



# **Town of Scituate**

## **Citizen Engagement Strategy**

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# Community Profile

Scituate is a historic coastal town that roughly 18,000 residents call home. In November of 2015, the Town's leadership entered into a [Community Compact agreement](#) for Citizen Engagement as an IT Best Practice. In the summer of 2016, a team from the Office of Municipal & School Technology (OMST) began researching the Town's current efforts around citizen engagement, with particular focus on social media. Last year, Scituate commenced a redesign of their website to make it more intuitive and modern. Town leadership requested assistance in brainstorming how to leverage the new website to engage residents and to promote the redesign upon completion.

The OMST frames citizen engagement around three distinct levels. At the base is *communication*: municipalities engage with citizens by broadcasting information. Once this foundation is set, some municipalities are able to provide *transactions* online; citizens are able to do their business with government in a convenient and digital way. The final citizen engagement goal is *co-creation*; municipalities who are able to engage at this level are able to collaborate with their constituents in governance. The OMST uses this framework to inform its assessment of the Town of Scituate's current web presence, which includes a website, [scituatema.gov](http://scituatema.gov); a Facebook page called [Town of Scituate](#); and a Twitter presence at [@ScituateTownAdm](#).

## ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

OMST interviewed Patricia Vinchesi, Town Administrator; William Sheehan, Director of Information Technology; and Steve Moberg, Information Technology Specialist for the Town of Scituate to better understand citizen engagement processes and strategies currently in place. These interviews suggest that there is staff appetite for increasing citizen engagement. Our interviewees shared examples of trying to make it easier for the public to reach out to them—to report a Wi-Fi outage, for example—and a desire to see increased engagement at Town Meetings in particular. They also mentioned a strong belief in open government and a desire to make Scituate an easier government for citizens to engage with. When asked what topics seemed to be likely to inspire engagement from residents, interviewees mentioned water (both because of the recent drought and current infrastructure improvements), winter storms, festivals, and Town meetings.

## WEBSITE

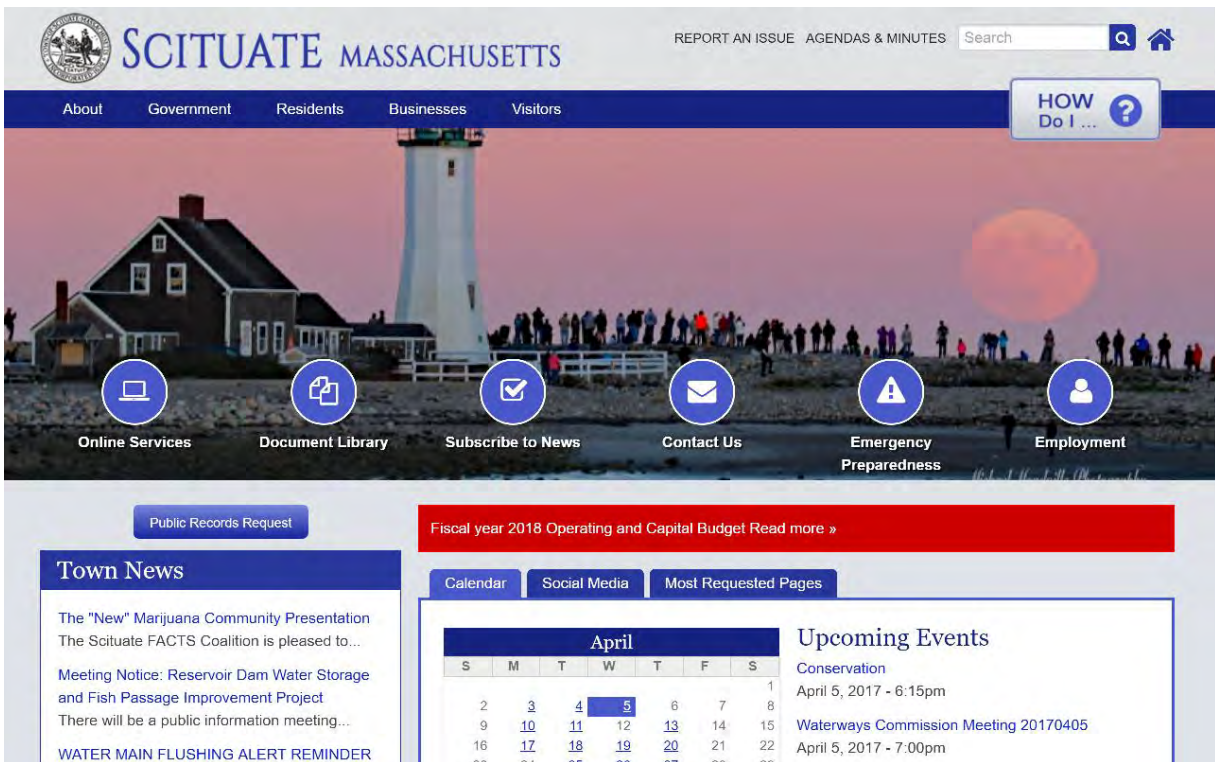
With the new website design in place, the OMST would like to recognize the Town's previous engagement endeavors and their current efforts to transform the site into a more user-friendly platform.

