



Internet Media and Public Consultation

Introduction

The rapid growth in the use of “social media” has been well documented by the national media. Internet sites such as ‘Facebook’, ‘MySpace’ and ‘Bebo’ have featured, as have the associated dangers of identity theft.

However, despite the risks, with 14 million broadband connections in the UK, this growth will accelerate.

This paper looks at the impact and opportunity for the use of the internet on both the formal pre-application stakeholder consultation process and the wider issue of building scheme awareness and preference throughout its lifecycle.

The Web

Once upon a time, the Daily Telegraph was the backbone of traditionalism, of middle-class values.

Today it has more paying web-based subscribers than purchasers of the paper version; it breaks news on the web first and uses the whole range of digital media including “podcasts” and video.

For many people - especially in the higher socioeconomic groups - the web has become the primary source of reference material. The ubiquitous Google has become the window on the world for a very wide section of the community.

But the internet is now far beyond being a simple research tool. The immediacy and interactivity of the web helps organisers of pressure groups motivate and direct their opposition more effectively than ever before.

In recent contentious development proposals, objecting groups have run active online campaigns resulting in large numbers of objections.

Of course, one of the challenges facing the developer is building a strong support community for a scheme. Those that object are naturally drawn together under a common banner, but for a supporter – whether active or passive – there is often no rallying point.

There are big benefits for developers using the internet. A well-produced web site provides:

- A single place to deal with issues and communicate scheme benefits.
- A repository of all marketing materials – press releases, letters and newsletters.
- Direct access to objectors. Once the web address is published, you can be sure that all objectors will visit the site.
- A way to collect contact details of supporters.
- An easy way to ask questions and make comments.

Given the ease, low cost and speed of creating a web site, any developer that chooses not to engage with the internet concedes web ownership of the scheme to the objecting community.

The verb “to Google”

Most web users now “Google” a brand name rather than trying to remember a web address. A developer needs to make sure that the scheme web site is at the top of the search results.

On any Google search results page there are “**sponsored site**” adverts and “**natural search**” results. 85% of all viewers of that page will click on one of the first 10 listed sites. If those represent the objecting community, then the opportunity to influence is lost.

By producing a web site written with search terms in mind there is good chance of the scheme web site appearing towards the top of the **natural search**.

Sponsored site results follow a pay-per-click bidding process. By bidding on relevant search terms, a developer can ensure that a web site appears at the top of the Google page. Properly managed this is excellent value for money.



Podcasts and “YouTube”

Implemented as part of a scheme web site, podcasts and YouTube videos let developers personalise the presentation of scheme benefits.

Podcasts are voice recordings hosted on a website. They can either be played directly or downloaded to an iPod or MP3 player.

YouTube videos are short video clips viewed via the scheme web site or via the YouTube site. The YouTube formula is for short self-produced video material. A developer can talk about a scheme in an easy and approachable way.

Both of these media are easy, quick and cheap to produce but add the ability to personalise the message. Not as good as a face-to-face conversation perhaps - but available to web visitors 24/7.

Blogs and forums

Blogs and local or issue based internet forums have become the mouthpiece of many objector campaigns. Half-truths and rumours are “posted” to a blog by an “activist” and these then become urban myths and part of the fabric of misinformation.

By playing an active role in these blogs and forums, a developer can offer the other side of the argument and mitigate any damage done to its support base.

Of course, this participation needs to be done transparently and honestly, demonstrating that the developer is taking a real and open approach to consultation. Supporters can also be encouraged to play an active role in the forums.

Facebook

Facebook was the phenomenon of 2007 with millions of new users. New networks, online communities and pressure groups appeared forcing a series of policy changes in a number of areas.

Once more, the developer must engage in order to keep hold of the agenda and minimise damage.

Our View

Developers can and do run public consultations and support major planning applications without taking any account of the internet age. However, by doing so they are allowing any objecting groups to use internet media to define the agenda. The natural result is that unless the developer uses the internet and social media to articulate scheme benefits, he runs the risk of being forced to respond to negative comment rather than driving the application forward.

More than that, LPAs are expecting to see digital involvement in consultation as part of any application SCI – a trend that we expect to see continue.

How can we help?

We offer a full range of internet services as part of our consultations and communications packages.

Critically, we will advise you on the best and most effective media and digital options to take your message to market.

We will design interactive web sites, manage your Google presence as well as contribute to Facebook, forums and other blog sites on your behalf.

Contact us

If you would like to more about our property and planning services and how we could help you then, please contact our dedicated property and planning team on +44 (0) 1625 506444:

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