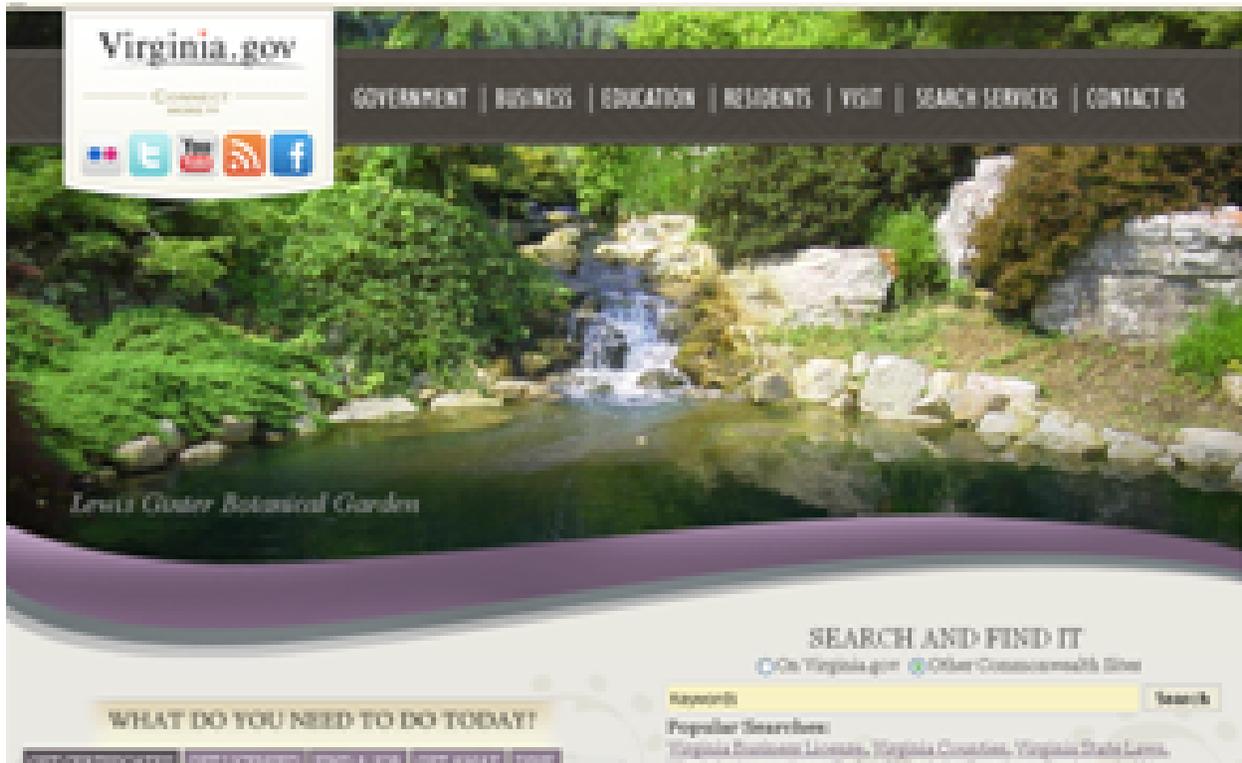# Virginia's New Web Portal Emphasizes Mobile Access, Social Media

Brian Heaton | June 30, 2011

Those wanting to stay connected with the latest information from Virginia now have the real-time ability to do so, thanks to an overhaul of its website.

Virginia's transformed Web portal shines a brighter spotlight on social media and debuts a new mobile application, allowing visitors to engage with the state and find resources on the go, via their smartphones.

According to Sam Nixon, CIO of Virginia, the new site — which made its debut on June 23 — was a natural evolution responding to how people consume information both in Virginia and around the globe. He said that the ability to push data out to people in real time was of critical importance to the state.

"We're no longer in a situation where just publishing information on a static or interactive website is sufficient," Nixon explained. "If something happened and we lost our website, it's important to already have in place social media outlets and other channels of communication established. [You] can't wait for an emergency to do that."

Virginia.gov's redesign and hosting is handled by Virginia Interactive, a subsidiary of privately held NIC USA Inc. that manages the site and provides development work

through a contractual relationship with the Virginia Information Technology Association (VITA). Nixon said the new Web portal was a part of the company's regular work on the site, as Virginia Interactive is required to develop a new version of Virginia's home page every two years.

This time around, making the site more readily accessible through tablets and other mobile technology was one of the top priorities for VITA. Nixon said that the agency is taking a broad view of the computing devices in the consumer marketplace and is looking to maximize Virginia.gov to take advantage of whatever portable technology is being used by the masses.

"I was in a meeting recently and looked around the table and half the people there have iPads in front of them," Nixon recalled. " Folks are [also] sitting there with iPhones throughout the meeting. You realize almost none of those devices have been truly integrated into the delivery of government services, particular for state workers, so we're all rapidly moving in that direction."

Development Challenges

Improving the search function of Virginia's home page was one of the features that Nixon said was a topic of considerable discussion among staff members. While other states such as Utah have its search field in the middle of the screen, Virginia's is now located in the lower right-hand corner — still highly visible but slightly more understated than some other states.

Nixon revealed that in his opinion, when a visitor comes to a website, they typically have a task in mind they need to accomplish, so a site's menu is of critical importance. He said the search feature is more of an alternative to the site's primary navigation, in case there is something more obscure someone is looking for, which the Virginia CIO admitted happens often.

"What we wanted to do is have as clean and neat an appearance as possible and use that menu concept to drive users to those things they most likely want to do," Nixon said.

He added that the "dilemma is you want the search field to be prominent and in our case, we think it is ... but not quite as front and center as perhaps some others have done."

In addition, Nixon said that some state agencies in Virginia had concerns with their placement in Virginia.gov's navigation.

"There has been some pushback," Nixon said of state agency opinion on the changes. "Agencies own and operate their own websites independently of the overall portal ... [There's] a little bit less direct callout — and while the information is there, it is presented a bit differently than the old site."

Looking Forward

In addition to Virginia receiving a new website every two years, Nixon explained that Virginia Interactive also must refresh the site during in the intervening period. The

Virginia CIO said that while no formal ideas were left on the table during the current redesign, the state is devoted to the continued development of its brand and future updates to Virginia.gov will reflect that.

Nixon said that the Web portal would continue to emphasize the state's tourism assets and economic development opportunities and become more aligned with Gov. Bob McDonnell's larger statewide initiatives. But overall, Nixon stressed the need for Virginia.gov to be current, both in content and design.

"Our goal moving forward is to have the site in a reasonably continuous refinement mode," Nixon said. "It's so easy to get into the trap of having a new design and three or four months later, you realize the content isn't as fresh as it needs to be. Having a renewed commitment that makes sure everything is still pertinent to the needs of the people visiting the site is a real challenge."

http://www.govtech.com/e-government/Virginia-Web-Portal-Emphasizes-Mobile-Access-Social-Media.html