



# Engaging with Stakeholders in the Digital Age.

A Practical Guide for the Built Environment.



# Introduction.

Before we dive into the contents of this guide, let's get one misconception out of the way: A successful Stakeholder Engagement Comms plan is never fully digital, but leans on a blend of on- and offline channels to reach different kinds of stakeholders. Demographics will play an important part, because certain channels might be more effective in reaching certain age groups, while location could play an important role too.

While an increasing number of Stakeholder Communication professionals see digital communication channels as an effective mouthpiece to broadcast their messages, many remain reluctant to adopt them because of some common myths:

- That digital supposedly excludes older people
- That you need verified contact details to communicate with stakeholders
- That digital channels make you more vulnerable to negative feedback
- The less you share, the better; 'No news is good news'
- That managing digital channels requires tech-savvy staff members

While not advocating for the one channel for success, we do explore the current channels available to Stakeholder Engagement professionals on its effectiveness. We follow that up with presenting our ideal channel mix and explain you how to actually apply it in your field of work.

Our knowledge comes from nearly 10 years of experience with Digital Stakeholder Engagement and data collected from 2000+ construction projects globally.

# The Myths.

## **"Digital excludes older people"**

Although some might argue that digital excludes older people, we should be careful not to patronise this group and assume they'd prefer letter drops over online communication: 80% of those aged 55 to 64 in the UK used a smartphone in 2019, whilst one in five people aged 75 and above now use a smartphone.



## **"You need verified contact details to communicate with stakeholders"**

Local residents are not the only important stakeholders. Commuters and future users of the space might have an interest in your project as well. Selecting just a geographic circle of interest to target your messaging to, is simply too limited. Digital channels make it easy for everybody to follow project updates, milestones and upcoming hindrance.

## **"Digital channels make you more vulnerable to negative feedback"**

People don't suddenly become negative when you open up new channels to them. If you're facing a influx of negative feedback, it likely has another cause. Digital channels make it easy to start a dialogue and take control over the narrative of your project's unique story. Wouldn't you rather like to be aware of the the sentiments around your project? Every complaint is actually a gift since digital channels allow you to actually get voices heard that were silent before.





## **”The less you share, the better; No news is good news”**

It’s easy to tell yourself that ‘no news is good, news’. It’s easier to fly under the radar and not to raise any flags, right? While construction is ongoing, the exact opposite is true. Not sharing any updates and leaving people out of crucial information can actually lead to suspicion or confusion. People appreciate being kept up to date, even if the news you share causes inconvenience. Expectation management is key!



## **”Managing digital channels requires tech-savvy staff members”**

Let’s be honest: you don’t need a degree in Computer Science to create and manage a Facebook profile, as is the case for the many other platforms out there. Digital platforms often invest a lot of energy in making their tools easy to use and support and assistance is often included as a service. And if you’re still uncertain; why not ask for a free demo before making a decision?



# The Challenges.

## **”On-demand access to information is expected”**

Over the past decades, our world has rapidly evolved into an ‘on-demand’ society. We expect to be in control of our own time and expect to have access to information and resources at our fingertips – a trend which has also come to the built environment and is currently transforming many construction companies’ approach to Stakeholder Engagement.

## **”There is no one-size fits all”**

People are getting a lot of information from different channels already and you need to compete with them. At the same time, whatever it is that you want to say needs to be repeated. You can’t expect that information from last month’s letter drop remains fresh in the mind of your stakeholders.



**”The most challenging part of Stakeholder Engagement is sending the right information, to the right people at the right time.”**

## **”Traditional channels are often one-sided”**

Traditional stakeholder channels often tends to focus on getting information across. A lot of focus is put on the sending part of communication while losing sight of the receiving part. Stakeholder Engagement is essentially about relationship building and in relationships you need to be able to communicate with each other. A traditional letter, while great at getting information across, is not the most suitable for starting a dialogue for example.

## **”Adapting to different stakeholder needs”**

Your preferences might not always be adapting to the needs of your stakeholders. Although coffee mornings and in-person community consultations during working hours may be convenient for site teams, they tend to attract the same stakeholder groups and may potentially exclude people with work or childcare commitments. Disabled people or those for whom English is not a first language also risk slipping through the net.

# The Stakeholder Managers' Communications Toolbox.

In Communications there are 3 important questions to consider when evaluating the channels available:

- What's the potential reach through this channel?
- What's the actual reach through this channel?
- What resources do I need in terms of money and time to use this channel?

Each channel has different characteristics and therefore its own pros and cons:

## Pros

## Cons

### Meetings

- It's personal
- Opportunity for dialogue

- Usually attracts vocal people only
- Not everybody has time for it

### Letters

- Very targeted, you know where it lands
- Builds awareness
- Trustworthy

- No opportunity for dialogue
- Costly and time-consuming
- Not trackable for metrics

### Newsletters

- Cheap and easy to distribute
- Easily accessible

- You need to get subscribers
- Low open rates



## Pros

## Cons

### Websites

- Easily accessible
- Informative - great for context and background

- Requires action from visitor
- More focused on sending info

### Social Media

- Cheap and easy to set up
- Many people use it
- Interactive nature

- Need for moderation – heated discussions
- Dependent on algorithms
- Too many options to consider

### Mobile Apps

- Collect important data
- Quick and easy access to crucial information
- Offers room for dialogue

- It's a relatively new phenomenon
- Requires action to get followers.



# A winning Stakeholder Communications Mix.

If we look at a classic Marketing Communications Mix, we see that organizations focus on a set of channels to communicate a message to its desired market or the market in general.

Marketing Communications include advertising, promotions, sales, branding, campaigns, and online promotions. The process allows the public to know or understand a brand and get a clear idea about what the brand has to offer.

If we look at Stakeholder Communications in a similar a way, it makes sense to adopt a Communications Mix that ensures that stakeholders understand your construction project and get a clear idea of what to expect from it. Based on our 10 years experience.:



**”A winning Stakeholder Communications Mix is a diversified blend of online and offline channels with a Stakeholder App at the very center.”**

## Why would you use a Stakeholder App?

An app does not replace all other means of communication. You use it as your core channel for Stakeholder Communications, while leveraging your other channels to drive traffic and engagement.

The App will serve as the central place where the most up-to-date information can be found and where stakeholders can easily get in touch with you for questions, complaints or feedback.

Some great advantages of a Stakeholder App is that you:

- Have 24/7 access to your Stakeholders
- Can quickly communicate last-minute changes in your schedule
- Collect data so you can analyze your efforts



# How to apply our winning Stakeholder Communications Mix?

## Meetings

Hand out business cards with a QR code and share instructions on downloading the App.

## Newsletters

Include download buttons of your App to Google Play and the App Store.



## Letters

Reserve a recurring section including a QR code for downloading your app.

## Websites

Create a dedicated section highlighting your App with download buttons.

## Social Media

Create a post about your App and share it with your followers.



## #1 Stakeholder Communication App for Construction Projects.

To help Stakeholder Engagement staff build and maintain stakeholder relationships during construction, we developed an innovative App to make their work a little easier.

Our SitePodium App allows Stakeholder Engagement staff to quickly communicate important project developments such as schedules, milestones and upcoming impacts.

Stakeholders simply download our SitePodium App, follow your construction project and receive push notifications about important developments. They can also easily get in touch with questions, complaints or feedback through surveys.

Curious to learn more about Digital Stakeholder Engagement?

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