- **Previous Design:** While the former website had loads of great content, the menu options lacked prioritization making it less intuitive for a new user to find what they needed right away. The previous Content Management System (C.M.S.) of the website also lacked some of the capabilities around decentralizing content curation, making it more difficult to produce dynamic content.



Screenshot of Scituatema.gov taken August 9, 2016.

- New Design:** The new design leverages the [Virtual Towns & Schools](#) platform and allows Town leadership to decentralize responsibility for the website, making it more convenient for departments to update the information on their respective pages. The site offers constituents a variety of useful tools including: an informative document library, GIS and assessor data, the ability to rent Town facilities, bill pay, and a host of other important transactions with the Scituate government. Built on a responsive platform, the new design prioritizes accessibility and usability so residents can retrieve Town updates through the convenience of their mobile device. The site is maintained through an updated C.M.S. that is intuitive to individuals with web development experience and non-developers alike.



Screenshot of new design taken January 12, 2017

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is certainly not the only avenue for communicating with constituents; however, it can be a quick and cost-effective alternative to other, more traditional media channels like print, radio, and television. The Town of Scituate has expressed a deep interest in improving their social media presence to connect with more citizens. Once the Town established their social media presence, they were able to put new processes in place to achieve this goal.

### **Facebook**

Scituate's official Facebook page was created in late 2015 by the Town's IT Director, Bill Sheehan. The Town's social media specialist is a high school student that dedicates ten hours per week to managing and updating the page, providing regular communication about Town news as well as information on how to conduct business with the Town. The Facebook page has content ranging from local events of interest to public works updates. As of April 2017, the Town had over 1,900 followers, a following that has increased steadily in recent months.

### **Twitter**

The Town also has a Twitter account that was created in January 2014. While the rate of growth in Facebook followers has outpaced the Town's Twitter account, the number of Twitter followers continues to increase, with 517 followers as of April 2017. As a result of the text limitations of the Twitter platform, these posts are generally focused on broadcasting important information.

### **Defined Roles**

When staff members would like to post something to social media, there are five Town Hall employees who are authorized to post content. Scituate's Town Administrator, Board of Selectmen's executive assistant, Town Administrator's assistant, IT Director, and IT specialist are all free to post to social media without needing approval. The Town's executive assistants and Board of Selectmen are tasked with monitoring social media comments to ensure that issues and misinformation are addressed at Town meetings and on Facebook. The police department and recreation departments also have their own social media platforms, which they manage separately.

