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**Policy Whitepaper
“Citizen Engagement Through Technology”**

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Electronic Governance

Emerging technologies can enable citizen interaction with government now more than ever before. Elected officials and government agencies have their constituents “at their fingertips” with today’s technologies such as mobile devices, social media and a variety of other simple tools.

Citizens expect access to their governments beyond the confines of brick-and-mortar government agency office hours. Although most government entities do not provide 24/7 customer support, many do, however, utilize electronic tools to provide timely information and important news updates via media channels.

Mobile Service

As users start doing more “PC-like” interaction on mobile devices – such as accessing news, entertainment, and social networking sites – many organizations have noticed that more and more of their overall web traffic is being sent by mobile devices. Furthermore, the mobile web has the potential to bridge part of the digital divide since, while people may not have access to broadband or a computer, they are increasingly likely to have a web-enabled mobile phone.

According to research firm Nielsen Mobile, more than 50 million U.S. mobile subscribers (nearly 20% of all mobile phone users) actively use the mobile Internet. This metric does not just include users with iPhones, Google's Android, and Windows Mobile smartphones – rather, it encompasses all cellular-driven devices in use across the country. Consider the following statistics:

- In the next 12 months, more than 60% of U.S. consumers will own a smartphone
- 70% of mobile web use occurs at home
- Although AOL experienced tremendous growth in the early 1990s, iPhone/iPod touch ownership has grown eight times faster than AOL subscriber rates did
- A Fall 2010 Morgan Stanley study estimates that mobile-based traffic will outpace desktop traffic by 2015
- The Pew Research Center found that people with low incomes and low levels of education were more likely to access the Internet solely through their cell phones

Mobile Web Sites

A mobile-enabled web site should be completely standards-compliant and flexible, allowing users on any device to view and access content. Also, by creating a mobile style sheet, a government agency can ensure that core content from every page can be easily viewed on all mobile devices.

With the effective use of both style sheets and javascript, government agencies will be able to instantly redirect mobile visitors to a version of the site designed specifically for mobile viewing, with content whittled down to the absolute necessities for easy access to crucial information and services.

Mobile websites run the gamut from the full web page shrunken to fit in the mobile browser to barebones text-based versions. A hybrid approach is recommended, which provides a simple user interface to the sections with relevant content, but also still feels like the overall site design.

Best practices for a mobile homepage:

- Navigation at the top
- Online services at the top for easy entry
- Login, dashboard, or payment items prominently placed for immediate and easy access
- News and local information featured

Since real estate is at a premium, it is suggested that mobile-friendly content includes strong calls to action (e.g., renew online or get directions) and simple, plain English descriptors. It is important to recognize that mobile design is constantly evolving, and it is suggested that site managers regularly interview mobile users to determine what is working and what should be improved in future iterations of their mobile solutions.

Mobile Applications

Whether it is an “app” for a phone or a new tablet device such as an iPad, mobile services are becoming effective government vehicles for disseminating information and performing transactions. Online searches can be emulated on mobile devices, and service such as permitting, licensure and other eGovernment transactions can also be completed in this convenient manner.

Mobile payments for government services are now in place in several states. Arkansas became the first state to provide secure payment processing specifically for smartphone users. These mobile applications provide a convenient, simple, and secure option for users to access government services and can be made available on all smartphone operating platforms, including iPhone, Blackberry, Google Android, Windows Mobile, and Palm.

Social Media

The term **Web 2.0** is associated with web applications that facilitate interactive systemic biases, interoperability, user-centered design, and developing the World Wide Web. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as consumers of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to web sites where users are limited to the active viewing of content that they created and controlled. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, mashups and folksonomies. [Wikipedia]

There are many social networking tools that create stronger connections between government and customers. Social computing has dramatically changed the way the Internet is used, and customers expect to be able to play a much more active role in the government-related web sites they visit, including sharing their ideas and benefitting from content generated by other users. Some Web 2.0 solutions include the following:

- Message boards, blogs, and wikis to make connections between state government and customers by soliciting opinions and establishing a dialogue
- Social networking solutions that encourage citizen and business postings and responses, including Facebook and LinkedIn pages, photo and file sharing, and Twitter feeds
- Crowdsourced customer service, which leverages citizen input to answer questions from fellow citizens and create a strong community of government supporters
- Interactive mapping that shows the locations, comments, and keywords posted by customers

Facebook

Designed originally as a social network for college students, Facebook is now one of the most-trafficked sites on the web, boasts more than 500 million users, and is the fastest growing social network in all age groups. Facebook's application platform has an incredible amount of potential for reaching constituents seeking government content (event information, photos, videos, etc.) and services.

