

21 Common e-Consultation Mistakes



1. Not using e-consultation.

It is almost certain that the majority of your citizens now have some form of internet access, making large scale e-consultation a genuine possibility.¹

e-Consultation saves time and money over conventional surveys, provides quicker results, allows more two way dialogue and meets your e-government priority outcomes, so not taking advantage of it is the biggest mistake of all.



2. 'e-Consultation is an unprinted word document'.

Almost worse than not adapting a survey for online usage is merely providing a survey in document form that has to be downloaded, printed out and posted or emailed back. e-Consultation should allow the user to submit their response through a dedicated website in a few clicks. Any extra complications will see response rates plummet dramatically.

3. Not getting the issues right.

All consultations receive more responses if people are concerned about the issues involved. e-Consultations, however, provide an extra opportunity, in that users can e-mail their friends a link to the consultation for them to respond. They are only likely to do this if the issue is engaging, so don't expect an issue presented dryly to set the internet alight.

4. Not engaging the right partners.

e-Consultation can be initially costly but, unlike other products, costs need not rise much the more it is used. e-Consultation provides a great opportunity to bring together partnerships of fire, police, health and local authorities to run joint consultations on cross-cutting issues and spread the start-up costs.

5. Poor layout.

When users first visit a web page, they decide within 15 seconds whether they want to remain on the site or move elsewhere.²

The main information on the site must be clear, punchy and visible near the top of the screen.

¹ 55% of all households in Britain had internet access in July 2005, according to National Statistics. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=8>.

² Khan and Shahzad, 'Accessibility and Speed', from Managing Customer Relationships on the Internet, <http://epubl.luth.se/1653-0187/2005/02/LTU-PB-EX-0502-SE.pdf>

6. 'e-Consultation is just consultation with the letter 'e' in front'.

Many of the techniques of traditional consultation still apply to e-consultation, but you cannot just take a conventional survey, put it online and expect it to work. Years of experience exist in engaging people in websites and the internet and unless these are learnt from, the chances are that your e-consultation will fail.

7. Using too many free text questions.

Free text responses are invaluable for 'getting under the skin' of certain issues and enhancing meaningful analysis. However, our research has shown that people are far less keen to provide large amounts of free text responses in online surveys than in paper based surveys. If you do want primarily free text responses, consider using online discussion forums or live webchat sessions instead.

8. Forgetting about the fun.

All consultation must make the respondent feel that their views are being heard and acted upon. Good e-consultation should also be a pleasurable experience in and of itself. In the last couple of years, new methods of game-like consultation have started to emerge, providing users with visual rewards for their responses, and producing massive response rates. One such consultation saw 17,000 responses in its first week, such was the appeal of the combination of consultation and gaming.³

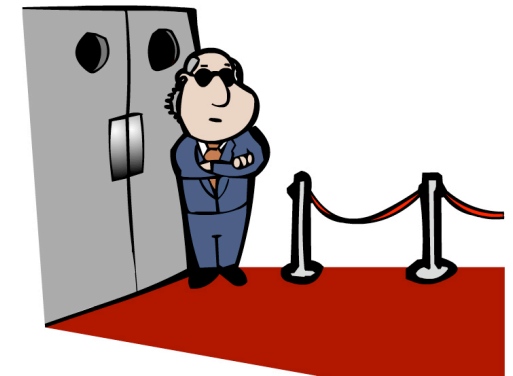
³ See <http://www.pimpmyparty.co.uk>

9. Not consulting internally first.

Before e-consultation can engage your citizens, it must first engage your staff. If the products are to work, staff have to see the benefit of using them and buy in to making them work. Already, e-consultation projects have failed to get off the ground for something as simple as failure to consult council IT managers before the wrong product was purchased.

10. Providing poor accessibility.

Accessibility requirements are ever more prominent, and this is no less true in the software field. All e-consultation software should be accessible to W3 AA level, e-Gif compliant and provide text-only and screen contrast versions.



11. Poor provision of background information.

Unlike many paper consultations, e-consultation provides a real opportunity to educate as well as inform, as the same cost applies no matter how much background information you provide for respondents to download. Embrace this opportunity.

12. Using too much text.

Did you know people read at least 25% more slowly from a computer screen than from a printed page, and tend to skim read rather than take in detail?⁴

To counter this, e-consultation should ideally feature 50% less text per page or document than would normally be provided in hard copy, to ensure maximum efficacy and usability.

13. Forgetting about user recruitment and engagement.

Conventional consultation requires the consulter to go out and find respondents, either through advertising, word of mouth or face to face recruitment. e-Consultation can also benefit from those techniques, and a good e-consultation company should be able to advise you on web advertising and search maximization. But e-consultation should also allow users to sign up and register interest in consultations of their choice whenever or however they visit the site. Excellent e-consultation software will allow users to manage their own profiles and remove themselves from contact lists without requiring any work on the part of the site administrator.

14. Poor usage pathways.

The more times you make users click their mouse to get their final destination, the more users you will have dropping out of the process. Good e-consultation tools have a very low click-through requirement and the best will monitor the number of users dropping out at each stage.

15. Poor security.

Collecting data online brings with it potential security issues. Good e-consultation software must be able to demonstrate clear security features, secure data storage and full compliance with the data protection act.



16. Providing too much functionality.

You want your tools to work, so understandably you provide as many ways to use them as possible. But did you realise that typically less than half of a product's functionality is ever regularly used?⁵

Providing too much functionality, such as too many search categories on a consultation finder, can actually be confusing, off-putting and a real barrier to citizen participation. On the internet, simplicity is paramount.

⁴ Wilkinson, R.T. and Robinshaw, H.M." "Proof-reading: VDU and paper text compared for speed, accuracy and fatigue", Behaviour and Information Technology 6, 2 (April-June 1987).

⁵ Lidwell, Holden, and Butler, Universal Principles of Design.

17. Maintaining one directional relationships.

Conventional consultation generally means asking the public questions and getting their responses. e-Consultation allows you to turn this limited dialogue into continuous meaningful conversation. Why not use quick poll tools or discussion forums to ask users what they think you should be consulting on, or what they think of the consultation reports you have written?

18. Not monitoring data validity.

A paper survey can only be filled in once, whereas an online survey can be filled in many times. This presents a risk that a determined group or individual could stuff the consultation with multiple responses to skew the results in their interest. Good e-consultation tools will as a minimum drop 'cookies' in the users computer to prevent them filling it out again, and will ideally allow site administrators to record and monitor unique respondent internet addresses, clusters of responses within a short time and even the software used to submit the response. With these capabilities, administrators can soon spot multiple responses.

19. Poor design.

It goes without saying that e-consultation tools should be visually appealing and fit well with your existing websites. It will always be worth investing in good design, so be prepared to spend a little extra initially to ensure your tools receive comprehensive customisation from professional web designers and graphic artists.

20. Not integrating offline and online processes.

There is no point saving time and money by using e-consultation only to spend more on producing two different surveys and analysing two separate data sets. Good e-consultation tools should be able to print out online surveys into paper version automatically, import and export responses in common file formats such as .csv, and provide tools to track and contact both online and off-line users from a central point.



21. Being scared of e-consultation.

e-consultation is different from standard consultations, but is a skill that can easily be learned, and once mastered it can provide excellent results with significant cost savings. Many organisations across the UK, such as local authorities, NGO's and central government have already implemented it with great success, and if you follow the points in this guide, you won't go too far wrong.



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