## OTHER COMMUNICATION VEHICLES

The Town of Scituate has a CodeRED reverse 911 system, which they use in the event of emergencies. Citizens can subscribe to this service to receive a call or text with important, time-sensitive safety information. Other standard tools like electronic signage, public meetings, and occasional print media are also used by the Town to communicate with residents. Furthermore, Scituate's Town meetings and Board of Selectmen's meetings are live streamed through their local cable station, Scituate Community TV ([SCTV](#)). The video footage is then uploaded to [YouTube](#) within twenty-four hours so residents can stay up to date, even if they were unable to attend the meeting in person.

## Internal Processes

There are several established, clearly-understood processes for how to post important information online, which is an important foundation for citizen engagement. Aside from social media, the Town also has a News Alert application, which has its own subscriber list. This process enables staff to provide updates to proactive residents who are interested in consistently engaging with the Town. Certain routine events like water pump replacements, which may cause water discoloration, have pre-approved messaging attached to them. When these types of events happen, staff can send out alerts without needing approval.

## RECENT RECOGNITION

In early 2017, the Town received an [award](#) from the Massachusetts Municipal Association (M.M.A.) for their advancement in emergency management communications and strong ability to respond to residents swiftly and clearly. They developed a comprehensive communications procedure that leverages a variety of communication vehicles and brings together leaders across the Town to ensure a consistent and accurate message. The Town Administrator recently conducted an emergency communications workshop at the M.M.A. Annual Conference and presented the following strategy:

### **External Communications Before, During and After Incidents/Event: *Communications to Public***

- Goal: Timely, accurate and helpful information
- As soon as event known—Posting of information on website, simultaneous email blasts, Facebook and Twitter, forwarded to media contacts. FB and Twitter are best for immediacy. Also use community access T.V. with constant stream; all other content off
- What to include: info on what to do if power off shelter, safety precautions, weather, status of snow removal, road closings, wires/trees down, numbers to call. Excellent resources from F.E.M.A. and other state agencies
- If no power, use local radio station (transmitter brought to Town Hall)
- Storm advisories issued pre-planning then continually as needed or warranted sometimes three in a day
- Water system updates on drought issued DAILY, postcards mailed to each home
- Reverse 911 - may not always be appropriate with changing conditions. Used in specific areas for specific situation not frequent broadcasts-creates future expectations

## **External Communications Before, During and After Incidents/Event: *Media Interface***

Important to get as much information as possible out there that is ACCURATE and FACTUAL  
The Town is in control of disseminating information and how much and when. Be prepared: What you do for one event folks will expect for EVERY event

- Channel all inquiries through one person--Public Information Officer (P.I.O.).
- Insure P.I.O. is articulate, confident and reassuring that everything is under control but also be truthful, if you don't know, say you don't know; you don't have all the answers
- Residents look to Town to feel safe and have assurances things are okay and dispel misinformation on social media and news reports.
- Public safety personnel addressing situation(s), best there is one person whose singular role is to get information out
- There will be work arounds by media to get info; make sure message is same. Press conferences—provide press release in advance with details
- Releases to newspapers, interviews – have media listserv in advance to send information
- Insure consistent message, make sure your facts are right
- Don't ignore; they will show up and camp out until you make yourself available or look for others to talk to that don't have right information
- Specific area designated for media trucks; turned back if go on closed roads

## Recommendations

Scituate demonstrates strength in using clear processes and decision-making structures that are necessary for towns to effectively engage with their residents. There is also a strong appetite across the staff we worked with to continuously increase citizen engagement. The following are recommendations that may be useful in furthering Scituate's citizen engagement efforts:

### ONGOING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

**Put the Town meeting information front and center.** The Town meeting is really the most important avenue for citizen engagement each year. Right now, the town warrants in PDF format are wonderfully descriptive and useful. However, they were difficult to find on the previous website, and the files are named in such a way that a newcomer may not know what they are looking for. Consider how staff could make this important document more accessible, including: promoting it more clearly on the site, providing explanatory text on the website for anything that might be especially confusing, or scheduling Q&A sessions for residents outside of the meeting schedule to encourage more engagement. Here are some additional ways town meetings can be more open and empowering:

- *Ensure town meeting materials are easily accessible.* Even the best citizen engagement strategies can be undermined if not everyone is able to access key forums or opportunities. Often people associate

accessibility with basic issues like whether someone in a wheelchair can reach a meeting location. However, accessibility in the truest sense means that people are not only able to participate but are welcomed, encouraged, and empowered to do so. Here are some tips to better fulfill accessibility requirements in preparation for Town events.

