



AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX
**E-GOVERNMENT
SATISFACTION INDEX**

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I. OVERVIEW: FEDERAL E-GOVERNMENT HITS THE TIPPING POINT

The striking increase in the number of federal agency web sites measuring their performance using the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is just one indication that federal e-government is getting serious. Only a handful did so a year ago, the number was up to 22 last quarter, and now stands at 36 and climbing. As we entered the new millennium, it was not unusual for government websites to be relegated to any available staff, get infrequent or no updates, do little more than serve as an agency brochure, and, while the commercial web was speeding forward, the government web often looked like a relic of the days of grade-school designs and frequent "under construction" signs.

The pace of e-government development is also being aided by the arrival of a metric that both passes regulatory muster and allows agencies to make their sites and services very citizen-driven. Government regulations, intent on building citizen trust, prohibit the use of some technologies that were critical in the early development of the commercial web. The ACSI allows agencies to make sophisticated decisions without the use of invasive methods. The ACSI solicits voluntary citizen inputs to determine priorities in terms of site design and service offerings, making sites heavily audience-driven from the very beginning.

Since the ACSI can deliver clear, actionable, user-directed web development, it energizes agencies' efforts. On the web, citizen reactions, inputs, and needs are clear and continual. The ACSI leaves little ambiguity about what will make the biggest difference to users. The web allows agencies to make changes accordingly, and almost instantaneously. There are few analogies in government—or in the history of government interaction with citizens—that enable such immediate action and matching of citizen needs and agency priorities. The ability to deliver and the knowledge that a real difference is being made is very satisfying to both provider and user, and produces an energy and relationship that is difficult to duplicate elsewhere.

E-government has evolved dramatically in recent years. Today, most patent applications are filed on the web. Soon, all National Institutes of Health grant applications will be electronic. FirstGov.gov, a pioneer in this area, started strong and then evolved into a re-organization of government services based on how citizens want to access things.

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An Historical Perspective From the Federal Consulting Group, Department of the Treasury
We've seen participation grow from only a handful of web sites a year ago to over 60 today, including some of the most visited information, purchase, and portal sites. The growing number of participants in the ACSI is a clear indication that the federal government has been getting serious about e-government.

Several factors are spurring what the latest ACSI numbers suggest is the arrival of a more sophisticated and valuable e-government. President Bush's Management Agenda is getting serious attention. The Office of Management and Budget is demanding that agencies demonstrate a strong business case, especially with respect to citizen input and feedback, to gain approval for new IT investments. Web development groups have sprung up throughout the government, replacing the often ad-hoc, if valiant, efforts of web staff working in a vacuum.

We have worked with the ACSI since 1999 when it was adopted as a standard metric for use by government agencies. By utilizing the ACSI to evaluate web satisfaction, web managers can gain insights into customer needs, make sophisticated decisions based on sound quantitative data, and better tie program performance to agency budgets. In addition, we see it as an ideal complement to usability testing to help managers set priorities in terms of site design and service offerings. We look forward to continued growth and improvement in the government's ability to better meet citizens' needs utilizing this service delivery channel.

—Anne Kelly, Director of Federal Consulting Group

II. THE AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX MEASURES E-GOVERNMENT: METHODOLOGY

Various agency websites had their performance measured through a partnership between the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) and ForeSee Results, an online satisfaction measurement firm licensed to use the ACSI methodology. The ACSI is a quarterly index based at the University of Michigan, and produced through a partnership among the University, the American Society for Quality (ASQ), and the CFI Group. The ACSI is a cross-industry measure of customer satisfaction, which measures the performance of about 200 private-sector companies as well as key government agencies.

In measuring e-government, an ACSI score is calculated on the basis of voluntary online surveys of users. Each government website below has been rated by its visitors on various components of overall satisfaction, and that rating has been converted through the ACSI methodology into a score on a 0-100 point scale.

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A key distinguishing feature of the ACSI methodology is its patented scientific approach to customer satisfaction measurement and its impact on future customer behavior. The technology behind the ACSI computes scores that reflect performance based on the relative impacts of various components of satisfaction on overall satisfaction and the likelihood of desirable future behaviors, such as repeat visits. Accordingly, the ACSI approach is able to isolate and determine the importance of the features and functions most likely to produce these behaviors—an important distinction from basic customer satisfaction ratings.



III. THE ACSI FINDINGS: E-GOVERNMENT IS SUCCEEDING IN ITS FUNDAMENTAL TASK

Though the websites measured are not a true “representative sample” of e-government, they represent a solid enough cross-section to be instructive. They provide a meaningful snapshot and a valuable set of insights about the state and direction of e-government.

