

Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government

2010 Progress Report

*An Annual Report
by
the Federal Web Managers Council*

April 2010

We welcome your questions and comments.
Please contact the Federal Web Managers Council co-chairs,
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with your feedback and ideas to help us improve online government.

Please note that this document reflects the individual opinions of Federal Web Managers Council members,
and not necessarily the views of our respective agencies.

Background

The Federal Web Managers Council is composed of the Web and New Media Directors of every federal cabinet agency, plus senior web managers of congressional support agencies, major independent agencies, and sub-agencies that deliver top citizen tasks. Our goal is to create the highest performing government websites in the world. In November 2008, we published "[Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government](#)", a white paper outlining six strategies to reform how the U.S. government delivers online services to the American people:

- Establish web communications as a core government business function;
- Help the public complete top government tasks efficiently;
- Clean up irrelevant and outdated content so people can find what they need online;
- Engage the public in a dialogue to improve our customer service;
- Deliver the same answer from every service channel (web, phone, email, print, in-person, etc.);
- Ensure underserved populations can access critical information online.

None of these goals can be accomplished through our efforts alone. We depend on numerous partners, both in government and outside of it, to help us improve how we serve our customers. In the spirit of Open Government, we're sharing this Progress Report, an honest self-assessment of how well we've achieved these goals, and what's still left to do.

What we've accomplished since November 2008

Government web and new media teams are collaborating across government to deliver quality online information and services to the American public. We also note that the Open Government Directive (OGD) had not yet been issued at the time we published our White Paper in November 2008 – and while the OGD supports our efforts to transform online government, it has also brought new challenges.

Today, our highest priority is still to improve the public's ability to easily complete their top tasks (those things most important to the greatest number of people). We've identified many of the top online federal government tasks,¹ which include:

- Find/apply for benefits such as Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid, housing assistance, veterans' benefits, disaster assistance, or student financial aid; apply for or renew a passport; search for reliable information on health issues, product safety, space exploration, the environment, energy, etc.; make a reservation to visit a national park; apply for visa/immigration assistance; file taxes; contact government officials; and, apply for a government job. (Note this list is not all-inclusive, and is not in any particular order.)

Over the past year and a half, we:

- **Improved Customer Top Tasks** – Federal agencies updated and redesigned their websites to improve delivery of top customer tasks, written in plain language. Many agencies, such as the Departments of Justice, Labor, Education, and the Social Security Administration, now prominently feature customer top tasks on their homepages. Our community has grown to over 2,000 federal, state, and local government web and new media professionals, who collaborate every day to improve top tasks across government.
- **Supported Participatory Government** – Earlier this year, twenty-four agencies opened online dialogues to give the public an easy way to engage, voice their opinions, share ideas, and help shape agency Open Government plans. We issued "[Barriers and Solutions to Implementing Social Media in Government](#)", a white paper to help agencies use online tools to engage and interact with the public. We conducted twenty New Media Talks with leading social media providers such as Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr, to teach agencies how to use these tools to engage with people, deliver content in innovative ways, and improve services.
- **Strengthened the Federal Web Managers Council** – To be transparent in our work, we published our Council [charter](#), reflecting our purpose, goals, organization, and operational policies. We recruited agency New Media Directors, and created new sub-councils to keep us current in areas of expertise such as search, languages, and accessibility. We collaborated on

critical inter-agency web initiatives such as the Open Government Directive, Recovery.gov, Data.gov and Apps.gov, to ensure agencies aren't duplicating efforts across government.