- **Include alternative text for every image and animation.** For many web management systems, anytime someone tries to upload an image, there will be a field called “alt-text.” This is text that is displayed if the page isn’t able to show the image and is spoken if a person is blind and unable to see the image. Filling it with descriptive text is one of the most important parts of making a website accessible to the visually impaired.
- **Describe all links.** Similar to images, the visually-impaired require specific text to let them know where to click and what the link will take them to. For example, if you are linking to the meeting notes, avoid saying “Click here to see the meeting notes.” Instead, write something like, “To learn what happened at the meeting, read the meeting notes.”
- **Select friendly colors.** A common pitfall in design is that certain colors are difficult for many people to read. The following links are tools that recommend swatches vibrant enough to be seen by individuals who struggle to interpret certain colors. The higher the contrast ratio, the easier it is to be seen. This tool is useful for print or web media and allows information to be accessed by a wider audience.
  - <http://leaverou.github.io/contrast-ratio/>
  - <http://contrast-finder.tanaguru.com>
- **Use machine-readable files whenever possible.** Whenever possible, include text directly in a web page. If a document must be a PDF, ensure that you are able to highlight and copy/paste text; if you can’t, a person will not be able to have their computer read the content to them. This may require re-typing old, scanned documents, but this will go a long way to improving accessibility for everyone; in addition to assisting text readers, it also increases the chances that anyone’s search will help them surface the document.
- **Put periods in all abbreviations.** Screen readers will not pronounce an acronym properly unless there are periods between the letters. If C.I.A. is spelled “CIA,” it might be pronounced like the singer Sia.
- **Keep copy simple but contextualized.** Whenever adding new text to a website or posting to social media, keep the language as simple as possible. This makes it conducive to all reading levels and even translators. On the other hand, it’s important to make this information understandable. If someone is sharing the results of a water test in a public lake, ensure that the meaning of the results is clear (e.g., it is safe to swim).



- *Meeting Accessibility Checklist.* Many of the most democratic processes involve in-person hearings, forums, and discussions. These can inadvertently exclude people because of poor scheduling, inaccessible locations, or even by being in a format that favors certain kinds of communication styles or languages.
  - **Event Scheduling**
    - Is the event at a time that ensures the maximum amount of people can attend?
    - Does the date conflict with any religious holidays? (See <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/>)
    - Does the date conflict with any other important Town meetings?
    - If a person cannot attend, how else can they participate? (For example, can they submit feedback in writing? Can they sign up to receive information about what people discussed?)
  - **Event Planning**
    - Is the location accessible by public transportation?
    - Is the location accessible for people of varying physical abilities?
  - **Accessibility**
    - Will the event be accessible to those who are hard of hearing?
    - Will the event be accessible to those speaking different languages? Could translation be provided with advanced notice, perhaps through a student volunteer?
    - Will childcare be provided? Will children be invited?
  - **Marketing**
    - Is the event framed in such a way that someone who has never been to such an event will feel welcome?
    - Are all of the services offered (translation, childcare, etc.) made clear in the event communication?
    - Is the agenda of the event clear to those who are not familiar with the event organizers?
  - **Promotional Efforts**
    - Has the event been promoted through:
      - Online channels
      - Print channels
      - Churches
      - Community groups
      - Email lists
      - Posters around town
    - Has a personal, verbal invitation been made to traditionally-underrepresented communities?
    - Have event organizers been tasked with personally reaching out to people who have not attended an event previously?
    - Have event registrants been asked to help promote the event? (For example, event organizers could email everyone who has registered a week before the event and ask them to consider inviting someone.)

