Payette National Forest Case Study

Customer Experience: A Look at Public Engagement with the National Forests

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Project Overview

Background

The Customer Experience (CX) Center of Excellence (CoE), under the direction of the General Services Administration (GSA) Center of Excellence Program and the White House Office of American Innovation, is a resource available to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to help strengthen customer experience by providing access to qualified subject matter experts in Human-Centered Design (HCD). HCD is a method of creating solutions that focus on the context, behaviors, needs, and emotions of the people who the solutions will serve. HCD research methods complement scientific research methods through a focus on empathy, a deep understanding of customer experiences through conversations with customers, and observations allowing for a human-centric understanding of public engagement. Mr. Gary Washington, USDA's Chief Information Officer, is the CoE's Executive Sponsor.

Project Overview

Government regulations require that the Forest Service not only draws upon the best available science when making decisions regarding the care of public land, but also requires that the Forest Service notifies the public who will be impacted by the proposed actions. However, at the same time that they're required to engage the public, each National Forest is left to determine the details of *how and when* it's going to engage the public. The consequences of not properly engaging the public have proven to be far-reaching, from citizens objecting to decisions and delaying project implementation, to organizations suing National Forests for disregarding their concerns.

The goal of this 4-month engagement was to complement the Forest Service's ongoing efforts to improve environmental analysis and decision-making processes (EADM), with a focus on strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of how the public is engaged in these processes. In partnership with the USDA Forest Service Washington Office Ecosystem Management Coordination (EMC), the CX CoE used HCD research strategies in National Forests and Grasslands across the country to observe how the U.S. public engages with the Forest Service. The research team interviewed a broad range of customers (i.e.,: local residents, National Forest visitors, Forest Service staff, county officials), and proposed new ways of engaging with the public.

Originally, the team hoped to examine public engagement practices of multiple National Forests with different characteristics to identify scalable solutions that could be useful to all Forests. However, the scope of the research visits was scaled back, so the findings presented in this report were derived from (1) a case study conducted at Payette National Forest and (2) a social listening analysis that examined the Forest Service's presence on social media. Chapter 2 details the Payette National Forest Case

Study methodology and findings, while Chapter 3 focuses on Social Listening methodology and findings. The opportunity areas, detailed in Chapter 4, are based on findings from both efforts.

Chapter 2: Payette National Forest Case Study

Case Study and Participant Selection

Case Selection

To select a case study site, the CX CoE team created a National Forest Selection Matrix (shown in Figure 1) that included size of the Forest, types of public engagement, regional location, status of Forest projects, and Forest project focus areas. After taking advantage of existing relationships and consulting with the Forest Service Washington, DC Office and Director of Planning and Financial Resources at U.S. Forest Service Region 4, we identified Payette National Forest as a Forest with top-tier public engagement strategies and an actively engaged Forest Supervisor, making it an ideal candidate for this case study.

Selection Criteria	Forest 1: Payette	Forest 2 (proposed)*	Forest 3 (proposed)*
Region/Area	Region 4	Region 8 or 9 (Eastern)	Region 3 or 5 (Southwest)
Size (acres)	2.3 million	~ 1 million	< 1 million
Public Engagement Methods	Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP)	Primarily informal networks established by Rangers	Multiple non-CFLRP collaborative groups
Urban/Rural	Rural	Urban	Rural/Urban

Figure 1: National Forest Selection Matrix (note that, because Forests 2 and 3 were never officially selected, these criteria are meant to represent possible diversification factors and characteristics)

The Payette National Forest's public engagement strategies focus heavily on its partnership with the Payette Forest Coalition (PFC), a group comprising civilians, members of community-based organizations, and interested business owners. Forest Service employees collaborate with the PFC to get input on Forest planning and Forest-level decisions. While the Forest Service ultimately has the decision-making authority, the PFC plays a large role in public engagement. Since 2009, the Payette Forest and PFC have participated together in the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

Participant Selection

All individuals who participated in this study did so voluntarily and fall into one of three categories:

1. Forest Service Staff who self-selected based on their background or involvement in public engagement
2. Community leaders within the Payette Forest Coalition and other community-based organizations who were recommended by the Payette National Forest Service Staff
3. Community members found in settings with a high concentration of potentially interested parties and who were randomly selected by research team members. Locations included grocery stores and local businesses in McCall, Idaho, the town where Payette National Forest is headquartered.

Throughout the course of this effort, the team:

- Conducted 13 pre-visit calls to introduce the project to Forest stakeholders and build rapport
- Conducted 18 on-site interviews, including two group interview sessions
- Distributed surveys and conducted short, adhoc interviews with seven members of the public
- Distributed surveys to eight Payette Forest Coalition members and Forest Service staff
- Observed 8 hours of meetings, including the Payette Forest Coalition meeting, the Land Allocation Committee meeting, and the Payette Forest Service Staff meeting

