



Creating Civil Space

How two teams of diverse experts—from a UX design agency and a municipal district—collaborated to build an intuitive civic engagement platform.



In 2014, the District of North Vancouver had a problem with public engagement. Entire demographic groups weren't participating in engagement efforts, leaving the community poorly represented—particularly those under age 55.

“The old town hall is broken, except for the people who want to grab a microphone and yell,” explains Mairi Welman, Manager, Strategic Communications & Community Relations at the District. Legacy methods of public engagement focus largely on in-person and paper-based participation, and—as anyone working in community outreach today knows—that's not where most citizens are spending their time. In today's reality, almost everyone is on their phone.

The team at the District was fairly certain they knew what was happening. But before they jumped to solutions, they decided to poll their citizens in a statistically-relevant, demographically-representative survey, asking how they wanted to be engaged. The results were resounding: those under 55 preferred to engage online. The DNV also learned that citizens who consider themselves uninformed about a topic are reluctant to give any feedback at all.

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The District isn't alone in their engagement challenge. In 2018, Granicus conducted a “State of Digital in Government” survey of over 500 public sector leaders: 48% of respondents reported that their strategy for engaging citizens isn't effective, and 45% of respondents wanted to use technology to reach and activate more people.

Barriers to online engagement

It's a seemingly cut-and-dried conclusion. Move the engagement efforts online for increased, diverse feedback. But as the District of North Vancouver knew firsthand, it's not that simple. Online attempts using survey tools were not successful, partially because participants had to download a pdf of complex information from the District's website, and switch between the pdf and the third party survey tool to submit informed responses. "It's enough to make even the most interested member of the public simply give up and walk away," admits Welman. It was time to look for a more robust and user-friendly solution.

In 2016 the District's Communications and IT teams spent months researching eight different community engagement tools to try to find a fit. They were looking for a third party platform or app that would either plug seamlessly into their organization's website, or mirror their branding to look and feel like a digital property from the District. They knew they needed the ability to embed contextual information alongside engagement questions—helping citizens become confidently informed in the process of providing feedback. Also on their checklist: robust back-end reporting with clear and accessible analytics and metrics.



“There were three primary issues with all of the off-the-shelf products we investigated,” says Welman. “First, there were the products that had excellent features but were very high in the initial cost, and had ongoing monthly maintenance payments that were—frankly—beyond our budget capacity. Second, many of the more affordable tools couldn’t be branded to look like they belonged to us, and that represents a huge trust gap for the public. Where are they being taken when they go to a third party site? Who is collecting information and what are they doing with it? A third deficiency was that many tools had really weak back-end reporting. We live and die on evidence and metrics. That simply wasn’t something we could skimp on,” she concludes.

Also alarming, the options on the market lacked solid mobile design and had flawed user experiences. Online engagement strategies that weren’t intuitive and didn’t work well on mobile were likely to be an exercise in futility, and were a non-starter for the District.

Can’t find the solution? Build your own.

Not content to settle with what they were finding in the market, the team at DNV got creative. In 2015, after a competitive bidding process with 37 international agencies, they had partnered with our team at Domain7 to create a completely new website: one that was well-received by staff and the public. DNV trusted Domain7’s UX design and digital experience. They saw an opportunity to work with our team to create their own public engagement tool. “We knew after doing the availability scan that the only way to host online public engagements on our website, with contextual information such as maps, photos, videos and text, and make it mobile-friendly was to build our own tool,” says Welman. It was an unusual and bold move, but one that Domain7 dug into with enthusiasm. With twenty years of experience, a focus on sophisticated UX informed by research, and a mission to create a more empathetic and connected world, our perspective and expertise aligned beautifully with DNV’s vision.

Working in close collaboration, Domain7 and the District embarked on an agile design approach: analyzing use patterns, conducting thorough research, and collecting feedback on each iteration of the platform in order to craft a simplified and sharply relevant experience.



As the project moved through a sequence of design phases, the teams' focus evolved beyond the basics of seeking citizen feedback. "We listened to what the public said they want from us in order to participate in civic decision-making, and that is to feel informed enough to have relevant input," says Welman. The feedback lined up with a belief held by both the District and Domain7: investing in co-creation and collaboration with an informed and empowered community is worth the effort, and should be best practice. So the teams designed the tool to be collaborative and robustly informative, with features shedding light on how the community is responding, and providing ways to explore the impact of initiatives on diverse groups. Everything came together in a strong and intuitive collective decision-making experience. "We consider a public engagement successful when it provides Council with actionable, useful information. When Council feels we've heard from the impacted citizens and understand their priorities and the trade-offs they are willing to make, then we've done our job properly," says Welman.

Unveiling a new era of engagement

DNV's bold move worked: the new platform delivered a substantial increase in the volume and diversity of engagement from the launch date, achieving key target metrics after a flawless roll-out to the community. The tool was integrated with their existing website, and was intuitive enough to require no introductory instruction. While engagement rates spiked, the District received no negative feedback—a stunning feat for any platform launch, and particularly surprising in the opinionated environment of civic engagement.

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— John Moreau, Project Manager of Digital Strategy at the District

The internal team was happy too, with a new ability to close the loop with data on each engagement almost instantly through simplified reporting tools. Staff also gave top marks to the streamlined user experience that makes creating an engagement easy. “Using the platform is no more complicated than updating Facebook. If you know how to type into a box, you can build a whole online engagement from scratch,” says John Moreau, Project Manager of Digital Strategy at the District.

Iterate and share: the launch of Civil Space

As we completed the successful launch of the District's platform, we realized that—just as their citizen engagement challenge isn't unique to their community—the tool we built together isn't relevant only to the District. What was built for one government team could be honed and expanded to serve all.



Domain7 and DNV's collaboration had successfully combined public servants' daily on-the-ground experience with UX designers' deep digital expertise. What could we create together if we evolved the custom platform to provide a highly relevant, effective tool for anyone working in public engagement?

Civil Space is the answer to that question. An iteration and expansion of the original DNV platform, Civil Space was established after a committed period of research with engagement firms, strategic consultancies, and municipal governments. The newly-launched tool delivers best-in-class mobile experience, seamless white labelling, intuitive user experience for staff and citizens, robust contextual information, thorough-yet-simple reporting tools, and collaborative decision-making capabilities. Hosted in Canada, the US, and UK, the tool also offers AI-powered toxicity filtering, creating more trusted, meaningful experiences for citizens, and saving time for public servants by cutting down on the need for comment moderation. It's one of the newer features that the platform continues to introduce as it grows and learns from users along the way.

“My hope is that we will get more people in government using Civil Space, and in doing so we will all share ideas about additional things we want it to do. Because we're all public servants and work in similar ways on similar topics with similar constraints, those functionalities that we all come up with will actually benefit everybody in our sector,” says Welman. It's a perspective that our user-centric team couldn't be more on board with.

To book a complimentary demo today, visit: explore.civilspace.io