

Establishing Transparency in Government with Drupal



Company Summary

- Organization: New York Senate
- Industry: Government
- Type of Drupal Site: Communications/Reference
- Acquia Services Used: Consulting, Hosting, Support, Remote Administration

How Open Source Social Publishing Has Transformed The New York Senate

In 1777, the New York State Senate consisted of 24 members under the State's first Constitution. Today the State Senate has 62 members who are tasked with crafting the legislation and policies that shape the State of New York.

The Changing Face of the New York Senate

2009 represented a dramatic shift in the make-up of the New York State Senate. Voters cast their ballots for change, ending a long period of incumbent government. Some of the motivation for change was due to a perception that the Senate lacked the transparency and accountability, and accusations of corruption. With the challenging party winning in large numbers, an opportunity was created to improve the Senate's relationship with its constituents. Some of the most fundamental improvements to the Senate's transparency and accessibility have happened by way of its online presence.

One of the logistical challenges created by a shift in party majority is change management. In addition to the turnover of elected officials, a substantial workforce of over 1,300 employees also changed. Not surprisingly, this change put the new majority party in a jump-start mode. The Senate was put in the difficult position of having to work quickly to minimize interruptions to government continuity, while not hastily jeopardizing existing institutions. The Senate web site – both highly flawed and highly visible – typified these challenges.

Evaluating the Incumbent Senate's Online Tools

The previous incarnation of the Senate's site was a series of static "brochure-ware" pages coded without a true Content Management System (CMS). A link to a streaming broadcast of Senate proceedings was the extent of dynamic media. Because of its static nature and limited substance, the site was of little value to the citizens of the state. There was no content available about legislative committees or ongoing legislative activity.

Challenges

- Static legacy site, with negative public perception
- Short time to launch
- Extreme pressure to execute without error

Individual senators had their own websites, which were not associated with the main Senate website. It was clear that senators from the outgoing majority party had previously enjoyed official pages with functionality superior to counterpart pages for the outgoing minority party, and often the official Senate site itself. Unfortunately, there were no clear standards governing how senators' websites could and could not be used, which resulted in a blurring of government and politics.

In many ways, the problems with the incumbent-managed web site plan mirrored overall complaints about the Senate itself. Communication was sparse, one-way, and inaccessible to many constituents. Having won the majority, the new party made revising the entire online strategy a key initiative.

Advisors to the Sunlight Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to creating transparency in government, worked with technology consultants to review the existing site and propose a plan of action. Their determination was to replace the static site with a platform that could drive bi-directional communication. Specifically, they recognized the need for an interface that would let non-technical users contribute content, including the Senate, staff, and the electorate as registered members. In this way, the Senate could improve transparency through real-time documentation of committee activities, and voters could submit questions and provide feedback on issues. To provide this Web 2.0 level of interactivity, the Senate was encouraged by these advisors to use Drupal, the Open Source social publishing platform. Furthermore, it was strongly advised that the Senate obtain technical talent experienced with Drupal, and to recruit a CIO who could deliver a swift, effective implementation.

The Move to Drupal

Andrew Hoppin was hired as the CIO responsible for overseeing the transition. To ensure a rapid, successful launch, the first thing he did was put the brakes on. "As I came in, I saw there was somewhat of a mad scramble to get the new site up. Page mock-ups were already being scripted – there was too much action without enough planning. My concern, which was shared and supported by the Senate, was that a failed attempt would be worse than doing nothing at all. There were actual political ramifications tied to the success of the relaunch." Andrew took the Drupal planning back to drawing board – including policy development.

The New Site Demands New Policies

Part of the extensive planning went beyond the domain of technical expertise, including drafting new policies and practices. Because the new site was going to introduce so much new functionality, there were risks associated with how information was going to be shared. One of the first decisions to be made was how to treat the intellectual property rights of content published to the site. Hoppin successfully argued the case to use Creative Commons licensing to keep all content open and free. This was part of a larger commitment to remove confidentiality and ownership from any and all content posted on the New York Senate site.

Another area of concern was the code of conduct regarding how senators used respective content areas dedicated specifically for them. Under the old paradigm, senators had their own sites hosted externally, where they enjoyed full license to post whatever content suited their interests. The new site strategy called for bringing the senators' sites into the Drupal fold, where they could be more fully integrated with the website of the institution, and centrally supported (via Drupal's Views module). Hoppin and the Senate crafted policies and technology that ensured senators would use their respective microsites for appropriate government purposes, and not for inappropriate campaign purposes such as making requests for campaign contributions.

