

Culture Shift Sparked by Government Agencies Involving Users in Redesign Process

Zack Quaintance | March 7, 2017



State and local government website design is changing. Across the country, agencies are putting a new group at the center of such efforts — the citizens who actually use digital services, services that make it easier to go online and pay water bills, report potholes or find a government job.

These efforts include things like alpha sites — rough drafts that users can visit and play with before giving their opinions, which are then used in the design's next phase. They also include civic user testing groups, assemblies of residents who stay involved throughout the process, offering feedback as it takes shape. These user-centered design realignments are happening in [Miami](#) and [Pittsburgh](#), [Grand Rapids, Mich.](#), the [Massachusetts statehouse](#) and [Alaska](#). They're happening all over, and those involved say the result is a shift in governmental philosophy, one that's increasingly putting customer service at the center of agency culture.

Becky Jo Glover, the 311 customer service center manager for Grand Rapids, is working to redesign the city's website, collaborating as she does with a civic user testing group that consists of more than 300 residents. She is also training representatives from different departments within municipal government to do their own civic testing. The idea is that as they develop services, they will do so with the community in mind.

“They all will be trained in the services they produce,” Glover said. “They have to go out and test, and we don’t just test with people randomly.”

Glover and her team want to make sure their input comes from a group that represents the population that will use the site. There are 32 neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, a diverse city of nearly 200,000, and Glover and her team are seeking testers that reflect each area. They’re reaching out via Mayor Rosalynn Bliss’ [Twitter account](#), as well as through council members who have grassroots connections.

Glover’s team is made up of three members who are working with 60 liaisons from different city departments. She described the user testing experience as rewarding for civil servants that don’t often have a chance to see the ways their work makes a person’s life easier.

“It really is all about the community,” Glover said. “Sometimes we just get so pigeonholed into what we’re doing because it’s so important to us. It’s just nice to kind of bring your head up, take a breath and see, ‘Wow, what I do really does make a difference.’”

By the end of May, Grand Rapids plans to have between 25 and 40 of its most vital services online for use. By December, the city hopes to have all services and all departments live, including ways to pay parking tickets, taxes, water bills, refuse pickup and more.

Civic user testing, and similar efforts, could also be a much needed way to soothe the growing concerns of those in government over the effectiveness of their work. A recent survey from Vision, a Southern California-based company that builds Web presences for government entities, found that only 5 percent of city and county workers gave their organizations [an “outstanding” grade](#) for citizen engagement.

Ashley Fruechting, a marketing director for Vision, said getting the public involved with design processes is “absolutely a step in the right direction.” Fruechting has worked in government development for 10 years, and she says that civic website designers too often get caught up in agency needs rather than those of the public.

“They think very inwardly about the purpose of the site and the content of the site,” Fruechting said. “They’re somewhat doing it for them, for the information they find to be useful and the information they think residents want to see. When that mindset shifts, and they start to view the website differently, I think that reflects a shift in the organization as a whole about what their purpose is.”