Town of Westwood, MA
Citizen Engagement

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Westwood Town Hall[1]

Introduction

The Town of Westwood, Massachusetts has a population of 14,618 residents[2]. Located in Norfolk County, Westwood is situated at the junction of Interstates 95 and 93 and has two commuter rail lines providing its residents with easy access to Boston in a beautiful suburban setting. The Town of Westwood adopted the Citizen Engagement Best Practice in January of 2017, as part of a Community Compact agreement signed with the Baker-Polito Administration. Through the Citizen Engagement Best Practice, the Town strived to better engage and inform the public through an enhanced online presence and two-way communication. This report summarizes the Town's work towards improving citizen engagement.

The Challenge

Westwood faced several challenges in its efforts to have meaningful communication with its constituents. One specific challenge is the decline of local print media. The challenges facing print media have been well documented and Westwood was no exception as it experienced a decline in local print media over the last few years. Up until a few years ago local print media for Westwood included a daily and weekly paper, *The Daily Transcript* and *The Westwood Press*. *The Daily Transcript* ceased its print

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/TownofWestwood/

[2] https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

publication, moving to a weekly and eventually an online only version[3]. Local leadership found that past practices such as posting notices or ads in the local paper were becoming less effective means of communicating with residents. The Town needed to start utilizing communication mediums that would reach its audience. Consider these findings from a 2018 Pew Research survey[4]:

- 76% of adults in the Boston area follow local news somewhat or very closely
- 66% of adults in the Boston area get their local news from the web
- 53% of adults in the Boston area get their news from social media
- 12% of adults in the Boston area get their news from print sources
- 8% of adults in the Boston area get their news from non-daily print

Surveys such as this show that while people follow local news closely, they have moved towards online sources, social media and away from traditional print media. The Town, recognizing that it needed to modernize their communications and follow their constituents, sought to enhance its online presence. If the Town wanted to communicate important or timely information to the community it needed to focus those communications where their citizens were listening - via online and social media channels. In other words, the Town not only needed to know what to say but where to say it.

The Town website, the primary medium for online communications, was immediately identified as needing improvements. The site was based on an older platform that lacked many modern features. The site search feature, for example, was not particularly robust and often failed to present relevant information leading to frustration for users and resulting in calls to Town Hall seeking the information or potentially in users giving up and not finding what they needed.

The Town not only needed to focus on modernization of their website platform but also on social media, email notifications and improvements to the Westwood Wire, the quarterly newsletter mailed to all town households. The Town also believed that the strategic use of apps and online services could be used to improve communications. By using modern communication tools and mediums the Town hoped to increase the quality and effectiveness of its communication with constituents.

Citizen Engagement Initiatives

Update Town Website
Westwood started by modernizing their municipal website (www.townhall.westwood.ma.us). The existing site was custom-built and didn't support the features, functionality or flexibility the Town needed. Improved site navigation, effective site search and a responsive site design for mobile devices were some of the key features needed for the site. By implementing a content approval process and integrating with other communication channels, such as social media, the Town is better meeting the needs of content creators.

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[3] Colby, E. B. (2009, August 20). Daily News Transcript will become the Dedham Transcript. Retrieved April 11, 2019, from https://www.wickedlocal.com/article/20090819/News/308199239
[4] What is the local news landscape in Boston? (2019, March 26). Retrieved April 4, 2019, from https://www.journalism.org/interactives/local-news-habits/14460/

The Town concluded that an upgrade to the existing site's platform required significant time, effort and expense. The Town chose to explore vendor options, focusing on those with experience in the public sector. In late 2017 the Town hired Granicus to design a new website and migrate existing content to the new platform. The new website launched in January 2018.

Site Navigation Improvements

Navigation is a very important design element in any website. A good navigation design can improve usability and reduce the amount of time needed by users to find content. The Town elected to implement a global navigation design which provides a navigation experience that allows several different groups or types of content to be presented to the user while providing a simple means of navigating between them. Given the nature of the site's content and typical user needs with municipal websites the Town implemented a global navigation design.

One technique that is commonly used with this design is fixed navigation bars. Fixed navigation bars are design elements that are consistently displayed across all pages of a site. This allows users to quickly navigate around the site without needing to backtrack or navigate a site structure. The fixed navigation bars also allowed the Town to place a focus on important and high-traffic content, always keeping this content easily accessible to users. The high-traffic content included sections such as "*How Do I*", "*Online Services*", "*Community*" and "*Contact*".

The *"How Do I"* content section helps citizens easily interact with Town Hall. It provides information and links on how to pay bills, register for services, view information or report issues to the proper departments. This makes many of the most fundamental interactions between citizen and government easily accessible.

The *"Online Services"* content section of the navigation bar provided quick, easy access to the following information:

- o Tax Assessment & Property Records – for residents to view their property records and assessments.

- o Online Bill Payment – for residents to view and pay their current Real Estate, Personal Property, Sewer and Excise bills online.

- o Recreation Program Registration – for residents to register and pay for various programs run by the Westwood Recreation Department.

- o Online Maps & GIS Data – for residents to view the Town's GIS and property data, selecting different available base maps and layers.

- o Signup for Westwood Wire – for residents to sign up to receive the Town's online news bulletin via email.