A groundswell of focused activity by federal government agencies is producing an e-government that is at least effective and, in some cases, almost standard-setting (even relative to the private sector). In some areas, a preference for information from the federal government seems clear even when there is a private-sector alternative. This is particularly evident in the area of health information and, to some degree, in career searching. Strong scores in these and other areas dramatically demonstrate that it is possible for citizens to value the way “the government” does business very highly.

As the number of sites being measured has expanded, and the sample broadened, there is a decrease in the percentage of sites earning only failing grades. 53 percent of the sites measured earned scores of 70 or better this quarter, as compared to 41 percent falling into that range last time. The percentage of scores below 60 was 18 last quarter and stands at eight this quarter. This reflects both some improvement in the aggregate but, more importantly, shows that a broader sample of sites is indicative of relatively good performance government-wide.

The range of scores—from very low to very high—is what you would expect to see in an “emerging industry.” Emerging categories of business, and especially e-business, are still trying to find the best methods and models. Some will be more successful than others but, eventually, all will gravitate toward a solid standard.

The presence of high scorers in important categories is a very encouraging sign for the President’s e-government initiative. Some of the more complicated roles of government—such as dispensing health information using ways that are understandable and accessible to people in need—are being handled very well on the web. This is also a positive development because the quality, consistency, and reliability of information on the web can be controlled much more than “offline” interactions. Offline information is dispensed by a wide range of people with varying degrees of knowledge and experience. Not only is e-government generally more convenient for citizens, it is also a good way to ensure quality as well as to reduce costs of services.

The range of scores is also indicative of the category of government in general, however. The spread is roughly equivalent to the scores for federal government agencies in the national ACSI. Agencies do not have the luxury of choosing their “customers,” their mission, or focus. Some types of customers will always be more difficult to satisfy, and their expectations may not coincide with the agency mission. For these and related realities of government, it is hard to imagine that every government website will ever do well. But agencies participating in the ACSI are able to adjust to users to the greatest extent their mission and objectives will allow.

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Likelihood to Recommend and Loyalty: A Key Test of E-Government Success

Users of government websites tend to have an unusually high likelihood to recommend the site to others. Likelihood to recommend and likelihood to return are two components that are measured in the ACSI model and go into calculating the overall ACSI score for any given site. Together, the two components give a good idea of loyalty and trust in the site. These are some of the numbers behind the numbers.

Sites measured this quarter that scored 70 or above earned an average "likely to recommend" score of 81. This is a strong indication that users may see room for improvement on the sites, but tend to have an experience that impacted them favorably. Agencies can and should seize this room for improvement, but are clearly doing something right. Even sites that scored below 70 chalked up a score of 72 in the "recommend" category.

The loyalty score is calculated, again, through a model that combines likelihood to recommend and likelihood to return. Users of all government sites have alternatives, at least in terms of channels. The President's e-government initiative is designed, in large part, to make the Internet convenient and a preferred channel.

By this measure, e-government seems well on the path to success. Sites with overall ACSI scores of less than 70 earn an average 75.3 on loyalty. Sites with overall scores of 70 and higher clocked in at 83.3 on loyalty, and sites with overall scores above 75 managed to get an average 85 on loyalty.

Individual Agency Performance: A Preference for Government?

Health-oriented government websites earn satisfaction ratings from users that rival or surpass some of the best-known commercial websites. Their performance is a function of both doing things right and having something people want. It is possible to have something people want, though, and not deliver it well.

The data indicate that MedlinePlus.gov and 4woman.gov are trusted and effective sources of health information. There are several reasons for their success. Their performance is built on a foundation of trust, which is dramatically important in government in general and in health services in particular. Citizens in need of health information like the fact that they have a reliable information source. The sheer volume of health information—and health scams—on the Internet makes having an effective government resource very important to consumers. They know they will not get scammed or spammed. They know that the information comes from an authoritative source, not a source whose credentials are murky. They also have a high degree of trust that their privacy will be respected.

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All this combined with the sheer depth and breadth of information available from government sources makes health services on the web a winner. Equally important, these health sites have done a very good job of, first, mimicking the interfaces and experiences that web users have become accustomed to from commercial sites. Navigation, look and feel, and all the rest are very similar to commercial sites. Beyond that, the health sites have organized themselves in intuitive, not necessarily bureaucratic, ways. And they have continually refined what and how



they present themselves based on what has the highest impact on users. The combination of trusted source, good practices, and incorporating voice of customer in web development is unbeatable.

