



TECHNOLOGY AND THE BUSINESS OF GOVERNMENT

Generation Y seeks more interaction with government online

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A recently released survey shows that Generation Y prefers to connect with government online in an interactive manner similar to the way they seek out news and other information.

The survey was commissioned by Meritalk, an online community of government information technology specialists, to examine the information-gathering habits of Gen-Y and its priorities for the next administration. A poll of 2,000 people born between 1977 and 1990 showed that 88 percent will obtain their news online during the next four years. Seventy-four percent want more information on government spending and programs, and 85 percent said they want the next president to reach out to the public online at least monthly.

"Generation Y really wants direct, honest, genuine communication [from the government]," said Liz Vandendriessche, spokeswoman for Meritalk. She said that through its research, Meritalk sought to capture how the fundamental relationship between government and citizens is changing.

According to Jeff Chao, an IT specialist at the General Services Administration's Integrated Technology Services, the public expects information that is readily available and easy to understand, direct from the government rather than disseminated through traditional media.

"The great thing about the Web is that it really opens up exponentially the number of ways a citizen can now obtain information from their government," he said. "That is something the government has to take seriously in terms of how it uses the Web to

disseminate information. It needs to regard itself as the official source of information."

Chao pointed to the USA.gov site, which links to hundreds of agency Web sites, as an example of making government the primary source of information. While USA.gov is a step forward, he said there is still the challenge of making the information easy to use and interactive.

"Right now I can log on to OMB.gov and download the budget. It's all there, but I have no idea what it means," Chao said. Agencies should consider not just what information to post, he said, but how to write it in a way a layperson can understand.

According to the survey, Gen-Y is significantly more likely to use collaborative and social networking sites to get government information. That's why Chao thinks the next step for agencies is to embrace interactive media. Some already have ventured into new territory with features such as USA.gov's Gov Gab blog, Greenversations from the Environmental Protection Agency and the NASA Edge podcast program, which offers interactive presentations online. This generation no longer is content to passively imbibe information from traditional outlets such as CNN or the newspaper, he said, adding that they want their voices heard.

"I can go post something on a blog and the entire Internet community can go see it the next second," Chao said. The Internet's ability to give a voice to bloggers, regular people who write online about topics of interest to them, is forcing the government to adjust to how they interact with the public. Unlike traditional media, the Internet allows citizens to choose what content they see, he added, putting the onus on the government to provide information that is relevant to its consumers.

The Transportation Security Administration's blog, which provides information to travelers about airport procedures, is just one example. The ability to comment and post questions has resulted in better service for airline passengers, Chao said.

IT specialists say the survey's findings are further evidence of government's need to provide more 2.0-style interactive tools online. Web 2.0 refers to the evolution of the Internet from a browse-and-download format to a two-way, collaborative conversation. The Web "is really there to help engage people more and for people to make more informed decisions, whether about their elected officials or the government in general," said Chao.

"Web 2.0 is not just for the election," Vandendriessche said. "It's also going to carry on past the election. Web 2.0 is basically forcing government 2.0."