Obtaining public support by harnessing the power of social media

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Digital technology has dramatically altered the way we communicate and engage with communities and stakeholders in the infrastructure sector.

The emergence and success of digital activism, from global political movements to local community development initiatives, along with the influence of social media, presents new challenges for navigating the difficult path from project conception to completion and achieving a social license to operate.

Social media has significant power to inform, educate and involve communities in the planning, delivery and operation of public infrastructure and is an extremely valuable engagement tool for establishing trust with key stakeholders and the wider community.

It can be a powerful contributor to a social license to operate because it lends itself so readily to two-way communication, which is the cornerstone of building positive relationships with project stakeholders. A digital communication strategy is essential for meeting project objectives related to strong community relationships and achieving a social license to operate.

Meeting the digital challenge

Digital activism targeted towards a project has the ability to incur significant damages to both the delivery schedule and company reputations.

Projects can be delayed, unexpected costs can be accumulated, and a groundswell of online opposition can contribute to political and social pressures that cause projects to fail With new media comes a new set of opportunities, as well as risks, for infrastructure projects.

Communities dedicated to a particular cause or issue can now be formed online, resulting in a changing stakeholder landscape, and traditional

assessments of a stakeholder's project interest and influence need to be reconsidered in this context.

Today, online communities yield significant power to influence infrastructure outcomes. Social media vastly broadens public awareness and interest in a project, which can create key stakeholders with new-found influence and a range of new political and social pressures that need to be managed.

Project action groups or protest groups can be formed and organised online and can quickly develop campaigns with the potential to spread to a much wider audience. In recent years we have seen highly coordinated online campaigns against the development of resources projects in Queensland, as well as campaigns against new coal mines in the prime agricultural regions of New South Wales.

The audiences for these campaigns are not just the local impacted communities but can quickly be supported from mainstream media and amplified to national and international audiences by the reach of social media.

The cancelled East West Link road project in Victoria suffered from intense community opposition, with community-led Facebook groups created to raise awareness and encourage action to protest the project.

These groups were able to use the reach of their online communities to mobilise large numbers of street protesters - pressure which was undoubtedly a contributing factor in the project failing to secure legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and therefore failing to obtain a social license to operate.

A critical success factor

Digital engagement and communication through social media has been shown to be highly valuable in the successful delivery of major infrastructure projects. The North McKinnon Centre (NMC) Project involved the biggest rail disruption to the Melbourne city network since the 1980s and consisted of more than a month of round-the-clock construction work in suburban Melbourne.

To prepare for potential backlash around transport disruptions and general construction, Victoria's Level Crossing Removal Authority strategically incorporated a social media campaign to their advantage, resulting in overwhelming support for the project.

The project team used a range of social media platforms to engage with the community and spread awareness of the positive outcomes that the project would deliver.

The aim was to use these new mediums to drive excitement and support for the NMC project, while also being upfront about short-term inconvenience and spruiking the long-term benefits.

Regular social media posts, such as weekly time-lapse videos capturing construction progress, generated significant online interest.

The effectiveness of the social media strategy was seen as a critical factor in generating greater support during the disruptive construction phase by providing a channel that was highly suited to the audience and for conveying the key narrative about the impressive scale and benefits of the project.

Tips for a healthy social life

Start Listening:
Social media can equip project teams with powerful knowledge and insights into emerging risks and the ability to track public sentiment in real-time.

While there is still value in traditional methods, such as focus groups, market research and media monitoring, many companies now also deploy sophisticated 'social listening' tools that collect and analyse an endless source of free, instant customer data and feedback via social media.

True social media listening involves more than just reviewing comments and tracking mentions - it requires a deeper analysis of digital analytics to identify demographic or geographic trends, identify the underlying sentiment in discussions and assess and monitor the reach and influence of key stakeholders.

Establishing a social listening system that can distil this data into useful outputs enables the development of more effective communication and engagement strategies, which will mitigate political and social risks and avoid reputational damage that can arise from community backlash to a particular project.

Know the space:
With a plethora of different social media channels and digital platforms, along with the expectation for consistent, quality content and engagement, implementing and maintaining a digital strategy can be a daunting prospect.

An assessment must be made on the most effective use of resources and the channels that are most suited to the objectives of a communication and engagement program.

It's important to understand the nature and makeup of online ommunities and the drivers for the digital activism that

cneeds to be managed. Once this is developed, content strategies and schedules can be prepared and rolled out.

Add value to the conversation:

While it can be used to share information, real value is achieved when projects use social media to create an ongoing dialogue with communities, by being an active contributor to community discussions; providing relevant, timely and shareable content; and maintaining a credible and authentic voice in all interactions.

An integrated social media strategy can help to establish shared values among all project stakeholders. In terms of authenticity and trust, this can actually increase public support for projects, as communities will see an approach that values transparency and accountability.

Providing valuable input into online conversations is also about ensuring the digital tools being implemented are suited to their task and the audience.

This extends to making all online channels optimised for mobile devices and tailoring all social media posts to the relevant tone and format of the medium.

Keep your promises:

Promise-keeping is an important aspect of building trust and if a commitment is made in the public domain, on a social media channel or via digital communication, it must be fulfilled.

To achieve this, projects will typically maintain a 'promises register', where commitments made can be recorded, actioned, tracked and closed out.

The easiest way to damage any relationship is to not do what you say you will – leading to a breakdown of trust and credibility.

Phillips Group is a leading communication and engagement consultancy. We develop digital communication and social media strategies, combining social listening and data analysis, value focused content generation and a commitment to genuine two-way communication, which lead to more informed, engaged and supportive communities and key stakeholders.

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