Government job-search sites are also, generally, doing well. The CIA (ACSI score of 80) and State Department (77) recruiting sites are particularly strong performers. The Office of Personnel Management (68) puts in an acceptable performance but has a much bigger, broader job than the other two. State improved its score by four points just since last quarter, partly by tailoring web development based on user feedback. Job search is a specific function, typically directed at a specific audience. Job seekers come to these sites with specific expectations, as well. For example, the CIA is perceived as elite, serious, and important and the user experience on the site must match this perception—and be functional. All of these sites “compete” with a wide array of commercial and university services, and therefore are succeeding in a tough market.

One thing that most strong performers have in common is focus. They are not departmental or agency websites per se. They have a very specific purpose and a very specific audience. Any time it is possible to organize according to the purpose of the site visit, performance tends to improve. Most users do not think in terms of departments, they think in terms of specific needs.

“Portal” sites—or main websites—have an uphill battle. Very few users want to access a “department” or information about that department. Those who do—for instance, those who want to know what the Treasury Secretary is up to and what the latest policy speeches are, or how the agency works—may well be satisfied with the main sites. But there are relatively few users like this. Beyond that, the range of services and information from, for example, the Treasury is just too vast to fit “above the fold” and meet most users’ expectations. One portal that puts in a respectable performance, FirstGov.gov, does so by trying to re-organize government information into a more citizen-centric approach.

Fundamentals of Success

Navigation and search are key elements of an effective website. Navigation and search are also difficult for the government, given the way it is organized and the overwhelming depth and breadth of information these sites must organize. The most promising thing an agency can do is to be customer-driven in terms of navigation, and re-think search terms and engines in ways that match how citizens actually think. This applies to language and terms in general, not just search engines. Again, thinking like a user produces results: navigation includes proper labeling and site flow is citizen-driven. Agencies have increased their scores in some cases partly by adjusting jargon and using more easily understandable language. This task is not easy, but effectiveness will improve steadily the more agencies let the citizens be their guide.

Beyond that, the clear elements of success are: focus, budget, management support, and citizen-centricity. Agencies are making dramatic strides and are truly realizing the promise of e-government. That is because there is an increasing convergence of these elements. Ongoing refinement and seriousness of purpose will continue to produce tangible results. It is an iterative process and each change improves citizen satisfaction in meaningful ways.

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A citizen-centric approach is increasingly evident throughout the government, even among agencies not using the ACSI. In addition to all of the above, there are a couple key lessons:

- In the absence of clear user “direction,” agencies would be tempted to organize their web services the way the government is organized only. That is not always the best answer, and citizen inputs help shape the delivery of information and services in ways that have the highest impact with users. The availability of a metric that provides direction makes the task of developing and delivering information and services via the web clear and manageable. It is no longer the daunting, ambiguous job it used to be. This, along with the upgrading of capabilities and information-sharing throughout the government, helps elevate agency web presences from simply being a web site for the sake of having a web site to true e-government.
- When they get it right—and when they have data that tells them clearly what they must do to get it right—agencies see immediate and clear benefits beyond citizen approval and satisfaction. Transaction costs and citizen support costs (i.e. cost of accessing information) are lowered. Consistency and quality of information is more reliable.