Interview Participants
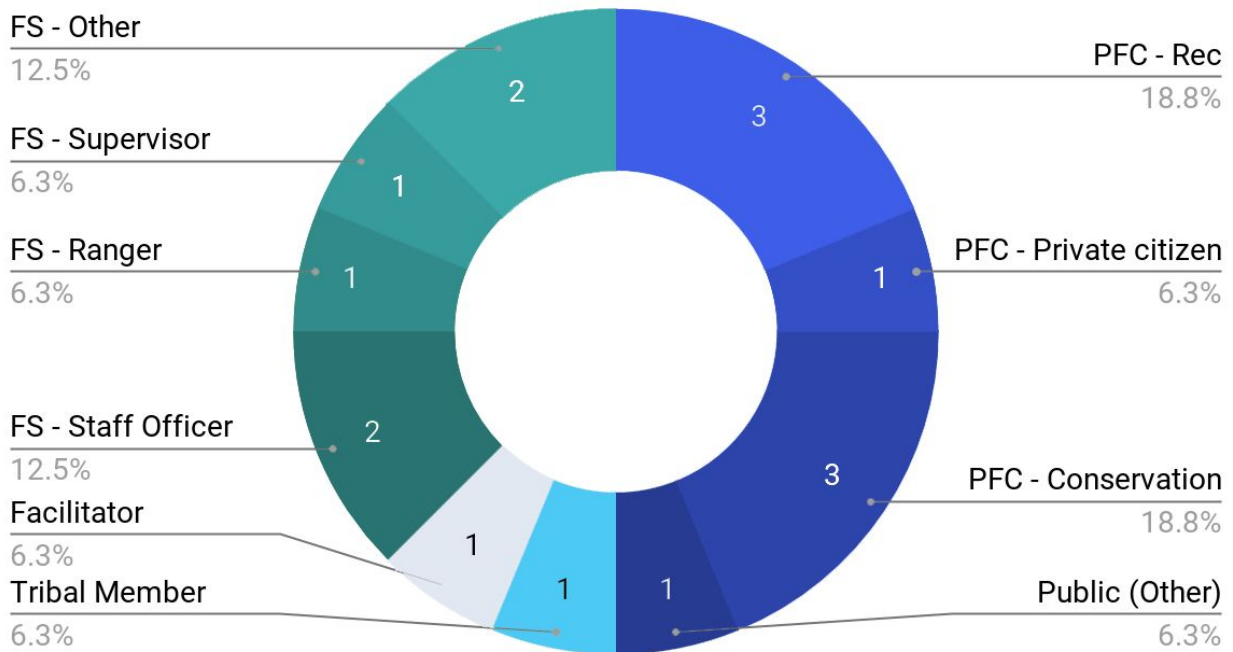
Figure 2: Breakdown of Interview Participants by Group and Role

Research Methods
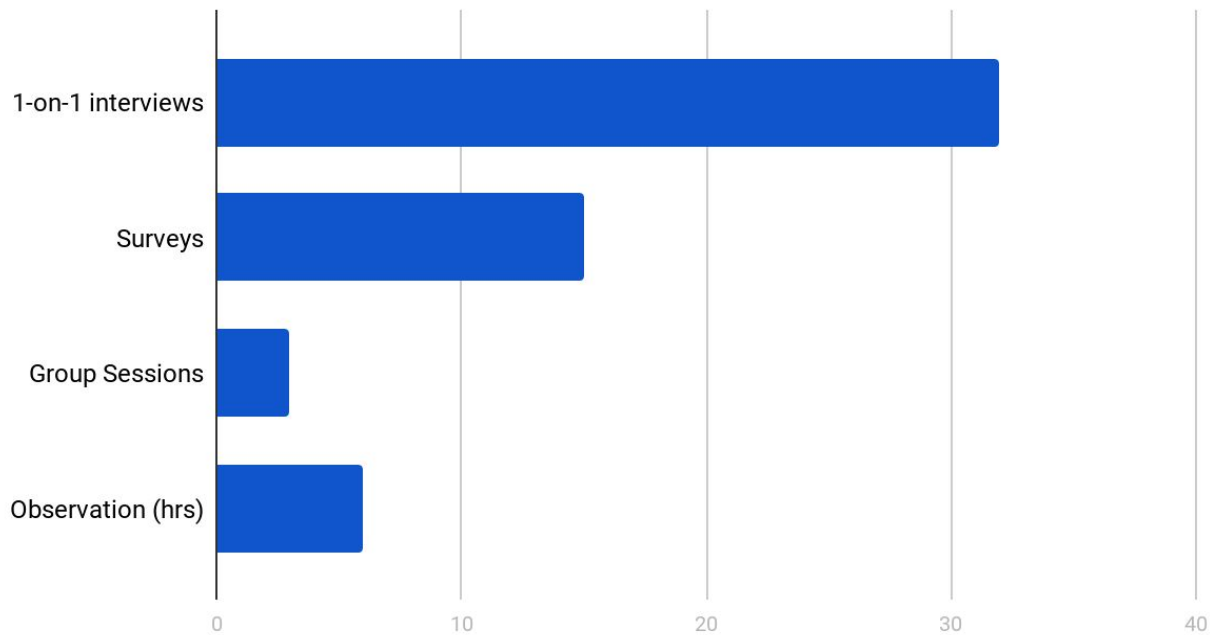
Figure 3: Research Methods

Methodology

The research team used Human-Centered Design methodologies—including one-on-one interviews, group sessions, observations, and surveys—to gain insight into the needs, motivations, and frustrations of a variety of users as they engaged with decision-making processes on the National Forest. As a whole, this effort aimed to answer the research question: How can public engagement in environmental analysis and decision-making processes be improved in the management of National Forests and Grasslands?

