

Putting your county or municipality on the Web is a change in the way you communicate with your citizens. It's also rapidly becoming an expected way to do business at all levels of government. With this in mind, manage your Web site with an understanding that it is changing your government and its relationship with the community.

Manage the change

If your Web site is to remain a dynamic and valuable resource, it must keep pace with the way your government works. To accomplish this, you need to continually consider Web content as an integral part of government operations. The following questions may help:

- What current information and/or services would be delivered more effectively over the Web?
- What information dissemination and/or services could be complemented by the Web site?
- Is there potential for the Web site to include new or existing services?
- How will increased demand and communication be handled?
- What impact will the new or enhanced Web site have on various staff?

Maintain relationships

The day-to-day operation of the Web site requires the cooperation and collaboration of many people. Obtaining their active participation requires an internal marketing and education effort aimed at presenting the long- and short-term benefits of devoting resources to the effort. Keeping them informed about progress and changes to the site will help maintain their participation and support along the way.

Manage the new way of interacting with citizens

For sites with one central e-mail address, managing incoming e-mails and ensuring timely responses will be a key issue for your government. Many government organizations have a standard process for tracking correspondence. Consider how e-mail fits into that process.

In one city, the Web master received all correspondence, decided where it should be directed, then directed it to the appropriate department head, council member, or office. Whoever received the e-mail was then responsible for responding to the inquiry. Another municipality had e-mail links to each department so the citizen engaged in direct correspondence with the appropriate department or legislator.

The Town of Colonie provides a page of e-mail links to town officials and staff members.

Adopt an editorial process

Just like publishing a new brochure, sending out a press release, or developing a new application form, there is usually a sign-off approval process for getting new content ready for the Web.

While some of their editorial processes were more systematic than others, few participants have formal written guidelines. The Web master for one county accepts whatever is submitted as long as it has the approval of the submitting department head. Sometimes this process requires him to make an additional phone call or return the document so it can be resent through the appropriate review process.

One town has a staff person whose main responsibility is getting documents from various departments, tracking them through the approval process, and then making them ready for the Web site. Other representatives cited less stringent processes: they publish any information that comes to them and fix any problems after the fact. These Web site managers said they rely on the contributors for the integrity of the document. And since the Web is dynamic, it's easy to make quick changes and corrections if needed.

Encourage content ownership

Wherever possible, be sure each page or related group of pages on your site has a content "owner." Content owners must also pay attention to updating and refreshing the material on their pages. For example, a person in

the highway department may "own" that department's pages and is responsible for the accuracy of the information on those pages. Failure to maintain accuracy could have significant ramifications ranging from losing visitors to liability issues. It is critical, therefore, that whoever owns the page understands the material and keeps it up-to-date.

Manage electronic records

Web sites represent a new challenge for record keeping. Managing the record created when a user completes an online form is a good example. Understanding how the form captures information and integrates it into business processes is the first step toward managing the business-oriented records.

E-mail messages also pose a record-keeping challenge. Sometimes e-mail represents a quick person-to-person communication, or it can document an action or decision. These messages need to be handled as any other document related to the business of government.

Tips from colleagues

- "Have an immediate backup and diagnosis plan set up in case your server/site goes down."
- "Put up only content that you can efficiently manage and regularly update."
- "Adopt policies, procedures, and standards for site design, implementation, and ongoing management functions."
- "Continually update the whole site, especially the home page. Users want to see new features and know the site is as current as possible."