Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government

A White Paper Written for the 2008 – 2009 Presidential Transition Team

by

the Federal Web Managers Council

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We welcome your questions and comments. Please contact the Federal Web Managers Council co-chairs, Sheila Campbell (Sheila.campbell@gsa.gov) and Rachel Flagg (Rachel.flagg@hud.gov).

Introduction

This White Paper recommends specific strategies for revolutionizing how the U.S. Government delivers online services to the American people. It was developed by the Federal Web Managers Council, comprised of Cabinet agency Web Directors.

The current state of government online communications

The importance of the Internet has grown exponentially over the last decade, but the government's ability to provide online services to the American people hasn't grown at the same pace. Building this capacity will present one of the biggest challenges—and most promising opportunities—for President-elect Obama. We need to build on the groundswell of citizen participation in the presidential campaign and make people's everyday interactions with their government easier and more transparent.

It won't be an easy task. There are approximately 24,000 U.S. Government websites now online (but no one knows the exact number). Many websites tout organizational achievements instead of effectively delivering basic information and services. Many web managers don't have access to social media tools because of legal, security, privacy, and internal policy concerns. Many agencies focus more on technology and website infrastructure than improving content and service delivery. Technology should not drive our business decisions, but rather help us serve the needs of the American people. Here's the result when communication takes a backseat to technology:

> "Often I can find the page on a government site that's supposed to contain the information I need, but I can't make heads or tails of it. I recently tried to Google a specific requirement for dependant care flex accounts. Although I got to the correct page, it didn't answer my question. The links took me to the typical, poorly written tax guidance. Where did I get the answer to my question? On Wikipedia."

We're working to address these problems. We've built a network of over 1,500 federal, state, and local web professionals across the country to share best practices; we created a large-scale training program for web managers; and we're working to support the use of social media while also addressing important privacy, security, and legal implications.

While our efforts have been very successful, a high-level mandate from the new Administration is needed to quickly and radically transform government websites.

A bold, new vision for the future

President-elect Obama should be able to promise the American people that when they need government information and services online, they will be able to:

- Easily find relevant, accurate, and up-to-date information;
- Understand information the first time they read it;
- Complete common tasks efficiently;
- Get the same answer whether they use the web, phone, email, live chat, read a brochure, or visit in-person;
- Provide feedback and ideas and hear what the government will do with them;
- Access critical information if they have a disability or aren't proficient in English.

The recommendations below are designed to help the new Administration increase the efficiency, transparency, accountability, and participation between government and the American people. Some of these changes can be implemented quickly and at minimal cost. Others will require significant changes in how agencies conduct business and may require shifts in how they fund web communications.

Establish Web Communications as a core government business function

One of the biggest problems we face in improving government websites is that many agencies still view their website as an IT project rather than as a core business function. Many government websites lack a dedicated budget. Only a minority of agencies have developed strong web policies and management controls. Some have hundreds of "legacy" websites with outdated or irrelevant content. With limited resources, many find it difficult to solicit regular customer input and take quick action to improve their

sites. While there are many effective government websites, most web teams are struggling to manage the amount of online content the government produces every day.

- Agencies should be required to fund their "virtual" office space as part of their critical infrastructure, in the same way they fund their "bricks and mortar" office space.

- Agencies should be required to appoint an editor-in-chief for every website they maintain, as do the top commercial websites. This person should be given appropriate funding and authority to develop and enforce web policies and publishing standards, including ensuring that prime real estate on government websites is dedicated to helping people find the information they need.

- OPM should develop standard job descriptions and core training requirements so agencies can hire and retain highly qualified experts in web content and new media—not just IT specialists.

Help the public complete common government tasks efficiently

The U.S. economy loses millions of hours of "citizen productivity" every year when people can't efficiently accomplish basic government tasks online, such as filling out a form, applying for a loan, or checking eligibility for a government program. This adds to people's dissatisfaction with their government.

- Agencies should be required and funded to identify their core online customer tasks, and to develop service standards and performance benchmarks for completing those tasks. If the core customer tasks are not yet online, agencies should determine whether or not those tasks can be made available online, and if so, develop a plan for making them available online within one year.