Data Analysis

During its field research, the team gathered 231 qualitative data points (direct quotes and observed behaviors). We then synthesized the data points by clustering similar items into affinity groups, combining groups with similar messages into themes, and refining those themes into insights. Each insight describes attitudes and behaviors of Forest Service Staff, PFC members, and public citizens which are surprising or unexpected. We used the insights to inform the opportunity areas, which are broad solution areas the Forest Service can explore to pinpoint specific ideas for improving people's experiences with the EADM process. The process of moving from data to insights and solutions is shown in Figure 4:

231 Data Points
direct observations and quotes

21 Themes
patterns in human behavior

6 Insights
learnings about patterns of behavior that are surprising or unexpected

3 Opportunity Areas
spaces to explore solution ideas
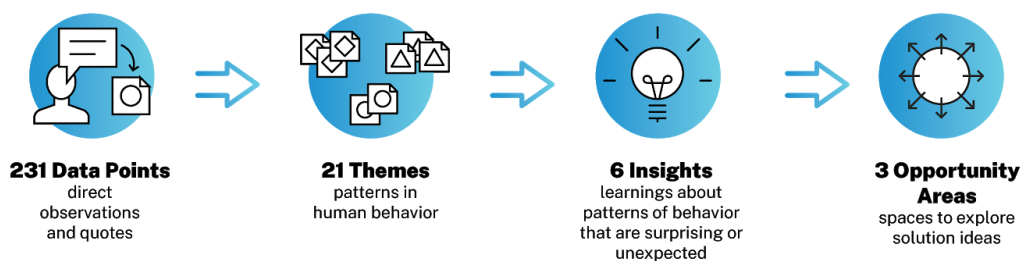
Figure 4: Synthesis Process

Findings

The following Insights capture learnings about patterns of behavior that the team found remarkable.

Insight 1: Too Small to Matter, Too Large to Grasp

Interviewees said that people are more likely to become engaged in decision making when they recognize that they have a personal or professional stake in the proposed project. Interviewees also said that successful decision making occurs when engaged individuals are able to see Forest dependencies beyond their own personal motivations, and are able to compromise with group members who hold other viewpoints. Unfortunately, most Payette National Forest projects are either too large for the public to fully understand and care about, or too small to be noteworthy.

[Supporting Themes:](#)
- Compromising Leads to Progress
- Finding a Reason to Care
- Zooming Out

What We Heard from the Public

"Well, what if there were a project that stayed out of these big massive clear cuts, but maybe restored this patch of stream and maybe thinned out these medium size trees?" And that's where we developed

the zone of agreement here. But it's not really worth my time if it's just 1,000 acres. Make it big enough to address, and appropriate scale so it's meaningful from fish perspective, or elk perspective, or a business perspective at the mill. And so by scaling up that works. We're not gonna agree on these other issues, so that was really important to find out what's the perceived problem. Are they related? Is there an overlap? And also who's not at the table?"

What We Heard from the Forest Service

[On how to keep people engaged] "It really has to fit their cause... There are groups that drop off and come back, and if we don't do anything that affects them, then people will 'leave the table'."

Insight 2: Public Engagement: One More Thing to Do

Forest Service staff fully acknowledge the limits of traditional methods of public engagement—like open houses and NEPA form letters—in obtaining public input, and the success of higher-effort methods like collaboratives, which are groups comprised of Forest Service professionals, community leaders, academics, and public citizens working together to help National Forests and their stakeholders make sound Forest planning decisions, in addition to informal networks, and partnership programs. However, the lack of staff, resources, and organizational priority given to public engagement activities discourages staff from investing time in these more effective but higher effort methods. In addition, because a majority of public relations work happens through informal, organic networking by Forest Service staff, it is difficult for the Forest Service to seamlessly maintain those networks when staffers move on or change roles.

Supporting Themes:
- Establishing Allies
- Relying on Informal Networks
- Lacking Time, Staff, and Priority
- Losing Stability, Sacrificing Input

What We Heard from the Public

"I had people work for me in my timber shop that had spent 15, 20 years in one place. As soon as we started getting what I call 'the drifters in and the drifters out, climb into the next step on the ladder,' we started losing that really essential element that it takes to really make good decisions."

"I think the Payette Forest does about the best job of all of them in terms of the leadership being engaged. If you were to ask me what makes the coalition successful, it's that [the Forest Supervisor] and his rangers are at all the meetings."

"The organizations, if not the individuals, attending these collaboratives serve as an important conduit for information from our membership about the things we care about. And likewise to [explain things back]..."

What We Heard from the Forest Service

" … it's just difficult because people are drowning in work. The last thing they want to deal with is this. There's been comments like, 'Well that's what a partnership coordinator is for, I don't have time for this.'"

"I think we're getting a little bit better [at public engagement]. There's tools out there that we can use. [There's] always time pressure and money pressure and that plays into public engagement just like everything else."

"Having rangers involved for a long period of time [is important to the success of the Collaborative]. With new rangers it's been a little bit of an adjustment but I think me being here and having that history to provide the stability [helps].. I'm worried about a new staff officer coming in and how are they going to engage so I gotta coach them."

Insight 3: Communication Methods Miss the Mark

While Forest Service staff complain that public input on projects is not always useful because it lacks specificity, the public complains that the information the Forest provides on projects is too hard to find and too complex to decipher. Further hampering the flow of information between the National Forest and the public is that most public citizens do not understand what NEPA is, let alone how to engage in the NEPA process.