The policy development is ongoing in areas such as exploring how to authenticate legally registered voters, as the site continues to grow in functionality, particularly in areas where constituents can vote and debate on issues.

The rigorous dedication to solving these challenges was worth the effort, according to Hoppin. "We are currently regarded as having one of the best legislative sites in the country. Our policies and even our software code are now being used by other government entities looking to match our success. I often receive requests to share policy information and lessons learned, which I gladly provide."

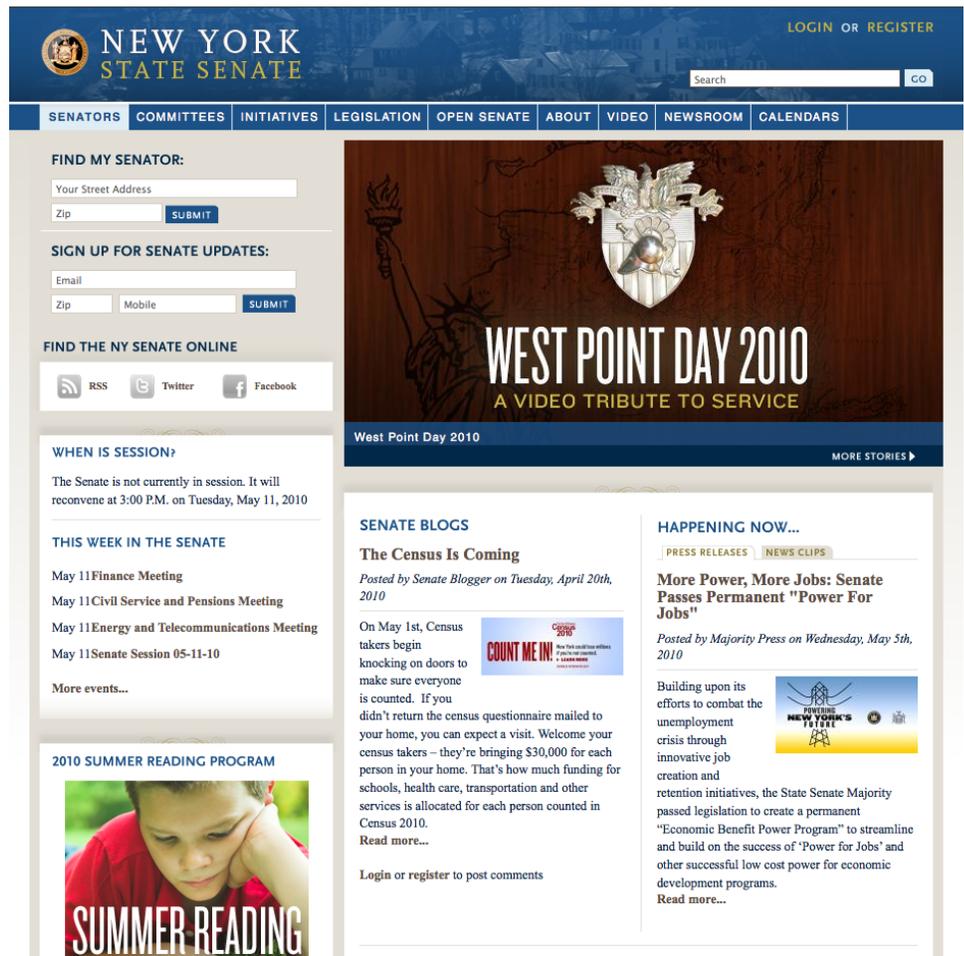
Launching the New Site

A 3rd party development and design shop created the look and feel for the new site, and worked with Hoppin and the Senate to establish a compatible set of user groups. With senators, staff, and constituents all contributing content, the site required a myriad of user types with unique complex permissions. A plan for identifying and tagging content was executed, enabling users to see and access related content from committees, senators, bills, etc. "With a government site, a lot of the time voters 'don't know what they don't know'. Powerful search tools are good, and we have placed emphasis on search, but if we can effectively populate and present related information in context, without the need to search for it, it's going to more effectively serve the public."