- **Modernized Policies** – The Web Council developed recommendations to help OMB modernize several web-related policies (e.g., policy on persistent cookies, social media, and Paperwork Reduction Act, etc.). We continue to work with OMB to recommend policy and guidance that will support a more open, collaborative government. In addition, our accessibility sub-council is also leading efforts to update standards for people with disabilities.
- **Negotiated Federal-Friendly Terms of Service** – The Council collaborated closely with the U.S. General Services Administration to create [Terms of Service \(TOS\) agreements](#) with over thirty providers to help federal agencies legally use social media tools. To date, 39 agencies have signed 179 agreements to use 658 instances of various social media tools, such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube. These tools reach people “where they already are on the web”, instead of relying on the public to come to government websites to find our information.
- **Trained Government Web Teams to Improve Service Delivery** – Over 10,000 attendees participated in Web Manager University classes, learning from world-class experts on how to improve government websites. We also developed instructional videos about plain language, user-centered design and testing, and social media, and published on WebContent.gov a best practices guide for websites in other languages.
- **Increased Stakeholder Collaboration** – We met with colleagues from Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, to discuss web management issues common to governments around the world. We participated on the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) eGov Interest Group, working to develop technical standards for electronic government, written in plain language.
- **Championed Open Government** – Web Managers contributed to agency Open Government plans and published their agency's Open Government web pages. Many Web and New Media Directors led their agency's online dialogue efforts. Web teams directly supported such flagship initiatives as the Department of Justice's FOIA Dashboard, Social Security's Spanish-language Retirement Estimator, and the General Services Administration's citizen engagement platform.

Where We Are Today – April 2010

While many agencies (including the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Health & Human Services, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs; the Social Security Administration; the Environmental Protection Agency; and the Office of Personnel Management) have made great progress to identify and improve their top customer tasks, the U.S. Government still has a lot of work to do.

To improve how we serve the online public, we have identified these roadblocks to our success:

- **Web Communications is not yet managed as a core business function throughout the federal government.** Many agencies still haven't implemented strong web management and governance policies. This means many agency web teams lack the authority and resources to properly maintain a modern website, or efficiently manage their agency's total online presence. It can be difficult to recruit web management professionals because web work is still considered by many to be a technical job. There is no classified job series for federal Web Communicators.
- **The public still has trouble completing common tasks.** Most government websites continue to prioritize public relations messages over top tasks and services. Many website designs promote content about the agency, instead of helping customers complete their tasks. In some cases, top tasks ARE easy to find, but the underlying content is poorly written, so even if people find the right place to start, they cannot always follow their online task to completion, and must call or email us for help. We need to get regular and real-time feedback from our customers, and write more clearly to guide people step-by-step through their tasks.
- **There is more clutter than ever.** When we wrote our White Paper, we estimated that there were over 24,000 government websites; there are even more today. When new initiatives are announced, managers typically request a brand-new website, instead of strategically integrating new content into existing agency websites. Some agency websites have hundreds of thousands (perhaps over a million) pages. Web teams are flooded with new content every day, leaving little time to effectively maintain the older content already on the website. Many agencies don't archive old content, making it hard for the public to easily find current information. While the

Open Government Directive has been a positive force in requiring agencies to publish new datasets, it has also added to the clutter of content that's already nearly impossible to maintain.

- **Public dialogues are not yet targeted to improving customer service.** The Open Government Directive demonstrated that agencies can successfully engage with the online public. However, most agencies still don't have good systems in place to consistently collect public feedback, report on how they're responding to the feedback, and improve service. Some agencies still see public feedback as a burden rather than an opportunity, and do not have systems to incorporate public feedback into their day-to-day operations. We hope this will change with the modernization of the Paperwork Reduction Act and other web-related policies.
- **We aren't giving consistent answers through all service channels.** Coordinating customer service across various delivery channels happens sporadically (or not at all) at most agencies. Though the web is the public's primary means of interacting with their government, front-line customer service staff and web teams rarely work together to ensure they answer the same questions in the same way. Agencies should invest in aligning customer contact functions throughout their organization. Managers at the highest level must recognize that new technology calls for a new allocation and organization of resources to improve customer service.
- **Getting critical information to underserved populations is not a priority.** Many agencies still do not have sufficient staffing or expertise to identify and address accessibility and usability issues. Though some agencies are now using blogs, widgets, podcasts, and social media sites to reach customers with limited English proficiency, most agencies don't have the staffing or funding to integrate these customers into their overall online strategy. Many web initiatives are launched so quickly that accessibility suffers, due to lack of time for testing.
- **We lack a consistent way of measuring performance.** Agencies still measure the effectiveness of their online efforts in a vacuum. The depth of research is dependent on the resources available at each agency, so those agencies with fewer resources are not able to measure as thoroughly as those with access to many different measurement tools. This inconsistency makes it very hard to provide government-wide progress assessments.
- **Resources are needed to support Open Government.** True open government isn't a "check the box" exercise, and it's more than just sharing data and publishing information using open standards. Agencies must present information contextually, to help the public easily find, understand, and use the information. Many OGD requirements (like online dialogues and Open Government webpages) fall squarely on the shoulders of agency web teams, yet most agencies haven't allocated any additional resources to develop, maintain or improve their web content.

