

Communication Guide

Best practices to communicate about the launch of your participation platform.



The launch of your platform is an essential step in your digital participation project. It can have a decisive influence on the success of the initiative, but it doesn't necessarily require extensive time or budgets to truly make an impact.

This guide has been written using CitizenLab's experience working with over 100 cities and local governments of all sizes. It features practical guidance about how to communicate about the launch of your digital participation platform, where to focus your efforts and which channels to prioritise. If you want to go more in-depth into communication strategies or if you would like to give your launch a bigger boost, we're also here to help.

Enjoy your read!

P.S. Feedback? Questions? Don't hesitate to let us know.

hello@citizenlab.co

Table of contents

1. Three key principles
2. Top 4 channels
 - 1.1. Direct web traffic
 - 1.2. Email campaigns
 - 1.3. Link on city website
 - 1.4. Social media
2. More communication tips
 - 2.1. Tracking
 - 2.2. Traditional media
 - 2.3. Frequency & variation
 - 2.4. Offline

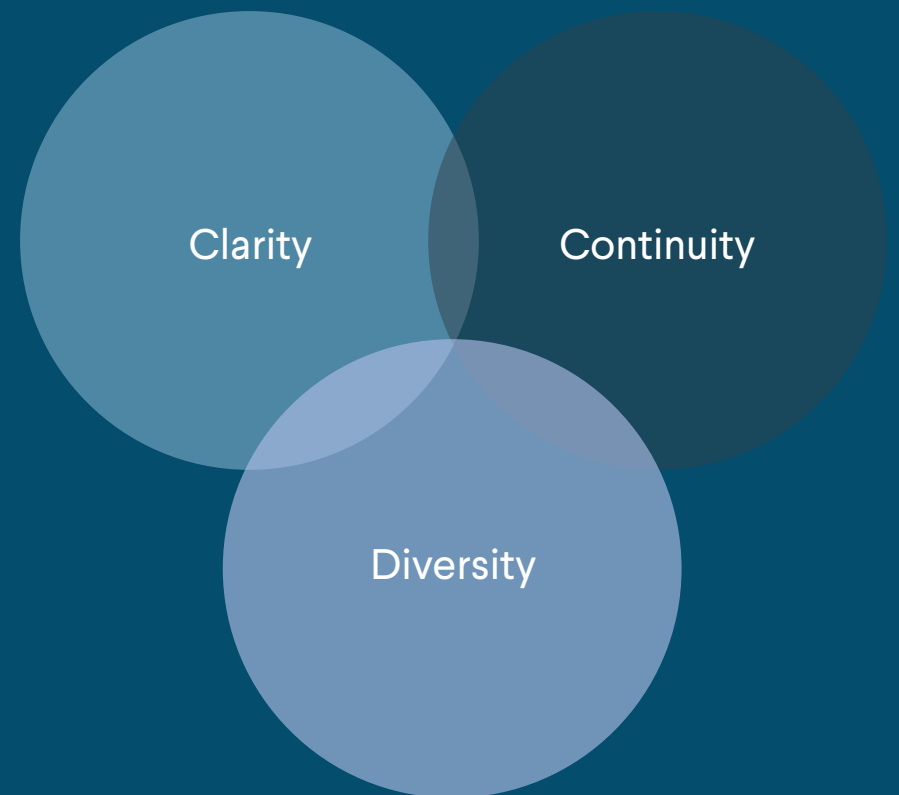
3 key principles

Communication for a citizen participation project relies on 3 key principles : **clarity, continuity, and diversity.**

It's important to be **very clear** on the aims of the platform, and about the benefits citizens will gain from participating. Be creative, short and precise in your messages: make it easy to understand why citizens should participate, and where they can do so. Finally, choose a clear call to action you can push in your messages.

Once you've defined this clear message, it's important to share it on multiple platforms. Using a mix of **different channels** helps you increase awareness and make sure you reach different audiences.

Continuity is making sure that you're communicating with citizens on a regular basis. Once the launch has passed, it's important to keep citizens informed about what's going on with the platforms and where the ideas are headed. You can plan your messages with a content calendar. These second, third and fourth messages will not only help you gain more users, but they'll also reinforce trust with existing users.



