

## **Moving Government Online From Red Tape to Red Carpet Treatment of eCitizens By Avi Hoffer**

The Internet, enhanced with specialized Customer Relationship Management software, has been one of businesses' hottest initiatives. The goal: to provide customers with relationship building services on a one-on-one basis over the Web. In short, the red carpet treatment.

Government, on the other hand, continues to create the perception that it views its constituency as a captive audience with no option but to relate to the government it pays to serve them in a manner the government sees fit. In short, tangling the citizenry in red tape. It's time for a call for action around a Citizen Relationship Management initiative to resonate in the halls of government.

There may be plenty of eGovernment buzz circulating the halls of Congress and local council chambers, but there is little action taking place in terms of citizens gaining real time access to local, county, state and national government services over the Web. Certainly the evidence that citizens want to connect is there as nearly 40 million tax returns were filed electronically, and another 31 million people received direct deposit refunds in the last IRS tax season.

In fact the concept Citizen Relationship Management is in its infancy and when presented to politicians, as to what they think of it, many would most likely illicit a response in terms of how many babies they kissed that week.

But citizens want more than lip service when it comes to interacting with government; they want the efficiency that can be gained by electronic access and process management. In a study by the National Information Consortium, 47 percent of adult respondents said they would like to renew driver's licenses over the Web and 43 percent of business respondents reported that they would like to obtain or renew professional licenses. A survey of businesses by Information Week found 80 percent saw automating business processes on the Web as a competitive advantage. Government needs to take the same view.

For example, there are many forms that one can download from the U.S. Postal Service, but then you still have to mail them in for processing, or take time off from work to deliver them in person. Worse yet, local postal branches rarely know, that forms are online, - most suggested a separate trip be made just to obtain a form. The Postal Service could save many stamps indeed by automating just the filling-in of form process.

It's not surprising then that a study by Brown University found the U.S. Postal Service, along with the White House, National Security Council, U.S. Trade Representative ranking as among the poorest in their study of Federal Web sites and their service offerings.

But how can we instill as much government concern about enhancing online citizen relationship management, as businesses do today? What steps need to be taken to create government Web sites and automate processes that can connect people to the services they want to interact with and eventually replace the notion of having to stand in line filling out forms in person all within fairly rigid time frames?

One hurdle that local governments face is that they have antiquated technology. Many are using hardware from companies that have long since gone out of business. Others are using emulation programs to run more current software applications. There are also plenty of cities and towns operating out of shoebox filing systems, manually filing and hand stamping everything from property tax payments to library fines to dog license fees.

What's needed is to develop a blueprint to maximize the potential of eGovernment by deploying software that allows existing IT systems to be both 'joined up' and linked to the Internet through minimal alteration in the way government and people complete their daily tasks.

Here are five criteria to seek:

1. Web sites should be designed to be citizen-driven and user-friendly.
2. The automating processes should be measurable, trackable and cost-proven in terms of improved efficiencies.
3. Access needs to be 24 x 7 to reflect the changing way we all live and work and for those without computers, access sites need to be set-up in public areas.
4. The Web site and its processes should be committed and flexible enough to continuous improvements.
5. Web access and the automation of processes needs to be secure and people's privacy needs to be protected.

Here are five steps to Citizen Relationship Management on the Web:

1. Set a standard by which your Web site and/or government will respond to citizen inquiries. Make sure you have processes in place so you can effectively meet the standard. For example the Small Business Administration must respond within 48 hours to congressional queries.
2. Select processes that are most commonly used and digitize them on the Web. For example, the filling out of driver license renewals, applying for summer jobs or requesting information about building permits.
3. Promise to protect privacy on the Web to encourage the sharing of information electronically. One way to ensure privacy is by allowing encrypted access and identifying users with PIN numbers as opposed to social security numbers.
4. Provide a personal Web page where users can save preferences or where local information can be retrieved for them each time they log in, such as latest council ruling on xyz project.
5. Offer citizens the option of push technology to inform them of important events and filing dates.

While citizen relationship management is still in its early stages, by no means is the technology and processes involved new from a business perspective, as pointed out earlier. The only new thing is the desire for Web access, and more importantly, response from government entities.

Again, while citizen relationship management is a new concept for some in the United States, elsewhere around the world the idea interacting with government online is a reality. Many citizens enjoy going online to check out library books, pay property taxes, complain about a broken street light, review meeting minutes and dialogue with elected officials.

For example in the United Kingdom, where online privacy laws are strongly in favor of protecting citizen identity, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, is the first in the UK to provide a secure Web portal to its citizens.

Built from software referred to as eGovernment Process Management, the Council's online system allows 24x7 access to personalized information and allows others to interact with Council staff online using their own secure, digital identities. The tax online payment system has proved the most popular service. Another well-used feature is accessing the community planning applications tracking system. This is also where citizens can make online comments on specific applications directly to the planning officer. It was found that 40 percent of individuals access the site outside of normal office hours; meaning people are able to swiftly resolve problems or carry out tasks on their own time, rather than at work. The Web site also allows user self-registration, which means each citizen can securely access their Council's eGovernment system to view personal accounts, change personal details and make payments.

Examples of specific online services that would provide immediate benefits here in the United States include obtaining licenses and permits - dog, hunting, drivers, building; filing complaints – potholes, graffiti, noise; and requesting information – planning, zoning, meeting minutes and applying for positions.

As the buzz for rolling out the red carpet in terms of citizen relationship management grows louder, the benefits of online delivery of services needs to be addressed up front. EGovernment services in which the entire transaction can be completed online can ultimately revolutionize the relationship between government and citizen. This needs to be done with real numbers associated with the return on investment that we will all share when our local, county, state and national government offices truly go online and throw away red tape and rollout the red carpet for citizens.

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