Supporting Themes:
- Accessing Information
- Reducing the Complexity of Explanations
- Knowing How to NEPA

What We Heard from the Public

"In Oregon, there's often where they don't understand the process, they're very angry […] They don't understand by law that [the Forest Service] is required to do [an environmental analysis] so they think they're trying to shove more wilderness down and it makes them angry. I once took a retired Forest Service person with me [to a meeting], and he explained NEPA and once they understood it was amazing, we had a very civilized meeting."

"At least 90% of the public has no idea how to get that information."

"Another comment was, 'Just use the authorities you have.' The supervisor was like, 'What authority do they think I have to just go cut trees without doing the proper NEPA?' I don't think the general public understands, and I don't think the Forest Service does a great job of explaining how the process works."

What We Heard from the Forest Service

"You've got people that got good ideas. They don't know how the process works... the people who are professional commentators know how the process works, but the people who are just the public in general that aren't out there to make a living off it don't know what the process is; they don't know

what's useful. At our public meetings, they'll say, 'This is what's useful.' They do try to give a little bit of direction, but you're only hitting the 20 people that show up at a really big meeting."

"In some cases, people just have a particular issue that they're passionate about and they use any venue to make their feelings heard on that issue. Another issue is they may just not understand very well the process and how their comments could be used."

Insight 4: Recognizing that Everyone Is An Expert of Sorts

While Forest leadership attest to the benefits of taking public input seriously and Payette Forest Coalition members express the motivating power of seeing their inputs result in action, there is still a culture among Forest Service employees that discounts public input in favor of technical expertise. This attitude towards public input becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when members of the public walk away from engagement opportunities feeling ignored, and consequently stop making the effort to provide input.

Supporting Themes:
- Opening Up to Other's Expertise
- Listening to the Public's Concerns
- Valuing Public Engagement
- Valuing Public Support
- Seeing that I Was Heard

What We Heard from the Public

"I get a feeling that a lot of things are not listened to."

"Why keep going if your input doesn't matter?"

"Sometimes [the Forest Service] does too good a job and we've anticipated everything and here's the perfect draft. Maybe they're right, maybe they're not. But there's something to be said about seeing a document or decision shift and improve and ideally whether we have a project that is half–ass and we have to do a lot of work to get it right. 85, 90, but it's not 100 percent. And then the members of the public can see that they made a difference, not just in the document but in the landscape."

What We Heard from the Forest Service

"I wish that everybody on all sides of the spectrum, including ourselves internally, could be more open-minded... but we all have our pasts that we drag along with ourselves and we're always trying to drag along the problems we had on the past to the current one."

"I kind of think in the Forest Service our technical specialists get a little too narrow–minded. The fisheries guy is like, 'Fish, nothing else.'"

"A lot of [the attitude towards public engagement] is personality–based. I think that runs up and down from the GS-5 to the GS-13. We may have some GS-13s that are like, 'This is what I wanna do and if I don't get it then I'm not gonna approve this project.'"

Insight 5: Diverse and Inclusive

All interview participants say that incorporating diverse viewpoints into decision-making processes results in a decision that is more durable, holistic, and implementable. At the same time, there is broad acknowledgement that current avenues for providing input and forums for decision-making favor only a small group of the population: those who have the time to donate and the technical expertise to provide. Furthermore, the Payette Forest Coalition meets for multiple hours during the typical workday hours.

Supporting Themes:
- Avenues for Participation
- Being Heard Requires Lots of Work
- Strengthening Decisions with Diversity

What We Heard from the Public

"[We've got to have] a diverse stakeholder base that's got conservation, timber, private citizens, grazers, everybody, to sign off on these projects and then they become more defensible if there is litigation, if you've got these diverse stakeholders supporting these projects."

"I think, overall, the courts recognize that decisions that have this kind of backing are good decisions. They're not viewing it like David and Goliath, like the little David out there trying to slay the Giant Forest Service. They're viewing it like, 'Wait a minute here, there's a lot of people of different interests and different backgrounds, opinions that are supporting this.' So I think it helps."

"As it relates to the PFC, we could have some evening meetings where locals could come. Same with the agency... having some sort of regularly scheduled public meeting projects on the table just to interface with public and let them feel like they have that avenue to contact those folks and get their ideas heard."

"That sounds bad but it can be pretty disruptive to bring a new person up to speed and it takes a long time to build that background. At the same time, you need to have people show up and talk."

What We Heard from the Forest Service

"I think [having a Collaborative] does help decisions. It gains some social buy-off from a wider group of people and it does cut down on some of the chances of objections and lawsuits, but it doesn't eliminate it."

"On these big projects, we have an open house. Using project websites and if we can talk to the people it helps, but if they don't reach out, we're trying our old tried-and-true methods and they hit some of the people and not all of the people."

"[I wish there were] Forest Service staff at trailheads to greet and tell [people] about opportunities for engagement or fill out a survey on the spot."

"But that only hits on a portion of the public: the people who are interested and engaged and have the time and proximity to be involved. So the rest of the public has to read through a document and call the Forest."

Insight 6: Tools for Successful Engagement

One of the largest barriers to public engagement is an absence of effective tools and techniques for the Forest Service to communicate decisions, information, and discussions. Existing tools (such as National Forest websites, mailing lists, and discussion facilitators) are inconsistently used, and furthermore, most Forest Service staff lack the necessary skills and techniques to translate complex, lengthy project documents into public-friendly formats. While inefficient tools can delay or even block access to information, ineffective communication techniques can stifle public understanding and interest. Both effectively negate public engagement.

