometimes expressed frustration that their voices were not heard or taken into consideration.

The Town's communication strategy, without one central location to gather input and little data supporting who actually participated, frustrated local officials because, short of anecdotal evidence, they weren't able to nail down exactly who was missing.

Three months into their adoption of Polco, coupled with a strategic engagement plan, the results are clear. With over 5% of the population now registered and using the Polco platform, The community has been able to verify and document the concerns of its residents, especially residents below the age of 40. This has helped the community strengthen its strategic approach to engaging residents on important local issues, and has lead to a higher level of confidence when making decisions that impact the community.

In Polco's hometown of Middleton, WI, local leaders knew they wanted to take advantage of a successful county-wide rollout of Polco's online engagement tools to gain valuable insight on their annual community survey. With the county live on the Polco platform months in advance, Middleton had already built a user-base among those most active in local government, and wanted to expand it in new ways.

Dane County, where Middleton resides, had launched on Polco prior to Middleton and done some of the baseline work ahead of time. Citizens in Middleton shared an expectation of involvement based on already being drawn to the discussions being presented by the County. Middleton officials went about posting and promoting the survey as they normally would, and once they began to see results, they knew how to make things better.

As a testament to their innovation, Middleton leaders sought to get input from seniors who generally felt left out of the process and were usually hesitant to take the survey online. They did this by bringing the questions to them. After capturing dozens of responses and mixing those in with the other results, over 300 online responses were received for the annual survey. Local officials now had demographic, geographic, and other socio-economic breakdowns to go along with the responses.
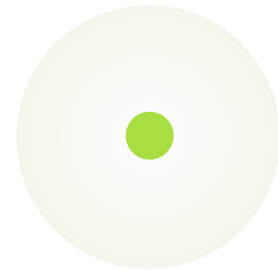
**Located just 50 miles outside of Washington, DC, Purcellville is a tight knit community that generally isn't associated with the hustle of the Beltway. An early adopter of Polco, we've worked with the Mayor, Council, and community leadership in developing innovative ways to engage citizens.**

Perhaps most interesting in Purcellville has been the focus on geographic answers to questions that affect different neighborhoods and their residents in different ways. Whether looking at potential bike path fixes or a three way stop-sign, the use of geographic breakdowns has helped the Council consider all voices, while taking particular note of those most affected by proposed changes.

As new topics come before council for consideration, this input has helped both educate the community and help build trust that government is listening. As engagement grows using Polco's online tools, residents gain confidence that elected officials have their interests in mind.

Drawing on experience with dozens of local governments across the country, we have set up best practices and engagement steps to help Polco customers get the most out of their communication efforts, expanding the reach of their message and creating an actionable, two-way communication channel between municipal decision-makers and residents. This strategy directly helps support and build a stronger community with a shared goal of engagement and education for both government and constituents.

**BEST PRACTICES**

**01** **Timely, regular communication** - By establishing regular communication goals and consistent scheduling for surveying constituents, the local government can help establish expectations for residents to have predictable opportunities for providing valuable input on local issues as well as receive information in return.

**02** **Build off of past input** - Sequencing Polco outreach to follow up on previous insights, or creating larger surveys on a broader set of topics, allows respondents to know their input is important, and that local leaders want to get to the root of local issues, not just skim un-actionable information from unreliable social media sources. This builds trust in the local government's actions, and makes constituents more comfortable engaging.

**03** **Target, and retarget, your message** - Don't take the easy road and simply blast messages to the broadest audiences. Set goals for engagement (like demographics, or geo-based targeting) and watch results. Knowing who is reached (and perhaps more importantly - who isn't) will be the key to unlocking the broadest base of community sentiment.

**DESIRED OUTCOMES**

The Polco approach helps citizens learn more about issues, and voice their opinions with higher frequency. Government learns more about constituent priorities, and can focus resources accordingly.

Instead of a vocal few, Polco can help engage the vocal many who are excited to participate and come to appreciate it. Building relevant sample sizes of citizens brings a new level of data to local discussions, and delivers valuable insight to both operations and discussions around local issues.

Even when tough issues arise, Polco tools provide the time and opportunity to educate and inform, instead of dealing with blowback at a single meeting. A local government that can educate while gathering constituent sentiment is more likely to deliver a solution that is acceptable to the entire community, even if it isn't every individual's first choice.