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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Introduction

This White Paper focuses on revolutionizing how the U.S. Government delivers online services to the American public. It was developed with input from the Federal Web Managers Council, which is composed of Web Directors and Managers from the federal cabinet agencies.

The current state of government online communications

The importance of the Internet has grown exponentially over the past few years, but the infrastructure to support it within the government has not grown at the same pace. One of the biggest challenges for the next President will be to improve how the government serves its citizens online. Managing the government's vast online presence is much different and more complex than running an online campaign. Instead of promoting an individual candidate, agency websites must deliver basic information and services to citizens, such as applying for a loan or finding out about health benefits. There are approximately 24,000 U.S. Government websites now online (but no one knows the exact number). Most agencies still place a greater emphasis on technology than communicating, hampering Web Managers in their efforts to deliver good web content to citizens. Here's one example of the frustration the public faces:

> "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. For example, I tried to Google a specific requirement for dependant care flex accounts. An IRS page came up as the #1 hit in Google. Although the page was devoted to this topic, it didn't answer my question. The links on the page took me to the typical, poorly written tax guidance.   Where did I get the answer to my question? On the Wikipedia page for flex spending accounts."

This is not to say that agencies have not vastly improved their websites over the last several years. Our Federal Web Managers Council has developed best practices, training, and tools for the government web manager community, and a growing number of agencies are already using social networking tools to interact with citizens.

The millions of American people who went online during this past political campaign season now have great expectations for a new era of online interaction with their government. If they see little progress, the next President will lose an historical opportunity to improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of our government.

A bold, new vision for the future

The next President 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 hear what the government will do with it;
- Access critical information if they have a disability or aren't proficient in English.

The recommendations below are designed to help the next Administration create a new level of efficiency, transparency, accountability, and participation between online 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 funding.

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 the 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.

- The Government should develop standard job descriptions and core training requirements (such as certification programs) that will allow agencies to hire and retain highly qualified web content professionals.

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 citizen 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 develop guidelines for making non-sensitive government information available 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

The next President 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 government websites and renewing existing ones in the .gov and .mil 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 the "authoritative government source."

- 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 to be posted 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 feedback and face barriers in collecting individual customer data (such as the information collection requirements in 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, they often don't hear how the government will act on it.

- 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 now 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 fully meet their obligation to make government websites fully accessible under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Conclusion

By harnessing the collaborative nature of the web, the next 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. Leaders who will put the American public first, and who will invest in the web as a strategic asset, can make that goal a reality. The millions of Americans who interact with their government online expect and deserve no less.