Supporting Themes:
- Old Tools? New Tools? What Tools?
- Communicating the Why
- Website Woes

What We Heard from the Public

"When I talk about [decisions], I try to tell the story. We started putting fires out, to stand replacing, to boil that down into talking… layman's terms. I like people to see what the overarching goal is."

"So the problem is that they'll [the public] say… what does this mean anyway? And I'll try to explain to them that it's just another term they invented to deal with something." (a former Forest Service member and current Payette Forest Coalition member employee speaking about his interactions with members of the public)

What We Heard from the Forest Service

"We get a lot of negative feedback from the public—"What's up with your site?"—because it's not what the public expects."

"We absolutely need better websites and we need the ability to keep that information alive and fresh and current. It's the wave of the future, it's the wave of today. We can't even give people the information that they need, let alone projects or collaboratives."

"Doing a better job of telling why in a shorter format. We could really narrow it down if we could do a YouTube video… provide some visuals. […]If we could do a better job of showing, here's what it was before, here's what it is now. Or what we think it's gonna look like or use some 'before and after.' Doesn't look that bad. Using technology a little better to portray it."

Chapter 3: Forest Service Social Listening

To augment this case study, the group conducted a social listening analysis of the Forest Service. Using the Meltwater Social software, the research team analyzed conversations on social media platforms to see how information from the Forest Service was being communicated to the public. The resulting findings give a more nuanced insight into the complexities of Forest-to-Public communication, and considerations for the Forest Service as they integrate their social media and public engagement strategies.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The team used the digital listening tool Meltwater Social (formerly Sysomos) to monitor specific mentions of the Forest Service and related topics of interest. In doing so, we uncovered insights about Forest Service-related digital conversations among individual users (including customers and political figures) and organizations (like the Forest Service itself, nonprofits, and others).

Using the tool, the team looked at the 6-month period spanning September 1, 2018–February 28, 2019, finding over 310,000 direct mentions of the Forest Service in the digital space, with 213,400 coming from social media. Looking at trends, sentiment, influences, volume, and engagement, we were able to identify where the top digital conversations were occurring, the most appropriate places to join future conversations, and trends across media that can inform communications strategies targeted at customers of National Forests.
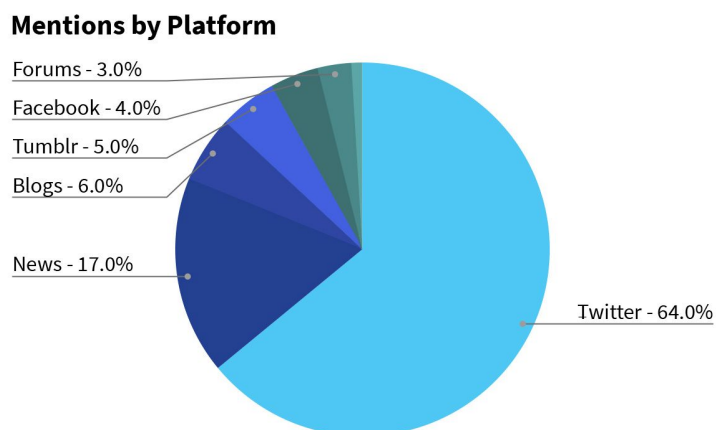
Findings and Considerations

Mentions by Platform

Forums - 3.0%
Facebook - 4.0%
Tumblr - 5.0%
Blogs - 6.0%
News - 17.0%
Twitter - 64.0%

Figure 5: Mentions by Platform

Twitter Is the Farthest Reaching Social Media Tool

Twitter is the largest platform for the Forest Service, generating 64% (~100.2K) of Forest Service digital mentions over the last 6 months. 97% of the 397,500 individuals who follow the Forest Service (including regional affiliates) do so via Twitter.

Conversations Are Event-Based and Propelled by Reposts

Most social media mentions of the Forest Service are in response to posts by political figures or large news outlets talking about the Forest Service. As seen in Figure 6, a spike in mentions on Twitter stemmed from a CNN tweet crediting the Forest Service for a video of a gender reveal party that sparked a wildfire. Another spike in mentions followed California Senator Kamala Harris's tweet on December 10th which detailed the workers who would be affected by a government shutdown. On Twitter, which accounted for 57.9% of conversations mentioning the Forest Service, 69% of engagement came from people retweeting posts originally made by other accounts.
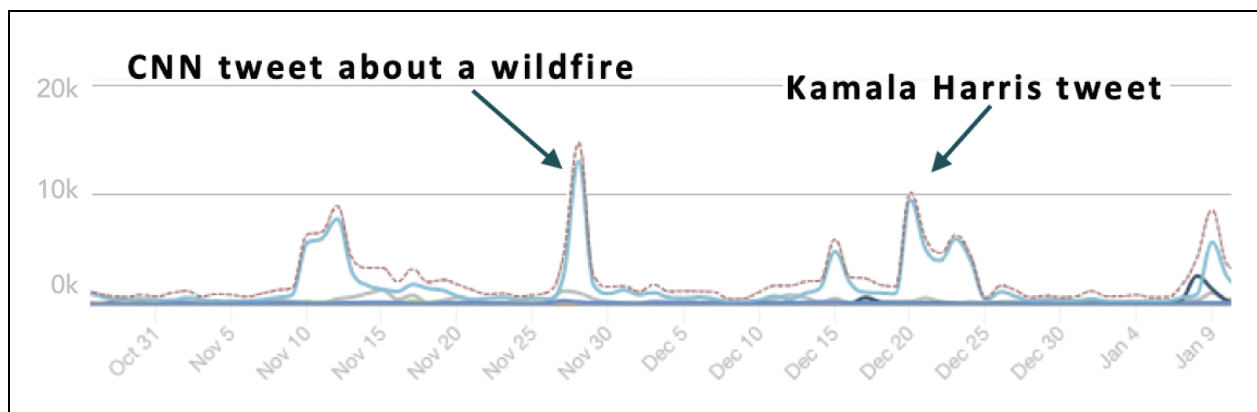

