

Are you ready to do business online?

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In the last year alone, the percentage of consumers who purchased products or services online increased a hundred-fold, according to the 1999 Yankelovich Monitor Study of consumer attitudes. The study's results indicate that 60% of consumers purchased online "to avoid hassles;" 56% shop online because they can transact business at any time of the day or night. Literally billions of dollars are being handled via e-commerce and by all accounts, this will continue to grow. Online retail sales are expected to grow by upwards of 500% over the next two years.

But how much does this behavior transfer to the local government or agency environments, where licenses, fees, taxes and permits are likely to be processed, rather than clothing, toys or music? You might be surprised if your results are anything like Fairfax County, Virginia (1999 pop. 948,636) which not only processes financial transactions via interactive web sites, but also employs kiosks and an interactive voice response system.

Case Study - Mid Sized Multi-Jurisdictional.

The Fairfax County website <http://www.co.fairfax.va.us> opened in 1996, and now more than 50 county agencies provide information to the public via this site. During 1999, the County concentrated on providing public access to public documents and interactive applications that allow residents and others to conduct business with the county 24 hours a day. Some of the most popular items include:

- Paying taxes by credit cards or eCheck
- Getting information about job vacancies
- Renewing vehicle stickers
- Accessing RFPs
- Reporting change of address
- Permit application and tracking
- Providing access to documents from human services
- Accessing the real estate assessment database

In addition to providing better service to its citizens, Fairfax County realizes the benefits of reduced costs and labor savings related to the reduction in repetitive processing tasks, such as cash receipts.

Some tips.

Before jumping into e-commerce, let's get some of the myths out of the way.

E-commerce is easy: Building a successful e-commerce website is not easy. One information executive compared an e-commerce website to an iceberg... only a tenth is visible, while most 90% - databases and tables joined by complicated rules and relationships, and elaborate

security and personalization procedures - works behind the scenes, transparent to the user. A considerable amount of research, careful planning, and attention to detail are necessary but not sufficient ingredients of a successful website.

E-commerce is cheap: An e-commerce website is not cheap. *Information Week* reported that companies spend an average of \$750,000 just for the baseline technology, according to a Gartner Group survey of 100 commerce sites. Of course, while this may be true for large companies, it is indeed possible to start a simple web-based store for considerably less. There are, however, several costs involved that may not be immediately obvious and have to be budgeted for.

Do Your Homework.

Before launching your website, spend a considerable amount of time planning. Think about where your organization will be one, five, or ten years from now. Review sites of other similar organizations. Write down what you like and what you don't. Call your peers and see what they are doing, what works well and what doesn't. Survey your constituents to see what services they most want or need.

Make It Easy.

Remember, the reason they are visiting your site is to make it easier than going to your office, or mailing in forms and checks. Design your online forms to closely represent the old paper versions while taking advantage of self-filling fields, dropdown menus, and form entry validation. This would



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increase the comfort factor for those used to completing the forms with paper and pen, but are now attempting to submit them online. Design the website to be accessible to all your constituents, some with fast internet connections, and others with slow dialup modem connections.

One Step at a Time.

As with many IT-related projects, taking them one step at a time is the best course of action. In other words, if you've never processed a credit card via your website before, don't try to set up a website that can process thousands of transactions from numerous agencies on the day you unveil your on-line effort. Since you have now found out what is most wanted by your customers, start with only a few services and build from there.

If you already have a Web presence, then e-commerce transaction processing can be added using packaged services from Cybercash, First Data, BankOne or other such providers. Packaged services take the hassle out of processing and verifying credit card orders by acting as the conduit between your customers and your website on the one end and the credit card company on the other end. The cost of such packaged services is a mix of fixed charges and per-transaction charges.

In Summary.

While setting up an e-commerce enabled website may be complicated and time-consuming, it will probably pay off faster than a corresponding brick-and-mortar setup. With an electronic store, business can be conducted easily 24-hours a day, 365 days a year from anywhere in the world. Money goes directly into the agency bank accounts faster and with less labor.

Case Study – Small Municipality.

The Website for Kennebunk, Maine (pop. 10,000) is a good example of a successful beginning in a small jurisdiction's quest to serve the online citizen. This Website was recently a winner in the Governor's Excellence in Tele-

communications competition and it is the intention of Town Manager, Barry Tibbetts, to eventually make available all town information that both lends itself to reproduction in electronic form and is currently available to the public by virtue of Maine's Freedom of Information Act.

The site currently contains up-to-date meeting agenda information, demographic information, notices of upcoming events, and items of general interest. There is an extensive collection of maps, accompanied by the assessor's database. The site has proven to be a very popular alternative to gathering information at the Town Hall.

The site contains extensive information from the assessor's office, including access to the database, GIS and on-line maps. The main users of the assessor information have been real estate brokers, sales people, attorneys, engineers and surveyors. In all, according to Tibbetts, the system saves time for the assessor and clerical staff, who previously spent half of their time answering questions from people who came into the office.

But what about cost? Providing all of this assessment and GIS data sounds expensive. It wasn't! The assessing program Kennebunk has used for several years is a proprietary program. Nevertheless, for under \$1,000 the town had the vendor write a software module that could extract the data for

use on the town's website (www.kennebunk.maine.org).

Case Study – Large Multi-Jurisdictional.

San Diego County (pop. 2.6 million) recently decided to outsource its primary IT functions, consolidating eight data centers into one, and converting 127 local area networks into a single virtual network. According to local sources, "the change brings in a new era of digital governance, a one-stop shop for everything from license renewals to zoning regulations and payment of parking fines." The new systems will integrate many previously fragmented systems and standardize hardware and software with the goal of serving more of the county's customers "online, instead of in line," said San Diego County Chief Administrative Officer, Lawrence Prior.

By making more services available online, San Diego expects to be able to reduce the cost of government, as an estimated 70% of the county's residents own personal computers. For those citizens who do not yet own computers, a network of kiosks will be deployed in public locations.

Find out about the GeoData Alliance Town Meetings at <http://www.fgdc.gov/GeoAll/>

Calling all street signs!

URISA is requesting photographs of real street signs to be used in URISA's upcoming street addressing conferences and workshops.

There will be an award for the "best sign" in two categories—best street name and best sign type. Street name categories will be 1) most unusual, 2) longest, 3) overall

favorite name, etc. For the best sign type award, judging will be on such components as color, address range, neighborhood and "other" information content.

Send your photographs to Scott Grams at URISA HQ: 1460 Renaissance Drive, Suite 305, Park Ridge, IL 60068, sgrams@urisa.org.