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Cities on the Internet 2001: E-Government Applied

Executive Brief

A Study by
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Cities on the Internet 2001: E-Government Applied Executive Brief

Overview

U.S. cities are making strides to move information online yet are ill-prepared to deal with the organizational challenges and complexities of e-government operations, according to one of the most comprehensive nationwide studies of e-government at the local level. Making government more responsive and efficient is clearly a daunting task, even for the most well resourced and tech-savvy municipalities. Nevertheless, the Internet offers the potential to fundamentally transform how governments interact with citizens, businesses and the community at large.

The study conducted by Civic Resource Group systematically evaluated the Web sites of all cities in the United States with a population of over 100,000 and measured over 70 different variables ranging from information delivery, to technology, e-policies, and online services. The in-depth study was conducted to help cities make decisions about how to use the Internet to better serve stakeholders and to help technology and management companies assist cities in their efforts. The full report includes:

1. Use of the Web By All Cities
2. Best City Web Sites Overall
3. Best Practices By Features and User Benefits
4. Guidelines for Web-Strategy Development

Highlights

Information Delivery

- **Information is Static and Limited in Interactivity:** Most cities still view their Web site as an electronic brochure, filled with static information and basic listings. While almost two-thirds (64%) of cities provide email addresses for elected officials, only 5% include user-friendly response forms to encourage and facilitate interaction. Similarly, nearly all cities post the names of elected officials (97%) and departmental listings (92%), but only 11% of cities provide interactive features for public participation in various processes (e.g., planning processes, public hearings, online meetings).

- **Online Access to Democratic Decision Making Information Not Widespread:** Elected official meeting agendas and minutes are available online in some form at 79% and 57% of city sites respectively, leaving significant percentages (21% for agendas and 33% for meeting minutes) of cities that do NOT provide online access in any form to this most fundamental government information. Very small percentages of city sites are utilizing online video (5%) or audio (3%) for meetings of elected officials.

e-Policies

- **Privacy Policies are Few and Far Between:** Although privacy is a major issue for Internet users, only 8% of city sites include a privacy statement of any sort to allay the fears of users, and a large proportion (40%) of sites use "cookies" to identify repeat visitors without disclosing this fact to users. This disregard of the public's concern about privacy is surprising given the

extensive media coverage, political controversy and consumer advocacy occurring in the commercial arena.

- **Cities are Ignoring the Disabled Online:** Only 11 City sites (5%) note that they are accessible (accessibility declaration) for disabled users. Upon follow up testing, no city, including those that claim to be accessible, complied with current accessibility guidelines as set forth by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and the recently enacted federal guidelines. While most cities currently are not required to ensure accessible Web sites and online information, the trend in that direction is clear.

Service Delivery

- **Online Transactions are the Exception:** Sites where stakeholders can initiate city services are beginning to appear, but only a small fraction of cities are actually conducting transactions online. Paying parking tickets is the most widely deployed transactional application at 9% of cities.

- **Cities are Learning to Take a "Customer-Centric" Approach but are Slow to Adopt New Methods for Online Customer Service:** Cities are beginning to re-orient their sites, moving away from the traditional departmental focus. Almost a third (31%) of cities now provide an online service request feature of some form whereby users can directly request information and services without knowing what department or office provides the desired information or services. A small number of cities (9) have actually implemented some level of personalization at their sites, allowing users to specify preferences and content for return visits and electronic updates.

Technology

- **Industry Web Servers are Preferred to Open Source Solutions:** Approximately 30% of cities choose to use open source solutions for their Web servers over vendor-based offerings from companies such as Microsoft and Netscape.

- **Cities are Slow to Deploy Multimedia:** Online video and audio, perhaps the "sexiest" opportunities on the Internet, are currently implemented at only 10% and 6% of city sites, respectively.

E-Government Applied: Best in Category

The "Best of Category" Web sites are distinguished by strong stakeholder orientation and a high rate of inclusion of predetermined information and service features. Usability criteria and Web mechanics also figured in the process, but subjective design and aesthetic components were not considered. The distinctive elements of each of these city sites are referenced in the full report. Best city Web sites by population size category are reported in the table below.

Medium <250,000	Large >250,000 to <500,000	Very Large >500,000 to 1,000,000	Major Metro >1,000,000
Alexandria, VA	Honolulu, HI	Austin, TX	Chicago, IL
Scottsdale, AZ	Minneapolis, MN	San Jose, CA	New York, NY
Spokane, WA	Virginia Beach, VA	Seattle, WA	San Diego, CA

Conclusions

Based on the findings in *Cities on the Internet 2001: E-Government Applied*, Civic Resource Group suggests the following 10 guidelines to aid municipalities in developing effective Web strategies:

1. **Cities Must Develop a Framework for E-Government Planning – Web Strategies for Local Governments Should Encompass Seven Dimensions of Excellence:**

    a. Essentials (Usability and Design)
    b. Information Delivery
    c. Policies and Standards
    d. Technology
    e. Service Delivery
    f. Community Building/Civic Engagement
    g. Economic Development

    The full report provides examples of work in each of the dimensions.