Figure 6: Twitter Mentions Over Time

Reactions to the Forest Service Brand Are Mixed

Overall, people who directly tagged the Forest Service in their posts (i.e., @ForestService, @PayetteNF) tended to speak positively about the Forest Service. Positive comments were primarily in response to news stories, especially wildlife assistance commentary. Negative comments came from users who did not agree with Forest Service decisions. Interestingly, posts that didn't directly tag the @ForestService account were slightly more negative than posts that did. One possible explanation for this is that users who connect news directly back to the Forest Service brand feel more positive about policy decisions or news stories. This finding contradicts the opinion voiced by many on the PFC that any information coming directly from the Forest Service—including press releases or videos with the Forest Service brand "can just immediately can turn people off from the left or the right" (Community member).

The Public Complains About Information Quality Only When it Impacts Them Directly

Despite overwhelming comments from case study participants about the inaccessibility of Forest information, users rarely shared measurable sentiment (either compliments or complaints) about the Forest Service information they received from social media. More often, they would reference information they got from other sources (like press releases). While not a strong trend, a few users did

comment on information they received on social media when it seemed to have a direct impact on them, the best example being the Facebook conversations surrounding the shutdown of Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness permits due to technical errors with the reservation system.

Social Media Is Most Often Used to Ask Questions and Share Opinions

When we examined conversations on Forest Service-owned social media sites (i.e., Forest Facebook pages, Forest Instagram accounts), we saw that most commentary on Forest Service posts consisted of users asking questions and sharing their own opinions of the Forest Service. Questions were most common on Facebook, while sharing sentiment was more common on Instagram and Twitter. We also found that users often ask questions in comments that are unrelated to posts, which supports what we heard during the case study; namely, that "People just have a particular issue that they're passionate about and they use any venue to make their feelings heard on that issue" (Community member).

The Forest Service Rarely Engages Directly with Users or Responds to Their Concerns

Users who inquire about specific National Forests and Grasslands do not receive answers from the Forest Service on social platforms. Somewhat perversely, the Forest Service does set the expectation that it will not answer user questions by simply not engaging with **any** users. On a small scale, the Forest Service will sometimes react to conversations by liking a comment, but will otherwise not not respond to or engage with the users. Because the Forest Service is not a part of the conversation, user questions are answered by other users, who may not be giving the correct information.

Chapter 4: Opportunity Areas

Opportunity areas are informed by insights and describe spaces for exploring ideas to improve public engagement practices.

Choosing and Designing Projects for Public Input

The Forest Service's current method for project planning, selection, and communication bars the public from effectively delivering meaningful input. Members of the public expressed frustration with projects that have such a broad scope that they are difficult to make any one decision on, as well as projects with too narrow of a scope to attract diverse input. Projects that are ideal candidates for public input are those that can provide value to a diverse set of stakeholders; are large enough to bring all of those stakeholders to the table; and can pinpoint key areas of influence that will bring scope and meaning to all stakeholders.

Equipping Staff with Tools for Public Engagement

The public wants to know what is happening on their National Forest, but feels that unless they hunt down the information and spend time decoding it, they will never have more than a general idea of what's happening in their Forest. Similarly, the Forest Service wants to tell the public what's happening, but struggles to summarize complex decisions in a user-friendly way that inspires actions. Forest Service staff feel ill-equipped to continuously defend their decisions, despite their expertise in sound land management practices—after all, staff are generally hired for their technical expertise, not their communication skills. Forest Service could promote effective communications by raising awareness of (1) the existing suite of public outreach tools (i.e., GovDelivery, PALS), (2) public outreach trainings (i.e., Leaders as Conveners), and (3) methods proven successful by other Forests (i.e., explanatory videos).

Promoting Public Engagement as a Core Value

The national-level Forest Service places an emphasis on public engagement, and staff consistently noted that public engagement lies at the heart of good decision-making. However, Forest Service field staff point to a lack of time and resources (including frameworks, templates, and trainings) as reasons they de-prioritize public engagement. Moreover, when they do organize public-facing events, Forest staff too often schedule those events at times (during the standard 9–5 workday) and places (near the Forest) that are convenient to the staffer, but inconvenient to the public. The result is a low and demoralizing attendance rate. The Forest Service has an opportunity to more formally integrate public outreach activities into employee responsibilities, and in the meantime, recognize employees who are going above and beyond their duties by engaging with the public.

Leveraging Social Media (Specifically Twitter) to Track Public Perception

Twitter is the top platform (by far) for social media mentions of the Forest Service. Twitter is the fastest and easiest platform where Forest Service could join the digital conversation, mitigate misinformation, and disseminate correct information.