Top 4 channels

After launching over a hundred platforms with cities and local governments, we have found that what works best is a combination of the 4 following channels: **emailing, direct traffic, website referrals and social media.**

Communication on these channels can be done a hundred different ways: you can decide to invest large budgets in social media ads and create extensive emailing campaigns, but you can also launch organic campaigns on social media and focus on writing two targeted email. Either way, using a combination of the four channels is the key to creating awareness and increasing engagement on your platform.

This guide focuses on the basics, and covers the main things you can do on these channels without investing large resources. If you want to go more in depth or increase the range of your campaign, don't hesitate to get in touch!



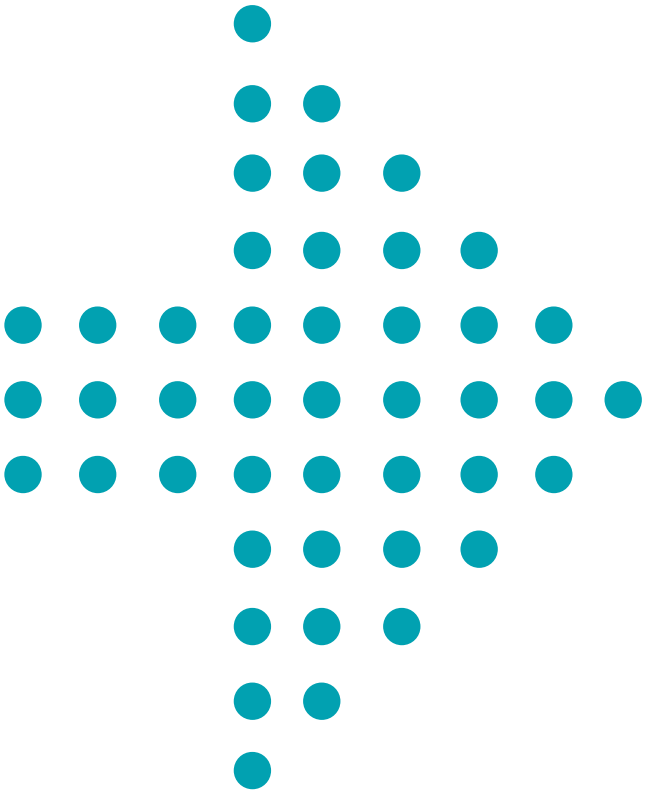
1 Direct web traffic

In most cases, direct web traffic is the **main driver of visits** to a website. You therefore want to make sure that the platform is well referenced and easily findable by citizens who look for it in search engines.

The first step is to choose your own domain name (URL). What is important here is that you choose a URL that is relevant to your project, and easy to remember. A so-called 'subdomain' such as [idea.mycity.fr](#) or [participation.mycounty.uk](#) is a winner.

When websites use relevant keywords, their search ranking increase. It's therefore helpful to use words like "citizen participation" or "participatory budgeting" (if relevant) in prominent places on your website.

Finally, the more webpages link to a website, the better its ranking gets. Make sure you reference the platform on your city website, and that it is also featured on your partners' websites.



Checklist

Direct web traffic

- 1) Set your URL
- 2) Define your **priority keywords** - what words do you want to be associated with? How should citizens find you?
- 3) Make sure these keywords are used on your websites and feature in prominent titles.
- 4) **Referrals and partners:** add links to the platform on the other websites that you own, and ask partner websites to host a link.

2 Email campaigns

Email is the channel that generates the most engagement. Since the city is trusted and recognised by citizens, the opening rates are high and the emails can drive a lot of traffic to the platforms. Citizens coming to the platform via email are also more likely to create an account and spend time interacting with the platform.

Think about the email lists you already have: do you send out a newsletter, in which you could introduce the platform? Have you already assembled a list of citizens interested in participation through other projects, to whom you could send out an invitation to your new project? Before getting started on these emails, just make sure the citizens on these lists have previously consented to be contacted.

Emails campaigns shouldn't be just a one-off: they can be used to promote the launch, but also to keep citizens updated and to promote the results. Cities communicating about the results a few weeks after the launch usually see a new surge in account creations.