The Drupal Views module is used extensively to deliver senator-specific and committee-specific microsite content. In total, NYSenate.gov uses over 20 custom modules, and more than 100 contributed modules. Actively engaged in the Drupal developer community, the Senate web team has submitted custom modules of its own to Drupal.org (<http://drupal.org/project/nyss>).

Benefits

- Lack of licensing costs reflect fiscal responsibility
- Ability to keep pace with online trends
- Offers public transparency and accessibility
- Easier to manage and monitor individual senator online practice



The screenshot shows the New York State Senate website. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for SENATORS, COMMITTEES, INITIATIVES, LEGISLATION, OPEN SENATE, ABOUT, VIDEO, NEWSROOM, and CALENDARS. A search bar is located in the top right corner. Below the navigation, there are sections for finding a senator, signing up for updates, and finding the NY Senate online. The main content area features a large banner for 'WEST POINT DAY 2010' and a sidebar with 'SENATE BLOGS' and 'HAPPENING NOW...' sections.

The New York Senate's Drupal-Powered Main Site

Engaging Acquia

The Senate had concerns about Open Source that are common in the public sector; they were worried about the reliability and availability of support. In order to maximize reliability of the website, and to more fully leverage the benefits of participating in the Drupal community, Hoppin followed the example of leading federal government entities that used Drupal in mission critical situations; he turned to Acquia.

Acquia provides commercial support for Open Source Drupal; specifically Acquia provides consulting, hosting, technical support and remote administration. The result of an unlimited community of developers, Open Source platforms provide an unequalled pace of innovation. The absence of licensing costs also provide Open Source users with cost savings and the flexibility to invest creatively. One of the traditional challenge areas surrounding Open Source has been support. Companies like Acquia are focused on removing that obstacle for companies who are serious about harnessing the benefits of Drupal.

Living with the Benefits of Drupal

The NYSenate.gov site is dramatically different from its predecessor. Content is well organized, highly visible, and exhaustive. Where the previous Senate Majority didn't actively invite broad citizen participation, the current Senate Majority has made a commitment to reaching out to voters, and the Drupal-powered website is an example of that. All of the Senate's ongoing activities and committees are well documented, and all Senate administrative and legislative data is published and easy to search upon. Users can provide input and feedback, as well as contact senators from their respective districts.

One of the best measurements of the impact of the new Drupal site was a recent debate over marriage equality legislation. Both New York and New Jersey were debating the contentious issue during a similar time period. The New York Senate streamed the event live, with senators' speeches embedded and available for download and public comment. Over fifteen thousand voters watched the debate live online, and one senator's rousing speech was viewed online hundreds of thousands of times. As a result, the issue gained a very high profile in regional and national media. Several weeks later, the same debate was fought in New Jersey. Without the social publishing tools at their disposal, the debate came and went with much less public attention and awareness.

Live events have become a highly active and visible part of the legislative process. With streaming and archived footage, online town halls, mailing list sign ups, and the ability to republish content through social networks – the New York Senate's online presence is now visible and highly interactive.

Looking Forward

The web team at NYSenate.gov is continuing to explore and introduce online innovations. Thanks to the modular architecture of Drupal and the prolific community of developers, new features are continually being created and refined. A crowdsourcing strategy is currently being pursued, with the Senate recognizing that oftentimes the best ideas come from the constituents themselves.



Hoppin is keenly aware of the role of Drupal in the technology landscape, and how well aligned it is with current Senate needs. "As an Open Source platform, Drupal suits us in a number of ways," says Hoppin. "Drupal is the result of a passionate community, which I believe is aligned with how our senators view their work with their constituents. With no licensing costs, we feel that we are being responsible with limited taxpayer resources. Drupal is also a work in progress – much like work in the Senate. As we tackle new challenges and issues, we're confident that new features will be available. We're indebted to Drupal.org and all of the members contributing to the Drupal community-- so much so that we are contributing our own patch fixes and modules, so that others may benefit from the investment we have made. It's very satisfying to be able to give back to a platform that is serving us so well."

About Drupal

Acquia helps organizations of all sizes build social publishing websites quickly, easily and with a lower total cost of ownership by leveraging Drupal, the open source social publishing platform that blends content and community. Our products, services and support enable companies to leverage the power, technical innovation and economic value of Drupal while simplifying the experience, removing the complexity and minimizing the risk. Please visit: <http://acquia.com>. Download Acquia Drupal, the completely free Drupal distribution, at <http://acquia.com/downloads>.

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