National Dialogue on Improving Federal Websites

.gov Task Force

10/31/2011

This document reports on the key themes and ideas that were developed from the public online conversation, 'A National Dialogue on Improving Federal Websites'.

Contents

Introduction

The National Dialogue on Improving Federal Websites (the Dialogue) is an online crowdsourcing activity that was sponsored by the White House and the U.S. General Services Administration between September 19th and October 4th, 2011. Using an online idea generation tool, the Dialogue brought together a community of stakeholders who are geographically dispersed and difficult to convene in one place to discuss the best ideas for how to improve federal websites.

The feedback and ideas generated by the Dialogue are a critical part of the .gov Reform Initiative to streamline how the Federal government manages its websites and to provide a better customer experience when people access government information and services online. By bringing together web experts, policymakers, and citizens to submit ideas, discuss the ideas, and vote on them, the Federal government heard and captured rich stakeholder feedback to drive its reform efforts.

Ideas were submitted on the following campaigns:

1. Developing **practices, policies, and principles** that should guide the federal web in the next 5 years
2. Creating better **user experience**, navigation, and design
3. Improving **content** to make it more readable, engaging, and useful
4. Improving how **services and transactions** are delivered
5. Providing **universal access** to government content online, regardless of device or technology
6. Optimizing the way the public is able to **search** for federal content
7. Ensuring content on federal websites is integrated with **social media** and other third-party websites
8. Improve how federal websites **protect privacy and security**
9. Reaching global audiences and **people with limited English proficiency**
10. Optimizing **government IT and infrastructure** to more efficiently manage government websites
11. Improving access to government information and services **beyond websites** (mobile, broadband, etc.)
12. Using **data, apps, APIs** and similar technology to improve delivery of information and services

The ideas that were generated will help inform what practices, standards, and policies should be adopted in order to have the most positive impact on citizens and businesses. Specifically, the Federal Government will use the Dialogue to help inform development of the Federal Web Strategy and to update federal web policies in the coming months.

Overall, nearly 1,000 registered participants submitted 436 unique ideas, made 1663 comments, and voted 8259 times. The themes described in this report represent a summary of this content. The full Dialogue is available online at http://web-reform-dialogue.ideascale.com/.

Idea Themes

The following is a summary of themes with key ideas that emerged from the Dialogue. Each idea is presented as a hyperlink to the discussion webpage where the full discussion can be reviewed. The number of votes and comments are noted next to each idea, with the ideas that received the most votes at the top. The themes that received the most interest are presented first, with the less prominent themes presented later in the document.

Theme 1: Change to a culture of customer service - Put the customer first

A major theme throughout the dialogue was "culture change" and pushing the federal workforce to take a 'customers first' approach in managing websites. Ideas that generated the most consensus included

using plain language on government websites, organizing content in ways that make sense to customers, and allowing government workers to use social media to provide direct customer service.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Plain language on government websites](#) – 225 votes, 62 comments
- [Create content around topics/customers, not agencies](#) – 160 votes, 33 comments
- [Finding who to contact](#) – 52 votes, 6 comments
- [Allow more access to citizens for usability testing/feedback](#) – 43 votes, 10 comments
- [Develop social media as a customer service channel](#) – 39 votes, 17 comments
- [Establish a customer bill of rights](#) – 30 votes, 5 comments
- [Use real-time chat to help customers solve problems](#) – 28 votes, 12 comments
- [Make it okay for workers to interact with citizens](#) – 26 votes, 5 comments
- [Create a culture of customer service](#) – 25 votes, 5 comments
- [Less content, more services](#) – 21 votes, 12 comments