Emails can also come from your partners : civil society organizations and relevant influencers can be a good way to reach communities you're not already in regular contact with.



You can import contacts to your CitizenLab platform and send out invitations directly from your admin dashboard. You can also easily contact all the participants to your platform to let them know about updates or results. Get in touch with your project manager to learn more!



Checklist

Email campaigns

- 1) **Define your audience:** who are you trying to reach? How do these audiences split into different groups? Are you already in touch with them? Think about **channels and contacts:** are you already sending out regular emails to your citizens? Do you already have a list of email addresses from a previous project that you could use?
- 3) Define a **clear message.** In a long email, you have space to introduce the project. In a short banner or paragraph, you want to focus on creating interest and directing users to the website.
- 4) **Choose your tools:** if you're sending emails to a large list, emailing tools like Mailchimp, SendinBlue or Mailerlite can help you manage contacts and format emails .
- 5) **Referrals and partners:** think about the partners who could add a link to the platform in their own emails.
- 6) Prepare **regular follow-ups** - what are the next milestones in the project?

BEST PRACTICE: EMAIL INVITATION

Knokke-Heist boosts citizen uptake with email invitations



Knokke-Heist experimented with email invitation for the launch of their CitizenLab platform. Rather than start a new campaign from scratch, the city used a list of emails from citizens who had already taken part in a previous participation project (and had agreed to be contacted for future projects). The uptake from this campaign was huge: almost a third of the 1,000 recipients went on to create an account on the new platform!

The success factors here were the familiarity of the sender, and the fact that the city focused on citizens who had previously shown interest in citizen participation projects.

BEST PRACTICE: EMAIL UPDATES

Kortrijk shares results to increase engagement



In January 2019 Kortrijk launched its citizen participation platform with a bang, using a mix of emails, social media announcement and support from local political figures. Over the first 3 weeks, over 600 new accounts were created. However, the city didn't stop there: after these first three weeks, it launched a second round of communications to share the first results it had gathered and to highlight some of the citizens' contributions.

This helped give the platform a second boost, and a new peak in account creation was reached in the weeks that followed.

Bekijk de ideeën



3. Stad met de strafste plannen voor meer biodiversiteit en minder vervuiling

We realiseren in samenwerking met de natuurbeweging een Biodiversiteits- en Bomenplan. We stellen een programmaregisser biodiversiteit aan. We geven het goede voorbeeld en willen de eerste energieneutrale stad van Vlaanderen worden

355 103 98

Bekijk de ideeën



2. De meest wandel- en fietsvriendelijke centrumstad van Vlaanderen

Kortrijk 8-80: een stad op maat van een Kortrijkzaantje van 8 en zijn/haar opa en oma van 80. Dat wordt de nieuwe filosofie. Daarom kiezen we voor Kortrijk Stapt en fietsvriendelijkheid en veiligheid

367 103 88

3

Link on city website

The visitors of your city website are the first users of your participation platform. You therefore want to make sure that your website features visible and clear information about the project.

You can have a dedicated page about the project on your website going through all the details, or just a link on the front page. Either way, it's important to make it clear to citizens what the value is in participating, and to make it very easy to reach the platform - think visible call to actions like a large button!

As previously mentioned, having your platform referenced on other websites helps with the search ranking. Who are the partners that could feature a link to the platform on their websites?



Adding an interactive widget to your website that showcases the latest citizen contributions on the platform can help highlight the benefits for the citizens. Get in touch with your CitizenLab project manager to learn more!



BEST PRACTICE

Marche-en-Famenne reaches a quarter of its population

Marche-en-Famenne, a Belgian municipality with 15,000 inhabitants, is the living proof that you do not have to be a huge city to get a high number of citizens on your platform. In less than three months' time, the platform received no fewer than 7,000 visitors, 2,850 of which registered to vote for their favorite future city square.

The communication service developed a communication strategy that focused on three important pillars: local press, Facebook and the municipal website.

Success factor 1 | Support from the local press gave the platform visibility on almost all local news channels around the launch. This accounted for about 26% of the registrations.

