

Electronic Government

by David Lytel

Increasingly, American citizens demand the same high level of service from government that they have come to expect from business. How to make the government enterprise work better and cost less? Like the

private sector, the U.S. government has looked to computing and communications technologies as the best way to improve its effectiveness and productivity.

In 1993 the newly elected Clinton administration launched two initiatives to help speed the adoption of appropriate new technologies by government agencies. The first was the National Performance Review (NPR), known as the "Reinventing Government" initiative. In September 1993, the NPR's report, entitled "Reengineering Through Information Technology," set out goals for the federal government in such areas as electronic benefits transfer, electronic access to government information, and government-wide electronic mail.

This push to connect information technology and government service proved so popular that many of these ideas became part of another key technology initiative of the Clinton administration—the National Information Infrastructure initiative (NII). One of its goals is to bring about changes in government telecommunications and information policies, which have often been seen as inhibiting the deployment of new technologies.

As a consequence, the U.S. government in the last four years has greatly increased its use of electronic mail and the electronic distribution of government information. The end result? Government services are simpler, faster, and more accessible to its customers.

This change in policy came at the same time as the invention of the World Wide Web and the development of browser software that made the Internet much easier to use. The new technology had a huge impact on access to government

information, making it easier and less expensive for agencies to provide information directly to the public.

The clearest transformation has been in the agencies whose mission it is to distribute public information. They are rapidly changing from booksellers to bitsellers as more of the public seeks electronic information.

The growth in the use of the Internet by all U.S. government agencies has been nothing short of astounding. The Internet has become the medium of record for most government information—the first place one goes to look.

FedWorld, for example, is the electronic distribution service of the National Technical Information Service (NTIS)—a part of the Department of Commerce. FedWorld began as a computer bulletin board—a single small computer connected to a few incoming telephone lines. At first it provided a listing of all the other government-run computer bulletin boards and made it possible for callers to choose one and be connected to it.

The Clinton administration sought and received several million dollars from Congress in 1995 to upgrade FedWorld. In 1993, NTIS had contact with fewer than 2,000 customers a day. Now, it serves more than 50,000 every day. And whereas in 1993 less than a third of its products were distributed electronically, today two-thirds of the information it provides to customers is in an electronic format.

The U.S. Government Printing Office is another agency that has information dissemination as its mission. GPO has operated a computer bulletin board since the 1980s, but the agency took its first step towards the Internet in 1993 with

the development of its GPO Access service, a Web site that makes GPO's reports and other government databases available free to the public.

GPO now delivers more than three million electronic documents to citizens every month, ranging from House and Senate hearings to the annual "Economic Report of the President." GPO made six databases available to the public in June 1994, and now that number has grown to over 40. The volume of information distributed has increased a thousandfold.

In addition:

- Citizens downloaded more than 200,000 tax forms and booklets from the Internal Revenue Service in 1995, the year this service was inaugurated.
- The Small Business Administration provides information on how to start, finance, and expand a business, a service that more than 60,000 people consult every month.
- Environmental data offered by government agencies has found a huge audience. Weather and climate data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is four times as heavily consulted now as it was two years ago. Demand for information about the Environmental Protection Agency on the Internet—everything from grants to regulations—has more than tripled in the last year.
- The Securities and Exchange Commission offers information on thousands of publicly traded companies, and investors use it to make important business decisions.

Electronic access to government information also helps answer the requests coming in under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), a law that gives citizens the right to request specific information from government agencies. The number of FOIA requests has not declined, but since FOIA requests are costly to answer and electronic information can be made available for very small amounts of money, each request that can be handled electronically saves agencies and taxpayers a great deal of money.

Among the most interesting Internet-based services is one run by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). When it publishes draft rules for the industry it regulates, the NRC solicits comments electronically. This novel promotion of dis-

cussion and interaction with the industry and the interested public means that a regulatory agency is actually holding public meetings on the Internet.

While this increase in Internet use has been impressive, the vast expansion of government CD-ROMs may be even more significant. As the leading publisher in the country, the U.S. government has become a very important producer of CD-ROMs, a format that lends itself to storing vast amounts of data. In 1993, government agencies offered only about 100 CD-ROM titles. Today that number is more than 1,000.

Probably the most important lesson from the U.S. government's attempt to improve government service with technology is that computers make things move faster, but not necessarily fast enough. The government agencies that have made the greatest strides towards improved customer service are those that have taken the opportunity presented by computerization to rethink how they are organized. An agency that uses computers to increase the ability of a citizen to make a request only increases frustration unless it adequately addresses the speed with which its internal organization provides that information.

Another important lesson is that citizens care more about government services than they do about how the government is organized. Many agencies began their electronic publishing on the Internet by showing how they are organized into divisions. With time, many agency Home Pages take on a more useful, more citizen-centered focus that organizes their information by the services they provide.

Finally, it is important to realize that well-run government agencies do not just save money. Disseminating accurate and timely information to the public makes both markets and democratic processes more efficient. A sense of openness may be the most important benefit from improved government information processing and dissemination, because it reinforces confidence in democratic institutions. ☛

David Lytel heads Sherpa Consulting Group, a firm specializing in on-line business development strategies, and chairs an independent political committee called Democrats Online. Previously, he served in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.