2. **Design for Users – Who Ever Actually Went to a Government Web Site to Find a Description of a Particular Department?** All of the best city Web sites are "stakeholder-centric," oriented to the needs of users rather than by the hierarchical, departmental structure of city government. Avoid at all costs the following design "traps":

    a. The org chart trap: Web architecture reflects departments and bureaucratic structure of the organization
    b. The creative trap: High-end graphics, flash and multimedia lead design and development at the sake of information and usability
    c. The tech trap: Technology and interactive tools implemented for their own sake

3. **Speed Kills – Strategic Planning and Phased Implementation will Ensure Successful Web Strategies.** Cities are legitimately concerned about committing to potentially expensive or unproven technology, changing business processes and culture, and meeting the heightened expectations of citizens and businesses. While the impetus to move forward with e-government is compelling, cities can afford to move gradually, learn from the experience of other organizations, and wait out technology change and cost stabilization. Cities can and should conduct tests and demonstration projects, and they must build in evaluation and political buy-in processes.

4. **Communication, Education and Participation are Paramount – the Real Power of the Internet in Local Government Lies in Building Stakeholder (Citizens, Businesses, Other Governments) Relationships.** Creating online transactions and implementing technology – the science of e-government – is the easy part. The management of relationships, communications, civic engagement, new ways of doing business, transforming processes – the art – is the hard part. Cities have tended to focus on the Web site and technology itself; they need to learn from the private sector that information, usability, services, online programs, opportunities for engagement and participation, marketing and outreach are all more important in the long run.

5. **Centralize E-Government Responsibility and Decision-Making – Cities Must Act and Plan on an Enterprise Level.** One of the powers of the Internet is its ability to integrate and leverage information, programs and systems across organizations. This can only be planned

and managed from an enterprise perspective. When more than one department or functional group makes independent decisions about online strategies, inconsistency may result. Coordinated, interdepartmental cooperation and planning is critical for successful e-government implementation.

6. **Develop and Disclose E-Policies – Privacy, Accessibility, and Open Government are Among the Important Online Policy Issues that Cities Must Address.** A phenomenon of the Internet is that users tend to have a heightened sensitivity to issues such as privacy, accessibility, security, and access to public information. Government entities in particular have to deal with these sensitivities and the very real consequences that may arise from even a perceived breach. The use by a government agency of "cookies" without disclosure, for example, will definitely impact its ability to build trust with users. In addition, emerging policy requirements and standards at the Federal level will most certainly trickle down to the local level, and under any circumstances Web users will expect the same level of care from any and all governments.

7. **Leverage the Local – the Greatest Return on Investment (ROI) for Local Governments will be in Economic Development, Quality of Life Issues, and Civic Engagement.** Unlike most other levels of government, local governments directly impact the business environment and the quality of life within their borders. As businesses and individuals rely more and more on technology to exchange information, build relationships and conduct transactions, they will be more inclined to reside and work in areas where local governments embrace and foster the effective use of technology.

8. **Research Your "Market" – Cities Must Conduct Market Research and Outreach to Learn About "Customer" Needs and Expectations.** Opinion and attitudinal research must be conducted with behavioral pilot tests. Simply asking "customers" about their interests and needs tends to generate apathetic or misleading responses, while observed behavior suggests that, when given new tools, usage is quickly adapted. One of the real powers of the Internet is the ability to reach numerous points of contact electronically, each of which in turn can disseminate information to other points of contact in whatever form is most appropriate.

9. **Look Inside as Well as Outside – Cities Must Also Conduct Research with a Focus on Internal Stakeholders to Assess Needs and Capabilities, Identify Assets and Opportunities.** Strategic planning must include internal assessments of key human and information assets that can be leveraged to the Web, ideas and opportunities presented by line personnel and managers alike, and most important to gain the buy-in of key internal stakeholders.

10. **Budget*ing* is More Important than Big Budgets – Cities Must Plan Budgets for Web Operations and Development.** "Free" online applications and Web presences can be more damaging than helpful, and one-shot budgets for Web projects will ultimately lead to unsustainable e-government efforts. However, costly technology and large-scale systems integration are not always the best or the most appropriate solutions for cities. In a very short time the costs of technology and implementation have decreased precipitously, even as the versatility and functionality of Web-based applications and technology have increased. Cities that plan and budget strategically can do more with whatever budgets are available.