There are agencies that have made great strides in effective web management – but these are the exception rather than the norm. Web communications is still not supported as a critical business component at many agencies – yet high-quality web content will help us effectively engage with the public and deliver top-notch customer service – which, after all, is the promise of Open Government.

Our goals for the next year

Our top goal is to improve online government by writing, editing, and delivering content that is clear, understandable, and engaging. Plain language writing – even more than technology – is critical to help the public easily complete their online tasks. However, it will require a cultural shift in how the U.S. government communicates (not just on the web, but through all our communication channels), and we need support at the highest levels to make this happen. Good writing aids understanding, provides context, and improves search results so people can easily find what they need.

In light of the progress we've made so far, and the requirements of the Open Government Directive, the Federal Web Managers Council has updated our strategic goals. For the next year, we're committed to:

- Improve the public's ability to complete their top online government tasks
- Enable public participation and collaboration
- Institutionalize transparency and accountability
- Integrate government content into the larger information ecosystem
- Share tools, resources and best practices across agencies
- Identify and remove barriers to accomplishing these goals

To meet these goals, we will:

- Institute additional efforts to train web managers and content contributors to write, edit and deliver content in plain language, so our communications are as transparent as possible;
- Make it easy for people to find government information by optimizing content for search engines and mobile devices, syndicating government content, and using social media to deliver content where people congregate on the web;
- Create awareness campaigns to better educate government employees about the importance of open government, the opportunities and challenges of using social media, and how to communicate with a new generation that expects real-time answers and opportunities to participate and collaborate;
- Work with OMB to develop consistency in how we measure the delivery of our top online tasks. Engage regularly with the public to assess how well we're doing, to ensure we're accountable in our daily work and spending resources wisely;
- Work with agencies to optimize their customers' top three online tasks, making them easy to complete, from start to finish, online;
- Strengthen our internal networks to improve collaboration within and across agencies, streamlining how we deliver top tasks that cross agency lines;
- Expand our external networks – collaborating with the White House and OMB, agency attorneys and technology staff, good government groups, and other governments – to stay attuned to new trends and technologies, share innovations, and shape policies and practices that enable public participation and better government;
- Identify and share common tools across government, such as webpage templates, shared code, user testing tools, engagement and collaboration tools, and tools to help with accessibility and language translation.

As the next step, we plan to publish a draft Strategic Plan that specifically details how we plan to meet each of these goals. We will open it up for public comment – because we believe the public should have a say in helping us determine where we should focus our time and energy. We need your feedback to help us improve how we serve the online public.

Dealing with your government should not be a burden. Finding authoritative government information or completing an online government transaction should be just as easy as buying a book on Amazon.com... but that will not happen until government web content is treated as a critical business asset, and clear communication and exceptional online customer service are top management priorities.

¹ Government Top Tasks were identified using data from: Nielsen NetRatings - most visited federal websites; most-visited pages and top searches on USA.gov; Gallup poll on the public's most critical federal agencies and government interactions; and Top Tasks survey completed by agencies.