Twitter

At its most basic level, Twitter is a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing? Twitter is part social network, part hybrid communication platform. This seemingly simple service allows the broadcast of updates, messages, and alerts, as well as user-to-user direct communication if desired. Twitter puts the user in control of how messages are received (by browsing the website, via a number of third party software tools, e-mail, or SMS/text messaging), and the process is entirely opt-in.

Twitter is built on a flexible and open API, allowing for a number of ways to get data in and out. Since it is essentially a syndication tool, RSS feeds work seamlessly and can broadcast a feed of headlines or announcements. There are also a number of widgets and scripts available to pull a stream of Twitter updates into a web site or blog.

Mash-ups

Distributed service-oriented computing has changed the way applications are developed. With the advent of web services and other open protocols, developers can utilize the component services of existing applications to create entirely new or enhanced applications. The result of this process is commonly referred to as a mash-up application.

Mapping applications are some of the most common and successful mash-up applications seen around the Internet today. For example, Colorado.gov's "My Neighborhood" solution integrates a rich set of important location types from multiple state and local agencies as well as publicly available resources, including driver's license and vehicle titling offices, police and fire stations, vehicle emission testing locations, hospitals, libraries, park and ride lots, light rail stations, public and private schools, and parks. These datasets are then combined with multiple mapping types – including standard, satellite, terrain, and hybrid maps. Outputs also include point-to-point directions from a starting point specified by the user as well as addresses and contact information for the selected points of interest.

Management & Policy Support

It is a reality that not all social media features are ideal for a government web site, at least in the form that they are normally deployed. Inappropriate content is never acceptable on a government web site, therefore it is important to find appropriate ways to integrate user-generated content into the site. Included with the launch of any social feature should be a description of the rights and responsibilities of contributors and moderators, such as:

- Contributors will post only content related to the topic in question
- Posting of web site content and links to third party sites will be subject to monitoring
- Inappropriate content is defined as: commercial, campaign-related, prurient, abusive, discriminatory, containing personal contact information, embedding other media, infringing the intellectual property rights of others
- Moderators reserve the right to remove contributions that are off-topic or inappropriate as defined above

To prevent inappropriate content generated by Internet users from reaching government web sites, it is recommended that all content provided by the public be screened by a human moderator. The responsibility of the moderator is to review submitted content for appropriateness and compliance with established content policies. Additionally, the moderator will ensure that the spirit of the forum is upheld. If content branches into topic areas that are outside the purview of the original charter, the moderator will be responsible for redirecting the content author to a more appropriate channel.

Even with human moderation, inappropriate content can make its way into a public forum because of human error. The use of a sophisticated moderator system will provide a feedback mechanism such that a user may report inappropriate or offensive content to site administrators. For un-moderated intranet sites, this passive community moderation technique will be the primary form of moderation.

As an alternative to traditional content moderation, selective “pushing” of user-generated content can be offered through government web sites. Where traditional moderation is focused on identifying user submitted content that is inappropriate, the “push” approach focuses on selecting very specific user-generated content for publishing. For example, a blog owner could allow comments to be submitted in response to a blog posting. These comments would not automatically show up on the web site as with many traditional comment systems. Instead, the comments will be communicated to the blog owner where they will select specific comments for publishing to the web site. The site owner has a much greater ability to keep user content useful, appropriate, and aligned with the intent of the original content by using this technique. While the system will allow for comment removal, final decisions about comment policy should remain with the government agency.

Social Media Policy Considerations

The use of third party social services can have policy implications, and is potentially the number one concern holding governments back in this area. It is important to develop both processes and policies for governments to deliver social features that meet business objectives without conflicting with state rules and procedures.

Policies and governing guidelines for the use of social media by constituents as well as by government employees must be considered. A few considerations:

- Overall web 2.0 and social media strategy
- Define business objectives
- Identify which tools are right for the job
- Communications guidelines and protocols for government employee participation
- Provide direction about types of communication – blogs, wikis, video and photo sharing
- Establish standards for official use – behaving with respect, complying with state law, and protecting confidentiality
- Define the role of the moderator
- Acceptable Use Policy / Terms of Participation for constituents
- Create a positive environment for participation and engagement
- Establish standards to safeguard against inappropriate content or use
- Define inappropriate content (commercial, campaign-related, prurient, abusive, discriminatory, containing personal contact information, embedding other media, infringing the intellectual property rights of others)
- Data archival
- Work with each service and its API to retain content in accordance with state law

For more information on technologies to engage your citizens, please contact:

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