Theme 2: Provide high quality content that is focused on the user

Participants had wide-ranging suggestions on how to plan for, manage, and improve content on federal websites. Several addressed the challenge of creating a Federal Web Content Strategy that will help articulate a shared vision across all agencies about how content will help them fulfill their core missions as well as serve their customers' needs. Others focused on the need for federal content to be driven not by agencies, but by topic, function, and services that are needed by citizens. All agreed that rigorous review of content will help ensure its quality and usefulness.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Create content around topics/customers, not agencies](#) – 160 votes, 33 comments
- [Optimize user paths](#) – 77 votes, 9 comments
- [Create a federal web content strategy](#) – 65 votes, 15 comments
- [Interview users before redesign kickoff](#) – 30 votes, 2 comments
- [User centered design](#) – 28 votes, 5 comments
- [Build a mental model to organize by task, not by government viewpoint](#) – 21 votes, 2 comments
- [Require a content review process](#) – 21 votes, 2 comments
- [More about what we (citizens) can do instead of what gov does](#) – 19 votes, 3 comments
- [Organize topically (across Agencies)](#) – 10 votes, 2 comments
- [Websites to be action oriented](#) – 9 votes, 3 comments
- [Link website design & organizational/operational infrastructure](#) – 2 votes, 0 comments

Theme 3: Promote greater efficiency and simplicity in federal websites, especially transactions

Another theme that drew a high level of consensus was a call for making federal web transactions more efficient and simple. The comments called for prioritizing "top tasks" and transactions on government sites as well as "not rehashing" the same content repetitively to the detriment of online services. Some comments addressed optimizing the workflow of online forms and making them mobile friendly. Others called for the elimination of downloadable forms that make it hard for customers to submit responses online. One recommendation called for using standard templates for online transactions to improve

usability. In addition, one participant suggested that Federal websites allow a citizen to have a "single digital signature" across the enterprise to enable more efficient online transactions. While some praised this idea, many others raised privacy concerns.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Simplify online Services](#) – 84 votes, 9 comments
- [Optimize user paths](#) – 77 votes, 9 comments
- [Make all online forms fillable](#) – 32 votes, 4 comments
- [Improve efficiency of transactional components](#) – 14 votes, 3 comments
- [Create a federal database of online services](#) – 8 votes, 5 comments
- [Opt-in to securely store/retrieve common form information](#) – 8 votes
- [Provide access to services, not systems](#) – 2 votes

Theme 4: Build in usability and accessibility during the design phase prior to launch

Many users suggested that accessibility must be built into websites as early as possible. One user suggested mandating 508 and user testing prior to launching the website. All agreed that retrofits for accessibility and usability cost significantly more once the website is launched.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Make usability testing and 508 testing required PRIOR to launch](#) – 139 votes
- [Build usability in, starting with the RFP](#) – 36 votes, 11 comments
- [Build in accessibility during the visual design phase](#) – 31 votes, 5 comments
- [Fail on paper!](#) – 30 votes, 8 comments
- [Accessibility Integration](#) – 25 votes, 1 comment
- [Avoid retrofitting](#) – 6 votes, 1 comment

Theme 5: Phase out use of proprietary technology

An important and prominent theme throughout the dialogue suggested that proprietary technology should not be used to present and store government information. Users recommended that the federal government use open source technology to enable more sharing of data and make content more accessible to customers.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [PDFs cannot be preferred publishing methods](#) – 114 votes, 22 comments
- [Avoid Adobe PDF, Flash, Office Docs! Use only HTML forms & docs](#) – 41 votes, 12 comments
- [WordPress, open source, and cloud hosting](#) – 26 votes, 5 comments
- [Open source, free, CMS, collaboration…one word: Drupal](#) – 13 votes, 7 comments
- [Encourage use of popular #openSource platforms](#) – 13 votes, 5 comments
- [Open source as the default license](#) – 8 votes, 4 comments

Theme 6: Adopt, share, and enforce best practices across all agencies

Many ideas and comments expressed the need for better sharing of web best practices across agencies, as well as a way to enforce the use of best practices. Some mentioned the desire for a central government "webmaster" that enforces or mandates these recommendations for all government

websites. Many agreed that adopting industry standards for the web would be a useful goal, especially around user testing and analytics. Others argued that having standard business processes and content strategy guidelines would enhance usability across all agencies.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Commit to best practices](#) – 92 votes, 32 comments
- [Federal web best practices for accessibility](#) – 24 votes, 17 comments
- [Best practices sharing](#) – 14 votes, 3 comments
- [Implement content strategy best practices](#) – 12 votes, 0 comments
- [Adhere to industry standards across agencies](#) – 10 votes, 1 comment
- [Empower "Search Police"](#) – 7 votes, 4 comments
- [Policy and guidelines enforcement](#) – 7 votes, 2 comments
- [Start usability with business process and content strategy](#) – 6 votes, 0 comments