- o Community Phone Notification – for residents to opt in to receive community notifications on their phones.

o   Submit a Request using SeeClickFix – an online citizen request tool that can be used to report issues such potholes, missed trash pickup, streetlight outages and many more.

o   Signup for E-Notification for Meetings

o   Public Records Request

o   Search for Documents

The *"Community"* content section of the navigation bar provides quick, easy access to the following information:

o   Community Links - information about groups, organizations and resources that serve or enrich the community.

o   Conservation Lands & Trails - information and maps to the trails and conservation land available in Westwood.

o   Westwood Day - information about the annual town-wide event that features road races, demonstrations and other activities.

o   Projects - information about any active or recently completed projects in Westwood. Residents can be kept up to date on the status of or potential impacts from projects. All available materials including videos, meeting minutes and related documents can be found in this section.

The *"Community"* content section also includes links to other important information such as town newsletters, GIS & map resources, recreation information, the Westwood Public Library and the Westwood Public Schools.

The *"Contact"* content section of the navigation bar provides address and phone directories and a link to the "[Stay Connected](#)" page. This page served as a gateway for citizens to find and engage with Town social media accounts and subscribe to the Town's community and emergency notification system. It also allows visitors to subscribe to the Westwood Wire, a newsletter that provides news, meeting and event information in addition to information on every town department, board and committee.

By keeping this high-traffic content easily accessible to users, residents visit the Town website and easily and quickly access information and conduct business.

Social Media

While residents could use the Town website to access information and documents, Town leadership recognized that greater use of social media could reach a wider audience and allow for two-way communication with residents. With several large ongoing developments in Town and other important initiatives the Town needed the ability to update and receive feedback from residents.

The Town worked to establish official social media accounts for important Town departments and events. The work of establishing official social media accounts included developing policies for the

creation and acceptable use of social media accounts. By using officially created accounts the Town could assure residents they were receiving reliable and credible communications.

Several departments have social media accounts including the Town of Westwood, the Recreation Department, Westwood Public Schools, Westwood Police and others. The Town also created social media accounts for Westwood Day, an annual town-wide event. Social media accounts were created across several platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest.

The use of social media for communications allows the Town to target and engage with those citizens who might not be regular users of the Town's website or other services.

Westwood Wire and Email

The quarterly newsletter is a popular format that ensures news is delivered to every household in Town. It serves as a platform for the town to communicate important news and initiatives. The newsletter format allows the Town to consolidate and communicate various news items and information for quarterly publication. While most of this information is also published via the Town website and social media channels, the newsletter encapsulates several items into a single source.

The Town recognized the advantage of the newsletter's reach to every household, however the Town wished to expand from the traditional "publish and distribute" model to a digitally accessible format. The quarterly frequency of the traditional newsletter also impacts the ability to deliver time sensitive information to the citizens. Additionally, the traditional newsletter is set to a specific number of pages which can also limit the information distributed. The Town chose to launch a subscription service which would deliver, via email, the Westwood Wire[5]. Using the GovDelivery Communication Cloud from Granicus the Town is able to distribute the Westwood Wire to those residents that are most interested in the publication.

One example of an initiative covered in the Westwood Wire was the Westwood Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee and their work to update the Westwood Comprehensive Plan. The Westwood Comprehensive Plan is a long-range policy document that sets the long-term vision for the community. The plan influences land use decisions, prepares bylaws, and guides future development. The committee was seeking public input and feedback on the plan, an important part of the process.

Using the newsletter's format, which easily conveyed long form content, the Town was able to keep residents informed of the long process and work of the Westwood Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. Important milestones, dates and objectives of the committee could be communicated to dedicated Westwood Wire readers.

Additionally, the Town leveraged the town census process to enroll all residents in the GovDelivery Communication Cloud service for important notifications. The intent was to increase the audience for these messages and hopefully increase engagement. Amazingly not a single resident chose to opt out of the service.

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[5] Seltz, J. (2018, February 23). Online local news bulletin now available - The Boston Globe. Retrieved from https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/south/2018/02/23/online-local-news-bulletin-now-available/wAvZtQQ0jd4OWean0OsbmI/story.html

The use of the website's email subscription service and the Westwood Wire's updated format allows the Town to target and engage with those citizens who might not be regular users of the Town's website or social media.

Apps

The Town also realized that many residents were active users of a variety of mobile phone apps and that this could potentially be an effective means of communication. The Town partnered with RecycleCoach[6], an online platform that reminds residents of recycling pickup dates and helps individuals determine what items are recyclable. RecycleCoach can be used online, with voice assistants or with its own app.

According to the Town website, "the service takes the guesswork out of recycling, empowering residents to make smarter disposal decisions and take an active approach to reducing household waste. For Westwood, the hope is that his will translate into higher recycling rates and less contamination in our recycling stream. [7]"

The app also provides a comprehensive monthly dashboard report to the Town that breaks down engagement levels within the community and areas where improvement is needed. In the future the Town intends to track recycling and contamination rates to determine the effectiveness of the program.

Conclusion

The Town of Westwood has been very thoughtful with their efforts towards their Citizen Engagement best practice. The important work will continue as the Town looks towards new ways to engage with its citizens and improve upon their existing practices. The residents of the Town of Westwood will benefit from these efforts as they work to stay active and informed about their community.

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[6] http://www.townhall.westwood.ma.us/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=31549

[7] https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MAWESTWOOD/bulletins/223c474