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IV. SCORES

| ID | E-Government U.S. Agency/ Department/Office | Website | 12/03 Score |
|----------|---|---|----------------|
| NLM | National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, HHS | MedlinePlus main website http://medlineplus.gov | 86 |
| FSA | Federal Student Aid, Education | Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) website— www.fafsa.ed.gov | 86 |
| OWH | Office on Women's Health, HHS | National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) main website— www.4woman.gov | 83 |
| NLM | National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, HHS | MedlinePlus en español main website http://medlineplus.gov/esp/ | 82 |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency | Recruitment website http://www.cia.gov/employment | 80 |
| NASA | National Aeronautics and Space Administration | NASA main website www.nasa.gov | 79 |
| Mint | United States Mint, Treasury | Online Catalog http://catalog.usmint.gov | 78 |
| NIST | National Institute of Standards and Technology, Commerce | NIST main website www.nist.gov | 78 |
| DOS | Department of State | Recruitment website www.careers.state.gov | 77 |
| NCJRS | National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Justice | NCJRS main website www.ncjrs.org | 76 |
| ERS | Economic Research Service, Agriculture | ERS main website— www.ers.usda.gov | 74 |
| NIAID | National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, HHS | NIAID main website www.niaid.nih.gov | 74 |
| OJJDP | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Justice | OJJDP main website http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org | 73 |
| DOS | Department of State | Main website— www.state.gov | 72 |
| Forest | Forest Service, Agriculture | Main website— http://www.fs.fed.us | 72 |
| GSA | General Services Administration | FirstGov.gov website— www.firstgov.gov | 72 |
| NLM | National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, HHS | Main website www.nlm.nih.gov | 72 |
| FAS | Foreign Agricultural Service, Agriculture | FAS main website— www.fas.usda.gov | 70 |
| FSA | Farm Service Agency, Agriculture | FSA main website— www.fsa.usda.gov | 70 |
| IIP | International Information Programs, State | IIP main website http://usinfo.state.gov | 69 |
| CNS | Corporation for National and Community Service | Americorps website http://www.americorps.org | 68 |
| OPM | Office of Personnel Management | Recruitment website— www.usajobs.opm.gov | 68 |
| Treasury | Department of the Treasury | Main website— www.treasury.gov | 67 |
| GAO | General Accounting Office | GAO main website— www.gao.gov | 66 |
| GSA | General Services Administration | GSA Advantage website https://www.gsaadvantage.gov | 66 |
| NARA | National Archives & Records Administration | NARA main public website www.archives.gov | 66 |
| PBGC | Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation | PBGC main website— www.pbgc.gov | 66 |
| CNS | Corporation for National and Community Service | CNS main website www.cns.gov | 65 |
| FAA | Federal Aviation Administration, Transportation | FAA main website www.faa.gov | 64 |
| NSF | National Science Foundation | NSF main website— www.nsf.gov | 64 |
| DOS | Department of State | Scores reflect www.geography.state.gov (now archived; replaced by http://future.state.gov) | 62 |
| ESA | Employment Standards Administration, Labor | ESA main website www.union-reports.dol.gov | 62 |
| NRCS | Natural Resources Conservation Service, Agriculture | NRCS main website http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/ | 62 |
| GSA | General Services Administration | GSA main website— www.gsa.gov | 56 |
| DOT | Department of Transportation | Main website— www.dot.gov | 55 |
| NOAA | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Commerce | National Ocean Service (NOS) MapFinder website http://www.oceanservice.noaa.gov/mapfinder | 48 |

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The lower scores on the table above are typically agencies that are early in their evolution. All of these agencies are self-measuring, however, because they are interested in determining the best user-driven path forward. In most cases, the blend of organizing information in citizen-centric ways, developing user interfaces that are attractive and easy, and not sacrificing their government credibility will be the way forward.

V. BENCHMARKS

One of the advantages of the ACSI methodology is that its uniform application allows comparisons across industries and sectors. Some useful points of comparison follow.

- Amazon.com: 88
- Google: 82
- Comcast Corporation: 55
- Walmart: 74
- McDonald's: 61
- Bank of America: 70
- The Coca Cola Company: 83
- United Airlines: 63

Note: Comparison scores taken from <http://www.theacsi.org/overview.htm>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry Freed is an expert on Web Effectiveness and Web Customer Satisfaction. He is also President and CEO of ForeSee Results, a market leader in customer satisfaction measurement on the web, which utilizes the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI).

ABOUT THE ACSI

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is the only uniform, national, cross-industry measure of satisfaction with the quality of goods and services available in the United States. A key distinguishing feature of the ACSI methodology is its patented scientific approach to customer satisfaction measurement. The technology behind the ACSI computes scores that reflect performance—based on the relative impacts of various components of satisfaction on overall satisfaction and the likelihood of desirable future behaviors, such as repeat purchases. Accordingly, the ACSI methodology is able to isolate and determine the importance of the features and functions most likely to produce these behaviors—an important distinction from basic customer satisfaction ratings. The Index is produced by a partnership of the University of Michigan Business School, American Society for Quality (ASQ) and CFI Group. ForeSee Results sponsors the e-commerce, e-business and e-government indices.

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ABOUT FORESEE RESULTS

ForeSee Results is the market leader in online customer satisfaction management and specializes in converting satisfaction data into user-driven web development strategies. Using the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) developed at the University of Michigan, ForeSee Results has developed a model that scientifically quantifies the elements that drive online customer satisfaction and predicts future behaviors like likelihood to purchase, return, or recommend the site. ForeSee Results, a privately held company co-founded by Compuware Corporation and CFI Group, is located in Ann Arbor, Michigan and on the web at www.ForeSeeResults.com.

ABOUT THE FEDERAL CONSULTING GROUP

The Federal Consulting Group, a franchise of the Department of the Treasury, serves as the executive agent in the government for the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), and holds generic clearance from the Office of Management and Budget that enables agencies to utilize the ACSI without having to obtain a separate clearance under the Paperwork Reduction Act to conduct customer satisfaction surveys. Agencies can participate in the ACSI through an arrangement between the Federal Consulting Group and ForeSee Results.

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