

BRAND

Mobilizing citizen participation through social media

How does online platform 'Fietsfan010' help improve the biking policy of the City of Rotterdam?



Rotterdam is the second largest city in The Netherlands, famous for its modern architecture and thriving port. The city has a population of around 600,000. Most Rotterdammers claim that they cycle 'now and then' because it's healthy, quicker than driving, cheap, and good for the environment. Roughly 160,000 Rotterdammers cycle every day. Still, Rotterdam is a city dominated by cars.

Online platform Fietsfan010 (Cyclefan010) was founded in September 2015 to help local government make Rotterdam even more bike-friendly. It does so by actively engaging locals in designing and implementing the city's biking policy.

Co-creating a new biking policy

In 2014 Rotterdam city council set the ambition to increase bicycle use by 10% by the end of 2018. Cycling is important in helping Rotterdam remain an accessible and pleasant place to live. After all, cycling boosts your health, the economy, overall quality of life, and promotes cleaner air.

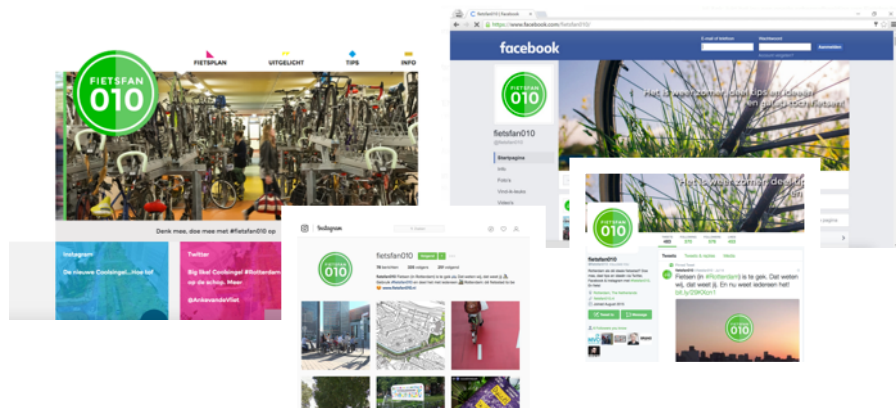
But behaviour can only be changed when local government introduces measures that reflect citizens' needs. In order to create support in the city, the municipality aspired a way of working together with Rotterdammers to design a better city for cyclists. And for that, we developed an online approach. Cyclefan010 was developed in four separate phases, with phase 4 to be reached at some point in the future. I'd like to take you on our journey and present our lessons learned.

Phase 1: Take the new biking policy debate online

In July 2015, the city council came to us with a very simple question. They wanted to involve Rotterdammers in co-creating the biking plan. This type of process usually involves a debate in a room full of – let's be honest – the usual suspects.

Rotterdam is serious about becoming an ideal cycling city and it needs the input of Rotterdammers. Input from a broad section of the population, not simply the same old faces that always turn up at consultation meetings. We proposed an online platform with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to connect with other bike fans – a place that values their ideas and participation. We designed a targeted, engaging social media campaign to appeal to and mobilize this community. With this vibrant and visible online biking community Rotterdam could be the first 'Social Biking City' of the Netherlands.

We could have called this platform 'Biking Plan Platform', or something equally insipid, but we wanted a name Rotterdammers would instantly relate to – that conveyed energy and vitality. A place where cycle fans – the advocates – could gather. Hence the name 'Cyclefan' with the Rotterdam area code 010.



The Fietsfan010 website, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

Getting the community involved

We condensed the current Biking Plan into around 20 bullet points or key topics. To make it relevant to Rotterdammers, we issued a forceful appeal: 'Will you help us make Rotterdam the ideal cycling city?' And, in a video the councillor himself invited locals to get involved and share their ideas.

Over two weeks time we called on people - through social media - to read and react to the 20 cycling plan action points. We focused on a different action point each day, accompanied by specific questions, such as:

- Which traffic lights force you to wait longer than necessary?
- Where would you like to see more bike racks?
- How do you make sure you're visible to motorists in the winter?
- Or, very practical: which cycle paths need repair work?

We also asked them: Who is your ultimate cycling hero? We have used these people as ambassadors in our campaign.

A large number of Rotterdammers responded to our call. They didn't just answer the questions; they offered tips and ideas for improvements.

On September 16 the councillor and his team came to our office for a full hour of online debate. As soon as the debate started the councillor and team were on hand answering questions and jotting down tips. And enthusiasm grew as the hour wore on.

This first fortnight of Cyclefan resulted in 596.000 online impressions and 858 messages. Hundreds of Rotterdammers offered substantive feedback on the biking plan's action points. That's dozens more than the number of people who would have turned up at any debate center.

After this first phase the total number of followers via numerous channels was 1.250. Once the two weeks were over, the campaign had generated sufficient feedback to draw up a definitive plan. Points that were integrated into the Biking Plan - thanks to the input of Rotterdammers - including better bike lanes, and a rain sensor so that cyclists have shorter waiting times when it's raining. More cycle racks will be installed, and safety on dangerous intersections will be improved.