**Have fun with social media.** The Scituate social media feeds are very professional and informative. There is not much engagement around most individual posts, but when a post does inspire a comment, the Town seems to be

fairly responsive. While these accounts have seen a consistent increase in their number of followers, including more photos and graphics that highlight life in Scituate might accelerate the public following. Social media accounts are also a great place to share some of the hard work that the staff members do. Mansfield's Police Department offers a variety of engaging posts on their [Facebook page](#). Examples include a "No Shave November" contest among officers, pictures of school visits, but also important information about events in Town.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**Take an hour to look through the social media feeds together.** Often people know more about social media than they realize! We'd suggest gathering everyone who generates content or otherwise deals with any social media or other engagement channels to spend an hour assessing the feeds and brainstorming improvements together. One piece to consider is whether an outsider would understand a given post or tweet based on what is provided; is there enough context for a visitor to know what is going on?

**Continue use of V.T.S. training opportunities.** As more people become involved with updating the new website, there will be an increased need for training staff and volunteers on the platform. Currently, V.T.S. offers free trainings for clients every few weeks. Town staff will soon have access to the company's User Support Center, where they will be able to peruse through a repository of training videos and website best practice guides. In addition, employees should be reminded to review the custom training material currently being developed in-house.

**Reward staff members and volunteers for their efforts on the website.** One of the challenges in decentralizing responsibility for updating the Town website is changing the culture so that everyone is empowered, comfortable, and proactive about updating their section of the site. Leaders can influence this cultural change by establishing internal challenges, leaderboards, or other rewards to incentivize desired behaviors. Even if it's just an occasional email showcasing particularly good website updates, this will help staff members adjust to the new expectations.

**Prepare internal staff for changes related to new technology.** Following the launch of the new website, Town leadership expressed a desire to implement more tools to engage residents. While adopting modern technology can improve efficiency within an organization, internal staff must be prepared to take on a potential influx of customer requests that the new tool may bring. It is important to notify every department and user that will be impacted by the new technology of their new responsibilities. Clearly explain how their work will change and ensure that internal staff is trained and well equipped to handle the new workload. Consider the following strategies to experience a smooth transition<sup>1</sup>:

- 1. Frequently communicate how the new technology solution will improve daily operations**

This is the foundation for your new communication strategy. Employees want to know what changes are being made at the executive level. They want to understand how transformative decisions will impact the work they do every day. Proactively explain the organization's vision for the technology and convey exactly how the new system will improve daily processes and procedures as well as the expected convenience for employees and citizens in the long run.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard Business Review, [Convincing Skeptical Employees to Adopt New Technology](#), March 19, 2015

**2. Standardize the new system**

Incorporate parts of the new system's functionality into everyday business operations so staff can become familiar with the new protocol and are not caught off guard using the technology when it's launched.

**3. Invest in quality staff training**

Before going live with a new technology solution, it's essential to thoroughly train employees to effectively utilize the new system. Be mindful of staff members who may require additional time or teaching methods to fully become comfortable with the tool, realize that they are all coming from different technology backgrounds and have various learning styles. Employee comfort levels will increase with the inclusion of time and dedication from Town leadership.

**4. Offer meaningful rewards or acknowledgement to encourage interest**

Certain reward systems, which do not have to be financial, can motivate employees to look past their comfort zones and become more open to working with new technology. For example, by organizing a lighthearted competition based on learning about and using the new tool, negative perceptions may begin to shift. Employees may start to re-evaluate their negative presumptions and give the new system a chance once they've personally discovered its benefits.

**5. Lead by example and encourage influencers to promote the new technology**

Town leadership should pave the way for new technology to enter the workplace. They can do this by advocating for its implementation and by showing other stakeholders how they have personally benefited from using the new tool. Give influencers the opportunity to test out the new technology for themselves so they feel personally invested in the tool and care about its progress within the organization.

**6. Determine consequences for cases of non-cooperation**

At this point, hopefully, most staff members have embraced or at least accepted the change; however, even if the majority of the organization is on board there may be times when employee opposition can result in reduced morale or initiative efficacy. If this should happen, be ready to address the issue with a prepared list of consequences that may be put into effect should employees continuously refuse to cooperate<sup>2</sup>.