Ideally, the Forest Service would develop an official presence on Twitter and engage in conversations there, though at a minimum, it should use social media listening tools to track top spikes in what users say on Twitter and other social media to identify issues that people are most passionate or confused about. By paying keen attention to what people are saying about the Forest (especially during crisis communications situations), the Forest Service can identify people's knowledge gaps and develop plans for responding to concerns. Joining conversations and responding with messaging from press releases and other official sources might help to spread the correct information among users.

Furthermore, the Forest Service could develop a better understanding on how to target communications to users by listening to social media not just for direct mentions of Forest Service account usernames, but also by monitoring for key terms and mentions related to key Forest Service topics.

Chapter 5: Website Prototype

One of our identified opportunity areas is "Equipping the Staff with Tools for Public Engagement." In the words of a Forest Service employee,"The biggest albatross is the Forest Service website. We try to dress it up, but I tell people, 'A pig is still a pig.'" Forest Service employees consistently pointed out that their Forest-level sites are difficult to update, load slowly for users, and are visually outdated and stale. One employee commented that he rarely attempts to add photos anymore, because it slows down the pages so much that users will abandon the page before it loads. In a future-facing effort, our team performed a high-level, internal audit of the current information on the landing pages, their position on the page, and what the users want to accomplish on the page. We then developed an ideal state landing page for National Forest and Grassland sites. In the event of continued involvement with a modernization and capacity-building initiative, the team would need to execute a full design process for best results.
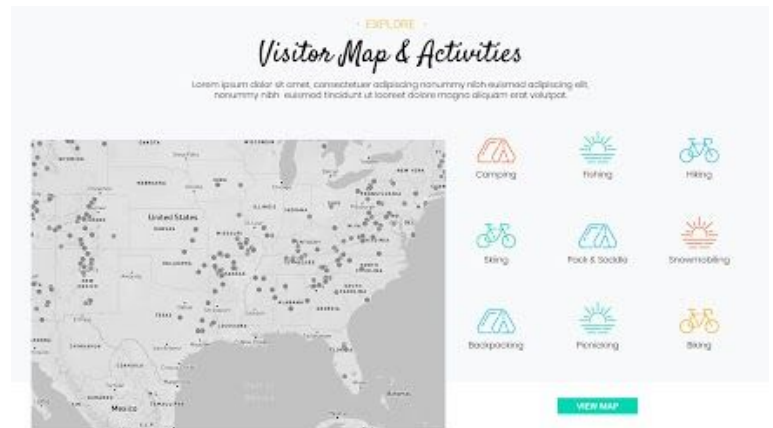
The hero shot with motto and National Forest name is the first item on the page, to grab the reader's attention and offer them a scenic tour (with sliding content) of the Forest and its news.

The second item on the page is the **Fire Danger** for the day. Forest and wildfires are one of the most talked about topics by the general public, and an immense concern for the Forest Service. This danger level should be visible and accessible to every person who visits the site, without having to click or scroll.

The third item is the **latest news for the Forest**, including any upcoming events or project proposals/decisions that the public might be interested in. We placed it mid-page because we wanted the public to see the news and events before performing any other tasks (such as locating a campground or another Forest).
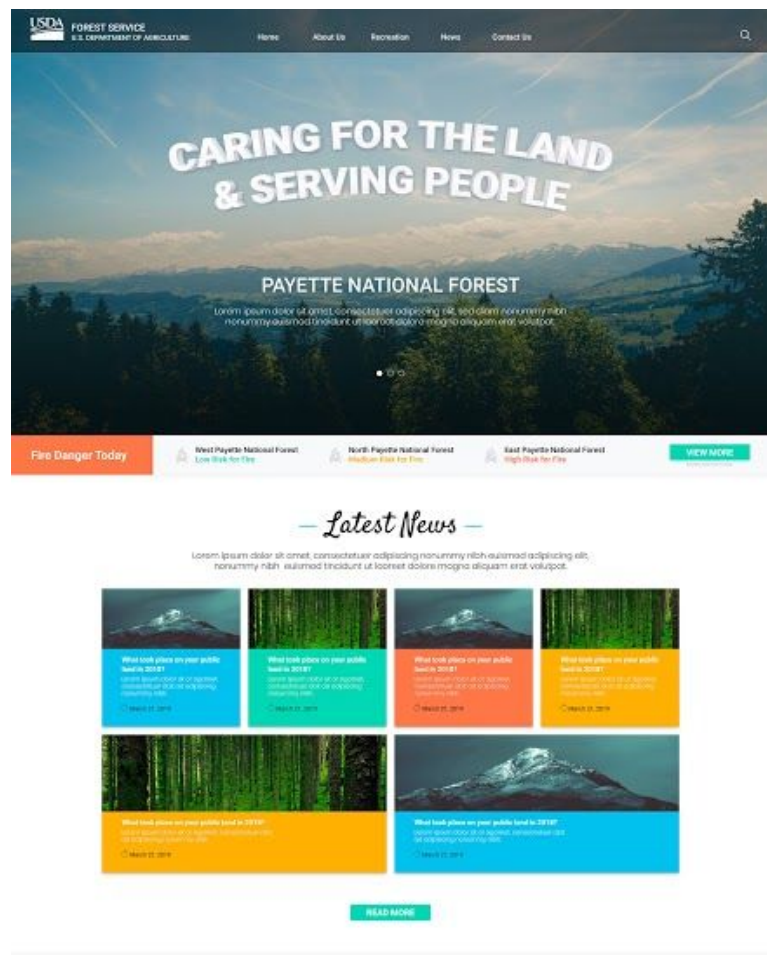
The fourth and fifth items down are the most common reasons why users access Forest sites: to browse **recreational activity sites and Forest-level project updates**. Recreational users are more common than project decision-makers so the interactive recreation map is higher than the Project Update cards.