But besides these infrastructural improvements through Cyclefan010 the city council gained:

- Genuine interaction: the city council and policy makers now have a simple and straightforward way to talk to cycling partners and local citizens. Now, it's not simply a case of sending messages via social media, but entering into conversations and seeking solutions together.
- Reputation: the platform is helping to build Rotterdam's reputation as a (social) Biking City.
- Mobilization: Rotterdammers from all segments of society are excited by the plan, and actively engaged.

Phase 2: Grow the platform into an online cycling community

After the first so-called consultation phase, it was time to expand the community into a platform where cycling and non-cycling Rotterdammers could connect. For extra impact and visibility, we connected the online platform with campaigns and activities in the city. Our goal was to turn Cyclefan010 into the online community for biking Rotterdam. We devised activation campaigns highlighting a different key theme every three months.

Safety was the theme during the last quarter of 2015. We called this campaign 'The All-Weather Cyclefan'. Special events were organised, including a bike-winning contest held close to Christmas - 'What Are Your Top Tips for Visibility in Winter?'. We were also handing out hot chocolate as a reward for cyclists braving the streets in bad weather. And we distributed free bike lights for bikers' own safety, and to prevent them from being fined.



Offline campaigns to promote the online community

We saw a steady, constant growth in the number of followers. We provided a lively platform with at least three updates per medium each week. Partnerships with the city's cycling club, local bike shops, a cycling magazine publishers, the local BMX school and other stakeholders, expanded our reach. However, our updates received a very varied number of responses per update. The most popular were current updates, updates asking for help, responding to news, or updates about Cyclefan in the news. But it was proving hard to involve the city partners we were targeting. They felt that involvement cost them valuable time, and weren't sure their efforts always paid off. Plus, they are often already involved in their own online communities.

Stagnating growth

As summer approached, we noticed that growth was stagnating. At around 3,000 followers, we saw growth begin to taper off, and decided to find out why. What value does the Cyclefan community provide to its followers?

We organised a 'superpromotor' meeting for our partners and most active followers. And asked what they expected of Cyclefan. They pinpointed two objectives. First, they saw it as a promotional tool for bike city Rotterdam. And secondly, as a think tank: a place to ask questions and test ideas.



Superpromotor meeting

After analysing reactions to different kinds of updates, we discovered that our followers are most active when invited to provide input on 'key issues', such as bicycle safety and bike parking problems. 'Celebrating cycling' was no shared goal. Biking is far too much an everyday part of Dutch life and every cyclist has his or her own reasons and specific associations with cycling.

What our followers valued was to participate in designing biking policy. That's why they had joined Cyclefan010 in the first place. Our followers derived most value from having an active say in making 'their' city a more bike-friendly place. City officials have also informed us that feedback from Cyclefan010 is by far the most actionable feedback for them, and of a high quality.

Phase 3: Reposition the community as an online think tank for the city

For us, phase 3 is about moving away from the fun stuff, towards more meaningful content. This translates into less activation campaigns, fewer updates, and more tangible questions about specific topics. In other words, it's no longer about quantity, but about quality. And this applies to content, followers, and events as well. This does not mean that Cyclefan010 is not visually active in the city. To let people know that the platform is as serious as ever about its objectives, fewer but more targeted events are organised. The social presence of

Cyclefan010 mainly focuses on cycling developments in the city and cycling activities organised by others.

A successful transition depends on having the solid support of the city and partners. And, importantly, actually implementing the input followers have provided. When a city government asks citizens questions, it creates an expectation that the city council needs to meet. Are you using the input provided by the community? It is also important to let your followers know in what way their input is used. Cyclefan010 has an active role in feeding back what has been done with the input of its community.

Phase 4: Expand the think tank into an independently functioning platform

This is our vision for the future. Cyclefan010 as a platform uniting the ambitions of local government with the needs of citizens, organisations and companies in the city. A think tank where answers and solutions for cycling-related topics can be sourced quickly and easily. In this phase, more partners will contribute to the platform. This may also mean a

10 tips on how to engage communities through social media

We have learned some lessons on the way that can be turned into do's and don'ts for mobilising people.

1. Make it easy to join and use multiple platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Whatsapp) for different target groups
2. Create the right expectations. Let people know beforehand how their input will be used
3. Ensure a good follow-up. Keep people updated on implementations
4. Use offline campaigns to raise the profile of the online community
5. Honour their effort. Express gratitude along the way
6. Give them VIP treatment: 'as the first....', 'as the only...'
7. Make it social. Organise live events where community members can meet
8. Keep it fun. Post witty, light-hearted updates on the platform
9. Provide partners and followers with a platform (give them a face)
10. Most of all: don't do it alone. It's more fun together!

different business model and maybe even other forms of funding. Solving this puzzle will be our challenge for 2018.

Would you like to know more about our activation campaigns and urban initiatives? Send an e-mail to founder and CEO Rinske Brand via rinske@brandurbanagency.com and/or visit our company website brandurbanagency.com

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