Success factor 2 | Regular Facebook posts that encouraged residents to vote for or against certain ideas. Some of these posts were shared over 150 times. These accounted for about 27% of the registrations.

Success factor 3 | Finally, the widget that linking from the municipal website to the platform accounted for a further 16% of the registrations.



4 Social media



If your city is on social media, we definitely recommend you use your channels to promote the platform. With a strategic approach of which channels to use and what message to develop, you can make a big impact with little to no budget!

The first step is to think about the channels you should focus on. LinkedIn is aimed at professional communities, Instagram has younger users and is image-based, Twitter is for instant news, Facebook has an older demographic and is a good place to share information and events. Many communities already interact with each other via Facebook groups: think of neighborhoods associations, community groups, or simply residents of the city... Posting informative messages about the platform in these targeted groups might help turn these users into ambassadors.

The second step is to think about the messaging. For a post to drive traffic to your platform, it has to clearly demonstrate the benefits of participation to your citizens. We recommend highlighting specific projects, showing things to vote for or to decide on, and sharing ideas inputted by other citizens.

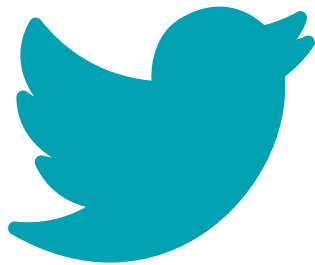
Finally, think about sponsored ads! Targeting can help you reach specific age or interest groups in defined geographical areas. We've seen it helps boost the platform's awareness and drives traffic to the site.



If you're investing money in a paid campaign, make sure you're tracking the results to know which setting or visual works best. If you want advice, get in touch with your CitizenLab project manager - we can help set up your campaign!

Checklist

Social media campaigns



1) **Define your audience:** who are you trying to reach? What's the best platform to reach them on?

2) Define a **very clear message**, with a single call to action. What page of the platform should your posts link to? What action do you want people to take on the website?

3) Add an **appealing visual** to your post. It should feature as little text as possible, have a high-quality image, and be in the right dimensions for the platform. If you need to create one, you can use tools like Canva for design or Unsplash for free images.

4) Think about **the time of day:** avoid posting late at night, or on less busy days like Friday and Saturday.

4) If you're running a paid campaign, be careful of how you set the budget. Set daily limits, or cap the cost of a single click.



BEST PRACTICE: FACEBOOK ADS

Temse boosts participation with sponsored ads

In order to boost citizen participation on the platform, the city of Temse paired up with CitizenLab to launch a campaign on Facebook, aimed at citizens interested in mobility. The precise targeting and the practical, compelling nature of the question helped make this campaign a success.

In less than 3 months, over 1,500 citizens joined the conversation on the platform. With over 300 ideas posted and 260 comments, debate was rich and brought new ideas to the city.



BEST PRACTICE: TWITTER

Vancouver organizes civilian budget around vacant tax

The Canadian City of Vancouver shared all the 'most viewed' ideas through all social media channels and asked followers what they thought of that particular idea. An action-oriented call around one specific idea or project became much better than a generic call.

Moreover, the support of politicians (ie a tweet from the mayor Gregor Robertson, featured on the right) helped increase the visibility of the project and increase participation on the platform.



Heb je ideeën voor vlot, veilig en duurzaam verkeer in Temse? We willen ze horen! Deel je idee op ons platform tot 20 maart.

[See translation](#)



[HTTPS://TEMSE.CITIZENLAB.CO](https://temse.citizenlab.co)

Jouw idee voor Temse?

Welkom op het online participati...

