The Future of .gov

Bringing State and Local Digital Services into the 21st Century

"We are addicted to innovation in our city," declared Louisville mayor Greg Fischer at the 2013 Code for America Summit, "and it's part of our DNA from the mayor's office to police officers to the arts to manufacturing – everywhere we can, we innovate."[1] These aren't just words: upon being elected, Fischer mapped out a strategic plan for Louisville consisting of a range of priorities – one of which is to "improve citizen interaction and transparency by continually expanding our digital offerings and presence as well as increasing transparency, availability and usability of information and data."[2] In keeping with this aim, Louisville has embarked on a comprehensive overhaul of its official website in an effort to enhance accessibility and openness, and while the newly launched LouisvilleKY.gov is still a work in progress, the latest version offers hundreds of previously unavailable services and datasets, drawing more than 225,000 visitors each month.[3] "We're real proud of that," says Louisville Chief Information Officer (CIO) Jason Ballard. "I think we're on a good path."[4]

Louisville's new website is just one result of the public sector's push toward implementing and streamlining digital services, and state and local governments across the country are engaging in their own quests for an improved online experience. However, confronted with cultural inertia, governments face significant challenges in creating citizen-centric websites – ones that can only be overcome if they successfully harness the power of open collaboration in their path toward the future of .gov.

Citizen-Centric Websites

So what exactly will this digital future look like?

According to Ballard, the primary consideration of website designers should be user experience. While navigating state and local websites often requires extensive understanding of the structure of government bureaucracy, the new Louisville website is instead oriented around citizen needs – the clutter of the original site has been replaced with advanced search capabilities, clearly laid out services and information, and other streamlined features.[5] And Louisville's digital team isn't the only one operating under this citizen-centric philosophy: New York state, among others, has also upgraded its online services to be more responsive and dynamic. Its new site features a newly-added local section that allows visitors to search for services and attractions based on their specific location – an example of user customization that will define the next generation of digital services.[6] Other state and municipalities are also embracing the potential benefits of a personalized web experience – the recently relaunched Utah.gov, for instance, geolocates visitors and then provides them with information on local services, job listings, community activities, elected representatives, and other geotagged search terms.[7]

Approaching Digital Enhancement

Of course, conceptualizing a better online experience is only the first step; coming up with a concrete process for achieving that future is where the work actually begins. Traditionally, governments have taken an inside-out approach to digital transformation, where administrators structure websites around the needs of government. However, in order to create user-friendly services, digital teams need to opt instead for an outside-in framework: the newest iteration of NY.gov is

the product of various IT departments, public information officers, media members, vendors, citizens, and other disparate entities coming together to achieve a single, coordinated vision oriented around the citizen experience. Rather than working within non-collaborative silos, governments should strive to build a culture of openness: communicating ideas, ensuring that every team member contributes, and, above all, involving citizens in the process.[8]

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Jason Ballard, Louisville Chief Information Officer

These principles are already being implemented on the ground – Boston provided progress updates and solicited public feedback throughout its web redesign process[9], San Angelo promoted the launch of its new website with an extensive social media campaign[10], and Santa Clara held in-person community sessions to familiarize citizens with its redesigned website.[11] According to Ballard, fostering public engagement is critical for the successful delivery of digital services: "A website is kind of the image of the city; it's a portal for everyday citizen events, how to conduct business, what's going on with the mayor, and traffic updates. You always need to have the everyday citizen there at table and be collaborating with different groups like those in economic development that can give you a lot of good input."[12]

Rewiring .gov

The digital revolution has fundamentally changed the way we interact with one another, and in order to keep pace with citizen demands, it is essential that state and local governments maintain a powerful online presence capable of delivering relevant, personalized information and services. And, observes CIO Jason Ballard, the process of reshaping these digital channels, of opening government to public participation, of nurturing a culture of transparency and collaboration, is incredibly rewarding in itself: "It's really wonderful to see how these types of things bring the city together, get people talking in the community, let the citizens in the community be part of the solution to solve these problems…. When a community comes together...that's when the magic happens."[13]

Sources

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