

# Time to Engage

*Social media must engage with public sector decision makers if projects are to survive the recession, says Helen Olsen.*



**S**ocial media is at a cross roads. Like many on the web frontier, social media advocates are beginning to realise that 'free' as a business model is not always sustainable.

Yes, the internet is free. Unfortunately, that means that no one wants to pay for it. For any of it: for its creation, its use or its maintenance. And with savage public sector budget cuts on the horizon the public sector funding pot is drying up too.

All councils now have websites. All are aiming to move service delivery to the most cost effective e-channels where appropriate. All will now have to make difficult decisions about where future investment is made. And the business case that is so far missing in the social media tool box could be a major block to gaining future funding.

Chief executives at Solace last month that were interested in technology were few and far between. However, those that were had a surprisingly laissez-faire attitude.

When the topic came up in a workshop, under Chatham House Rule, one chief urged colleagues: "Don't build your own web 2.0 community. Don't bother. Someone else in the community will do it for you."

Delegates were interested in how they could re-use, or hook into, already developed resources without funding development in their own councils. "Take the fix my street website, it's already been developed and works. We should be able to drive that forwards and pump the information into all the relevant agencies –

to generate our own works orders - rather than reinvent our own solution."

Many were dismissive of current council websites, branding them "little more than virtual town halls replicated on the web. The real version doesn't work, so why would the 'e' version of the corridors and the cliques?"

The chief executives' conference obsession with airlines – EasyJet and Virgin were mentioned daily – has an interesting underlying point. The business of flying hasn't changed, but the model for its provision has. Ergo British Airway's devastating losses (and subsequent merger with Iberia) clearly highlighting the danger in adhering to the 'traditional model' in times of change.

Interestingly, the two lessons taken from Virgin and EasyJet are radical steps away from traditional models – partnerships not investments for new services; and stripping services down to the essentials to deliver efficiency and open up access to all.

Social media has enormous potential. It can build relationships and networks and communities. It has the potential to add value to many public services and become a key part of service delivery such as taking the burden off frontline workers of forever providing the same information.

But like any other community it can become inward facing. It is striking that the same, incredibly talented and, well, thoroughly nice, people attend the same social media events – that are always bursting with the same ideas and potential. It is also striking that there is a lack of council heads of IT,

finance directors and chief executives in the audience at these events.

Indeed, almost half (49%) of all councils block social media use entirely, according to Socitm. Only nine percent allow unrestricted use. Councils' – aka council heads of IT – main concerns were security, time wasting and reputational risk.

It is painfully apparent that the social media message is not getting through to those with the power to effect change. They don't 'get' it. But that is not their fault. 'It' has never laid out its case in convincing and engaging terms. If the social media community does not start to network externally - and build a community - with the chief executives, finance directors and traditional council heads of IT, there is a very real danger that the enormous potential of social media will never be realised.

Enthusiasm and commitment will always build communities. Hyperlocal blogging does indeed have its own drivers. And all online communities have massive benefit for their members. But only a solid business case and engagement will deliver funding for the creation of sustainable communities that deliver real citizen engagement and two-way communication between the electorate, civil servants or politicians - that give value to both sides of the provider/user divide.

The internet may be free, but time and resource is not. Until the banks give out free money and the supermarkets free food, people still have an economic imperative to be paid for their time.

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