[LEARN MORE](#)



Gregor Robertson @MayorGregor · May 2

City asking for ideas on how to spend the empty homes tax \$. Estimated to bring in \$30M. Only requirement is it needs to be related to affordable housing. You can vote on your favorite idea here vancouver.citizenlab.co/projects/empty ... #vanpoll



Project · Empty Homes Tax

We are looking to Vancouver residents to source ideas on how to best invest net revenue from the Empty Homes Tax into affordable housing
vancouver.citizenlab.co

17 replies, 22 retweets, 25 likes



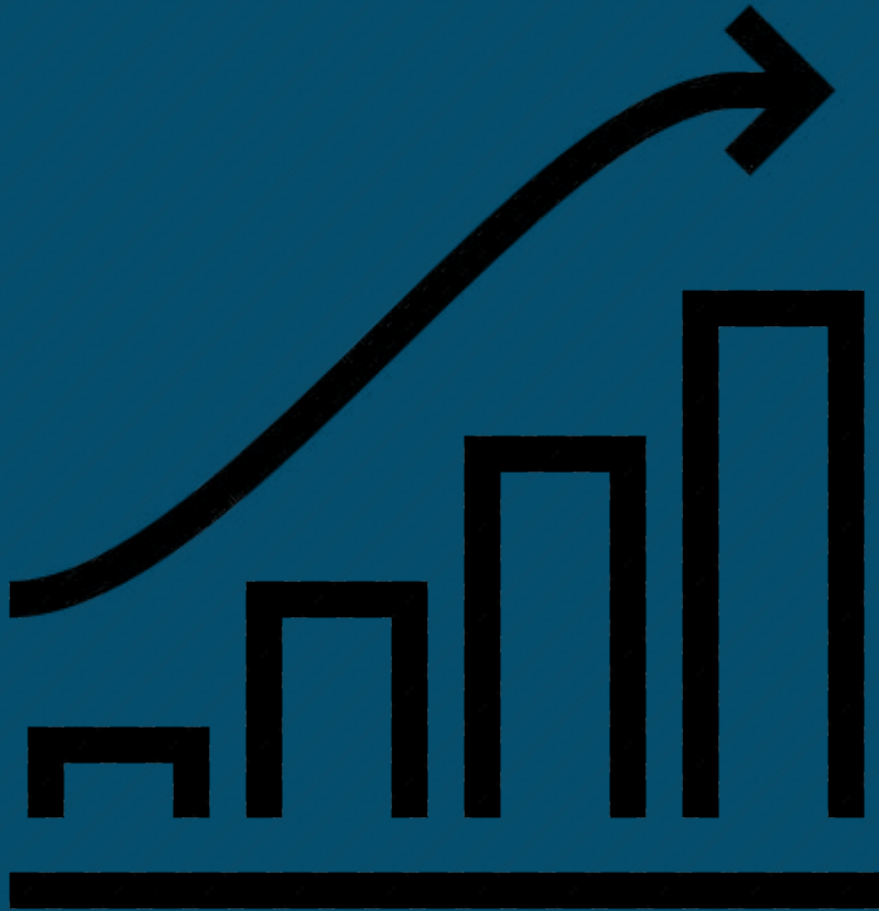
City of Vancouver @CityofVancouver · May 10

What do you think of affordable housing idea #62: Subsidize & Zone Purpose Built Rentals. Visit vancouver.ca/eht-ideas to learn more about this and all the other ideas that people have come up with, and give your favourites a thumbs up.

Share your affordable housing ideas.

More communication tips & tricks





Tracking

Promoting your platform on multiple channels is good - understanding which of these channels is the most efficient and what to prioritise is even better.

Some free tracking tools like Google Analytics can help you understand at a glance which of your marketing efforts is paying off, and which channels have the best return on investment.

In order to set up Google Analytics, you'll need to deploy some code on your website. The dashboards then automatically detect traffic sources and show you where traffic is coming from and what pages are being looked at the most.



Traffic is monitored on all the CitizenLab platforms. If you would like to know how your site is performing, reach out to your project manager!



Traditional media

Involving local press when launching the platform (newspaper journalists, but also radio or television) is a traditional but efficient way to reach more people.

Send a press release at important moments. Not only when the platform launches, but also when decisions are announced, when a new phase starts, and when ideas start being implemented.

Make a list of the press outlets you could reach out to - local magazines and press outlets, but also blogs and local influencers. If you're launching consultation about a school or a park, it could for instance interest a website that writes about family activities or education in the region.