If a user makes it past the action items, we provided them with an **"our history"** section which will give a brief introduction into the history of the Forest and button to pull them to a more in-depth history page.

The seventh item on the page is a **"find a Forest or Grassland"** interactive search. If a user made it to the current Forest page by mistake, or wants to search for information within a different Forest site, they will have the chance to do so here.

The eighth and final item on the page is a **photo gallery for the Forest**. If a user makes it to the end of the page we wanted to leave them with something beautiful, that they realize they can interact with should they go to that Forest.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Next Steps

The Payette National Forest was a significant introductory case study that offered a glimpse of how the general public engages with U.S. National Forests. In order to understand public engagement on a larger, national scale, further action and HCD research is required. The research team identified opportunity areas from the Payette National Forest research; however, the Payette National Forest is a Forest with better-than-average engagement. Further case studies of public engagement, using a range of diverse National Forests, would help to further this research.

We cannot make recommendations for a national-level strategy to improve public engagement without examining National Forests with different engagement levels, uses, acreage, and populations. The CX CoE recommends that the Forest Service conducts more HCD research to understand how to better meet the needs of the people the public lands belong to. Conducting more site visits, interviews, and observations in different regions across the country would create a more accurate and more holistic view of the nation's Forest users.

Theme Glossary

Themes are prominent or frequently recurring ideas or patterns that emerge during research.

1. **Accessing Information:** The Forest Service's go-to method for informing the public—posting on the website or Facebook page— is not foolproof, and members of the public complain that information is still not easily findable or available.
2. **Avenues for Participation:** Beyond writing a letter or calling a Forest Service office, there are few low-effort ways for a member of the public to provide input into decisions. Consequently, a large swath of the population does not provide input into Forest decisions.
3. **Opening Up to Others' Expertise:** Several Forest Service staff members recognize an opportunity for their peers, especially specialists, to look beyond their field of expertise and be more accepting of others' knowledge, needs, and wants.
4. **Being Heard Requires Lots of Work:** Time constraints, technical learning curves, and travel distances make it difficult for average citizens to engage in meaningful actions, whether it is writing a comment or attending a public meeting.
5. **Compromising Leads to Progress:** Collaborative members resoundingly agree that compromise is essential for progress.
6. **Strengthening Decisions with Diversity:** Many participants agreed that when decision-makers of diverse needs and backgrounds come together to discuss and negotiate their values, the resulting decisions will be more holistic and stronger for having addressed and considered the various opinions.
7. **Reducing the Complexity of Explanations:** Between jargon, acronyms, scientific terms, and general complexity of Forest Service decisions, it is difficult for the public to understand the information that the Forest Service provides.
8. **Establishing Allies:** There is strong evidence that establishing strong, interpersonal relationships with members of the public is of huge benefit to the Forest's public relations; members of the public who understand what goes into a decision are more likely to defend the Forest Service, even when they do not agree with that decision.
9. **Knowing how to NEPA:** Not understanding the NEPA process, including both how and why the Forest Service solicits certain information, is a key obstacle for citizens wanting to participate in decision making.
10. **Listening to the Public's Concerns:** The public often has knowledge that is critical to the Forest Service, such as awareness of unmapped trails or insight into community dynamics. Simply listening to members of the public when they call or come in can help the Forest proactively identify and respond to issues.
11. **Relying on Informal Networks:** A key conduit for information to and from the Forest comes from informal interactions between PFC members, Forest Service staff, and the social networks of both groups.
12. **Old Tools? New Tools? What Tools?** While the Forest offers many tools meant to support public outreach—from the older NEPA EM suite to the newer GIS tools—staff is neither consistently aware of, nor trained on these tools, leaving them under-utilized.

13. **Lacking in Time, Staff, and Priority:** Constraints on staff time and personnel leave public engagement activities—which are not often formalized responsibilities—left unprioritized and undone.

14. **Communicating the Why:** Forest Service staff and Payette Forest Coalition members attest that the intent behind a project is just as important to communicate to the public as the details of what the project will accomplish.

15. **Valuing Public Engagement:** The value placed in public engagement differs from individual to individual, and is not a formalized value for all national forests.

16. **Valuing Public Support:** The public needs to support the decisions the Forest is making, even if they aren't direct influencers.

17. **Seeing that I Was Heard:** Members of the public express the importance of seeing that the Forest Service listened to their opinions; on the one hand, it is frustrating for the Forest Service to not document previous conversations, and on the other, it is empowering for the public to see changes in decisions based on their input.

18. **Finding a Reason to Care:** People will be invested in a decision if they recognize that this decision will directly impact them.

19. **Losing Stability:** High turnover and employee instability contributes to a shaky foundation for the PFC and public engagement in general. Decisions are made more effectively when the public trusts the Forest Service and visa versa.

20. **Website Woes:** It is widely agreed upon on the Payette that the Forest Service website is difficult to work with and does not communicate information effectively or in a timely manner.

21. **Zooming Out:** Successful decision-makers are able to see how all facets of a decision overlap and are intertwined, even if those areas do not relate to their field of expertise.