- The Government should use social media, not just to create transparency, but also to help people accomplish their core tasks. For example, agencies could post instructional videos on YouTube to explain how to apply for a small business loan or learn about Medicare benefits. To do this, the government must ensure that federal employees who need access to social media tools have them, and that these new ways of delivering content are available to all, including people with disabilities.

- The new Administration should develop government-wide guidelines for disseminating content in universally accessible formats (data formats, news feeds, mobile, video, podcasts, etc.), and on non-government sites such as YouTube, Wikipedia, and SecondLife. To remain relevant, government needs to take our content to where people already are on the Web, rather than just expecting people will come to government websites. Having guidelines will ensure that we're part of the larger "online information ecosystem," without compromising the integrity of government information.

Clean up the clutter so people can find what they need online

President-elect Obama will inherit thousands of U.S. government websites. We have too much content to categorize, search, and manage effectively, and there is no comprehensive system for removing or archiving old or underused content. Some agencies have posted competing websites on similar topics, creating duplication of effort and causing confusion for the public. Much government web content is written in "governmentese" instead of plain language.

- The Government should set stricter standards for approving new, or renewing existing, government websites. All federally owned, managed, and/or directly funded websites must be hosted on .gov, .mil or fed.us domains. Where agency missions are related, a lead agency should be appointed to coordinate the online "information lane," and all other agencies should defer to the lead agency for posting comprehensive government information on that topic. This will reduce duplication, save money, and help consumers find accurate information.

- Agencies should be required and funded to conduct regular content reviews, to ensure their online content is accurate, relevant, mission-related, and written in plain language. They should have a process for archiving content that is no longer in frequent use and no longer required on the website.

- Agencies should be funded and required to follow the latest best practices in web search. This will improve the quality and findability of online government information, and help agencies deliver the services most requested by their customers.

Engage the public in a dialogue to improve our customer service

Agencies often don't have resources to effectively manage customer input. For those that do, they must go through a clearance process before they can survey the public (requirements of the Paperwork Reduction Act, which was enacted before many agencies even had websites). Many web pages are developed without regular feedback or testing with customers. When people do provide feedback or ideas, they often never hear what the government will do with their suggestions.

- Agencies should be required and funded to regularly solicit public opinion and analyze customers' online preferences – just as Amazon, eBay, and other top commercial websites do. This can be done on an "opt-in" basis and without tracking personally identifiable information by using blogs, online surveys, a "Citizens Insight Panel" (such as that used by the Canadian government), or similar tools. Agencies should be required and funded to do user testing before undertaking major improvements to any current website, or launching a new website.

- Agencies should use their website to publish a summary of common customer comments and explain the actions they are taking in response to the feedback. Doing so will create better transparency and accountability.

Ensure the public gets the same answer whether they use the web, phone, email, print, or visit in-person

Agencies communicate with citizens via many different "delivery channels," including web, email, publications, live chats, blogs, podcasts, videos, wikis, virtual online worlds, and more. But it's difficult to ensure timeliness and consistency when various delivery channels are managed by different divisions within an agency.

- Agencies should provide multiple ways for people to contact them and ensure that information is consistent across all channels. They should be funded to coordinate all types of content targeted to the general public (web, publications, call center, email, common questions, web chat, etc). Agencies should be rewarded for delivering consistent information, both within agencies and across government.

Ensure underserved populations can access critical information online

Agencies are required to provide online information that's readily accessible by people with disabilities, as well as to people with limited English proficiency. However, few agencies have the funding, training or resources to meet these obligations.

- The government should establish standards and guidelines for multilingual websites, and agencies should be funded and staffed with qualified bilingual web content professionals who can create and maintain them. This will help newcomers learn about the rights and responsibilities of living in the U.S.

- Agencies should receive adequate resources to make their websites fully accessible to people with disabilities and meet requirements of the Rehabilitation Act. The new Administration should invest in government-wide solutions, such as captioning software to make videos and webcasts accessible to people with disabilities.

Conclusion

By harnessing the collaborative nature of the web, the new Administration has the potential to engage the public like never before. The web can foster better communication and allow people to participate in improving the operations of their government. By listening to our customers we can provide better services, focus on their most pressing needs, and spend their tax dollars efficiently. We're confident that President-elect Obama will appoint leaders who will invest in the web as a strategic asset and make these goals a reality. The millions of Americans who interact with their government online expect and deserve no less.