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Satisfaction with E-Government Stalls In Latest Findings from American Customer Satisfaction Index

Shift in Priorities is Needed To Cope With Tight Budgets
says Index Co-sponsor ForeSee Results

ANN ARBOR, MI (March 15, 2005)-- User satisfaction with federal e-government websites leveled off after nine months of steady improvement, according to the latest quarterly findings of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which were co-sponsored by ForeSee Results. The new data shows a slight decline to an aggregate government website score of 71.9 from the December index score of 72.1 on the ACSI's 100-point scale.

Indications are that agencies need to focus on specific citizen priorities in order to kick-start satisfaction increases, according to the e-Government Satisfaction Index report produced by ForeSee Results. Of the government websites measured last quarter, 35 percent showed a decline in customer satisfaction, 33 percent remained flat and 31 percent increased, evidence of the uphill struggle agencies face to constantly improve perceptions of their service to the public.

The new findings come in on the heels of recently issued OMB guidelines for federal government websites that set new standards for performance. The guidelines include a requirement that the sites be "citizen-centric", and the ACSI e-Government Satisfaction Index is the leading measure of citizen satisfaction with 59 government websites.

Participation in the Index, which is voluntary, grew by 9 percent since December—as more agencies embraced the use of the ACSI methodology to evaluate their online features and services, to determine priorities for improvement from the citizens' perspective and to benchmark performance against other government and private sector websites.

"The leveling off of satisfaction growth in the e-government sector is reflected in the private sector websites as well," said Claes Fornell, Director of the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan and founder of the ACSI. "With the rapid pace of innovation on the Internet, government websites face an uphill battle to keep pace with the leading e-commerce and e-business private sector sites. As citizen's standards for evaluating their web experiences rise, government web managers must continue to make improvements to sustain satisfaction gains – they can't stand still."

The key to providing a good online experience in the eyes of users—as the OMB requires—is to focus on user-driven priorities. Top performers in this quarters' Index scoring 80 or above include: MedlinePlus (http://medlineplus.gov) (87), on par with the highest private sector ACSI E-Commerce score for Barnes & Noble; MedlinePlus en espanol (83); 4woman.gov with an (82); National Cancer Institute (80), the highest score in the Portals/Department Main Sites category; and United States Mint (81), the highest score in the ECommerce/
Transactions category.

"Agencies need to understand how best to implement the OMB standards based on their respective user segments," said Freed. "Privacy and content are two key areas the new OMB standards address—but user surveys show that these elements have achieved high satisfaction scores for many of the e-government sites measured, indicating that people are already very satisfied with these elements. It will be difficult to continue to realize satisfaction gains by making improvements in these high-scoring areas. According to citizen's, it ain't broke, so there's really no need to fix it."

The ACSI analyzes key aspects of overall satisfaction to determine where users find sites either meeting needs and expectations or falling short. Privacy scores a very strong 81, up two points from last quarter, is the highest rated element among all measured government sites.

Freed said that many agencies tend to allocate much of their time and resources to adding content, partly because it is "doable" in a resource-constrained environment. "Content already garners high satisfaction scores for the majority of government websites," said Freed. "The more critical issues to address are how the content is organized, how easy it is to find information and, increasingly, the ability to accomplish more business online through self-service functionality."

Search and navigation continue to be the two lowest-scoring areas for improvement. Search is a high priority element for 92 percent of the sites measured, with an aggregate score of 72. Navigation rated a 71 and is a high priority for improvement among over a third of the agencies in the Index.

Channel loyalty is up slightly, with likelihood to return to the sites rating an aggregate score of 82.0 (up nearly 1%) and to likelihood to recommend the site was 78.2 (up .3%).

Although many agencies are struggling to move forward, some are clearly making strides in increasing satisfaction. The National Libraries of Medicine's AIDSinfo site achieved a score of 80, a 5.2% increase over last quarter. The AIDSinfo site underwent a redesign of the home page and second-tier pages while implementing a new search engine employing

a "best picks" categorization of search responses. This site is the authoritative source for treatment information on HIV and AIDs.

Freed cautioned that government sites should become more user-centered than internally focused. "There is no one set of standards that addresses the wants and needs of every government website audience," said Freed. "It's critical for each government website to deliver on minimum OMB standards, but also to meet the range of needs and expectations of its varied user segments, which can be quite diverse -- from technical professionals and PhDs on one end of the spectrum, to elementary and secondary school students on the other."

Freed said the struggles to increase satisfaction tend to be "rooted in budget and priority challenges." He said the OMB standards will only be meaningful if both of these areas can be addressed, and if agencies focus more on sharing technology and best practices, which would allow agencies to take advantage of the size of government and the vast number of government websites.

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. In 1999, the Federal government selected the ACSI to be a standard metric for measuring citizen satisfaction. Over 55 Federal government agencies have used the ACSI to measure citizen satisfaction of more than 110 services and programs. The Index is produced by the University of Michigan in partnership with the American Society for Quality (ASQ) and CFI Group, an international consulting firm. ForeSee Results sponsors the e-commerce, e-business and e-government indices.

About ForeSee Results, Inc.
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 University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), ForeSee Results has created a model that scientifically quantifies the elements that drive online customer satisfaction and predicts future behaviors, including the likelihood to return to the site or recommend the site to others. ForeSee Results, a privately held company located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, can be found online at www.ForeSeeResults.com.