**Be prepared for Town-wide deployment.** Although there are many benefits in enhancing business processes, no technology is perfect. For any new system, it is important to have a test phase and backup plan, before commencing a widespread deployment. Town staff should work to identify any pain points in the system before it is implemented. Define and document who the point of contact is for technical support should any issues arise. First impressions are created quickly and can heavily influence whether constituents will use the tool to carry out a transaction or resort to doing it manually out of frustration. Make sure you are prepared to live up to expectations that have been set.

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<sup>2</sup> Harvard Business Review, [Convincing Skeptical Employees to Adopt New Technology](#), March 19, 2015

**Tactfully introduce new technology to the community.** Before unleashing a new public facing technology, consider creating a small outreach campaign to get residents excited about the new features they'll have access to. Leverage Scituate's existing communication platforms to share interesting details about the new tool, incorporate visual aids into the campaign to grab the attention of the end user. Here are some ideas to get started:

- Introduce the features and functionality of the new tool to the public using all available channels such as social media, website and email. Provide basic instructions describing how to access and utilize the technology once it's been launched so citizens can use the new system right away if they need to. Be prepared for negative and positive reactions from the community. Most people are not comfortable with change; however, if the new system provides an added convenience, over time it will slowly get incorporated into their routine.
- Print media is still an effective, relatively low-cost, way to share information and promote new services to citizens. Placing campaign materials in Town newsletters, utility bills, banners and flyers will help spread news of the new tool to residents who are not as tech savvy.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

**Social media engagement.** If Scituate decides that social media is an important part of their citizen engagement strategy, we recommend monitoring engagement metrics (likes, retweets, views, comments, etc.) in addition to the number of followers. While having a large number of followers is important, and often begets better engagement results, it is also important that people are seeing and interacting with content. The more that people view, like, or otherwise interact with Scituate social media posts, the more visible these posts will be to other followers. Below are basic instructions for obtaining Facebook and Twitter metrics.

- Link: Facebook tutorial on gaining page Insights and tracking engagement [[Likes, Reach & Engagement](#)]
- Link: Twitter tutorial on Accessing and using Twitter's Activity Dashboard [[Tweet Activity Dashboard](#)]

**Google Analytics.** The V.T.S. Content Management System contains a Google Analytics component, which will play a significant role in Scituate's citizen engagement strategy going forward. Data collected from this module can help the Town identify resident interests and track constituent behavior patterns as they interact with the website. Performance indicators such as: sessions, page views, users, conversion rates and bounce rates are all useful, quantitative information that can be tracked and analyzed to form a better online engagement strategy. Below are a few best practices to help leadership acquire a better strategy using Google Analytics:

- **Generate periodic reports.** Google Analytics allows organizations to create reports using an online dashboard. Depending on an organization's staff capacity, employees can pull reports from the dashboard on a weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly or even an annual basis to analyze customer traffic on the Town website. Town leadership can benefit from these routine data checks because it allows them to see the "as is" state of online engagement with the Town website.
- **Select best time to pull data and stick to it.** Data should always be pulled from the Google Analytics dashboard at a specified time period, which should be based on the first instance it was extracted. For

example, if the first instance of data was exported at 5pm, make 5pm the official time period for pulling data. Applying this method maintains data integrity and provides parallel sets of data collected over time.

- **Create a master statistics document.** Create a document (e.g. spreadsheet) that will allow leadership to compare data over time. Doing so will make it easier to identify trends in the data that could provide insight into constituent behavior. Town staff can then use the newly found information to customize the website further to fit constituent needs.

## Conclusion

The Town of Scituate has undertaken a citizen engagement endeavor to improve the user experience on their website and social media platforms. With collective efforts from Town staff and leadership, Scituate officially launched a new version of the Town website on January 23, 2017. The OMST commends this accomplishment and we hope that this document will assist with the development of a long-term engagement strategy.