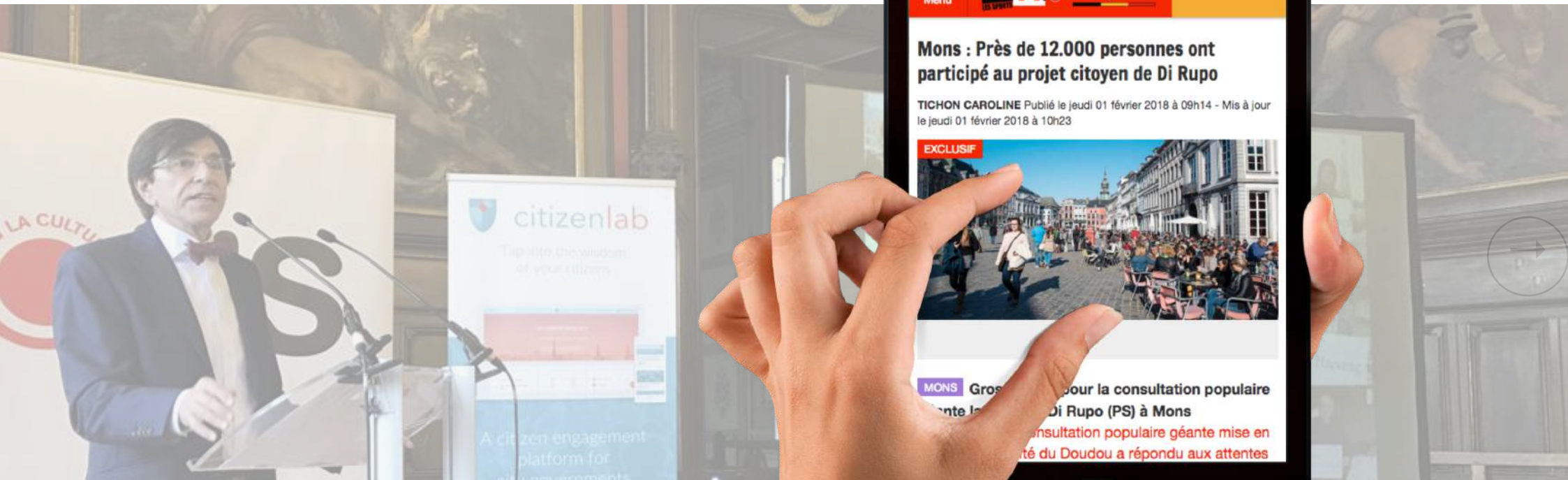
BEST PRACTICE: TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Mons shares regular updates via local press

Mons is the capital of the Walloon province of Hainaut and has over 95,000 inhabitants. At the launch of their platform "Demain Mons" (Mons Tomorrow) they made good use of the local press to trigger residents to reflect on the future vision of the city. In total, the platform reached 12,000 inhabitants and more than 850 ideas were submitted.

Good local press relations was one of the success factors of the communication campaign.

Press coverage went beyond local news - regional news platforms also wrote about the launch. The communication department provided regular feedback via the press, in such a way that the platform stayed active any time. For example, the interim results were shared publicly. In the feedback, the city highlighted some ideas and clearly explained how these were implemented in the policy cycle.





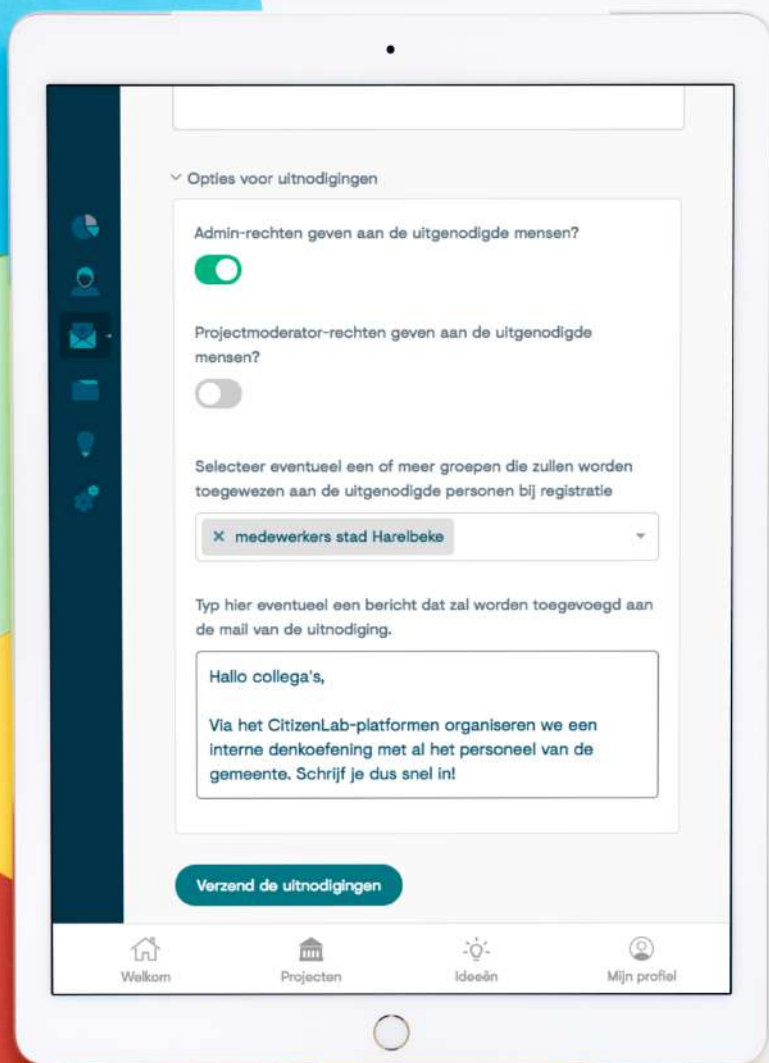
BEST PRACTICE: E-MAIL

Harelbeke & Mortsel invited their staff to the platform

What is the use of a participation platform if the people you want to work with do not use it? It is sometimes time-consuming to go after your colleagues one by one to tell them about the platform and to check whether they have actually registered.

The Belgian municipalities Mortsel and Harelbeke imported the +- 150 email addresses of their colleagues and invited them in just one click. CitizenLab has designed a template for the invitation where a personal message can also be added.

Both municipalities succeeded in getting their colleagues online in no time. Amongst other things, they have used the platform for an internal survey about a strategic plan and about internal organization.






Offline

Promoting the platform at offline events helps reach communities which are not always connected.

In order to bring your offline citizens to the platform you can share the URL at neighborhood meetings or city councils and add it to print materials you usually distribute through the city - think printed newsletters, flyers in public places such as at the reception, in the library, stickers at the local bar... Remember to personalize your URL so your audience easily remembers it.

 If you've collected handwritten ideas during an offline event, you can upload them on to the platform. This helps get the discussion going online and ensures all communities are represented.



Using offline and online to increase inclusivity: do you want to make sure older citizens and less connected communities are included in your projects? Then make sure they **get assistance in public places** to add their idea. The municipality of Londerzeel had a dedicated corner in the local library. In Marche-en-Famenne, municipal employees helped citizens navigate the platform in the townhall.



BEST PRACTICE: OFFLINE

Citizens as ambassadors of the platform

The municipality of Knokke-Heist launched its participation platform through the "Breinstorm" campaign. The municipality first launched a few ideas that it shared with citizens to get the conversation going, and then asked citizens to contribute their own ideas.

The catchy name 'Breinstorm' made it easy to remember the platform name and find it online. The city also invested in various other channels to spread the word about the platform, such as flyers or beer-cards. Finally, a diverse group of 11 locally famous residents were made the ambassadors of the campaign. They contributed to raising awareness about the campaign by posting about it on their own channels and talking about it to peers.

Because the citizens make the city!

Clarity, continuity and diversity: these 3 key principles will guide your communication strategy and help launch your participation platform regardless of your budget.

It's great to increase the visibility of your platform, but remember that the number of contributions you gather on the platform isn't the only success metric for your project. Sometimes, less contributions also means more qualitative input! Defining the type of contributions you want to get will help refine your message and target the right channels.

Questions or feedback? Don't hesitate to reach out to your CitizenLab project manager!

citizenlab.co
hello@citizenlab.co