Theme 7: Increase mobile access through standardized language and scripting

A reoccurring idea was that the federal government must improve its presence on the mobile web through standardized language (HTML5) and scripting. Some participants recommended that the government not try to develop new mobile applications, but rather focus on the mobile web. Another idea suggested that the government begin testing natural language processing that is tailored for 'conversational mobile' engagement.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Make government website mobile accessible](#) – 121 votes, 13 comments
- [HTML5 and semantic content](#) – 57 votes, 4 comments
- [Leverage HTML5/CSS3 vs apps for mobile data](#) – 12 votes, 3 comments
- [Mobile: Focus on mobile web, not mobile apps](#) – 11 votes, 7 comments
- [Mobile Web - Natural Language and artificial Intelligence](#) – 4 votes, 2 comments
- [Encourage gov. mobile sites to use standardized scripting](#) – 2 votes, 2 comments

Theme 8: Commit adequate resources to enhancing the federal web presence

Many participants suggested inadequacy in the level of funding and staff expertise that is used to manage and update federal websites. Different staff requirements were identified, but all agreed that due to the technical nature of the work,
- [Need coordinated teams of specialists vs. too few generalists](#) – 46 votes, 13 comments
- [Efficiency, jobs & QA: accessibility funding for dedicated staff](#) – 23 votes, 10 comments
- [Every agency should have UX expert on staff](#) – 16 votes, 5 comments
- [Require an integrated, official web & new media team per agency](#) – 13 votes, 1 comment
- [Dedicate a defined portion of your web team hours to search](#) – 12 votes, 2 comments
- [Adequate funding for mission critical staffing and training](#) – 9 votes, 1 comment
- [Funding plan](#) – 7 votes, 1 comment
- [Use specialists to build your web content](#) – 5 votes, 0 comments
- [Centralized web development team for every government department](#) – 3 votes, 2 comments

Theme 9: Integrate content into the larger information ecosystem– Go where people are

Another important theme was to "integrate government content where people are." There was considerable discussion about the need to actively engage in social media—go where people already are on the Web—rather than expecting people to go first to government websites to get the content they need. Participants discussed the need for government to use technology such as APIs that allow content to be tagged and easily reused and distributed on other websites and platforms, so the content is more ubiquitous. One idea called for using APIs to enable a customer to file a complaint and have it routed to the appropriate department/agency/accountable official regardless of which website the customer used to make the transaction. Other ideas emphasized the need for government to fully use APIs to allow for user-generated messaging and cross pollination between agency APIs.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- Develop social media as a customer service channel – 39 votes, 17 comments
- Open government requires open communication policies – 16 votes, 0 comments
- Engagement personnel needed – 12 votes, 2 comments
- Publishing .govs via APIs will allow innovation yet to come – 9 votes, 0 comments
- Wrap complaint forms in an API – 8 votes, 2 comments
- Consume their own APIs when building products – 8 votes, 0 comments
- Require .govs to provide all content and data via web services – 7 votes, 0 comments
- Use the appropriate social media channels for your campaign – 2 votes, 4 comments

Theme 10: Archive content proactively to keep it accessible but out of the way

A number of participants suggested that federal websites can be overrun by out-dated and excessive content. Participants highlighted the fact that excessive content leads to either resource over-allocation to maintain the sites or 'orphan sites' if no resources exist. At the same time, participants suggested that archived information should remain easily accessible through comprehensive government archiving. Differentiating between ephemeral and evergreen content will help make content more accessible and can improve search results.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- Differentiate between ephemeral and evergreen content – 64 votes, 11 comments
- Add the ability to flag a web page for outdated, incorrectness – 60 votes, 3 comments
- Create a user-friendly error page for "eliminated" sites – 54 votes, 3 comments
- Archive retired agency pages – 30 votes, 5 comments
- Require a sunset date from the start – 13 votes, 2 comments
- Removing content and files – 5 votes, 4 comments

Theme 11: Improve search through standardized metadata and better search engine optimization

Multiple comments expressed the need for better search engine optimization (SEO) and use of metadata. Part of the discussion focused around developing best practices for use of metadata and sharing them across the government to improve accessibility of content. A mandated government website template was mentioned as a way to ensure SEO, as well as a "meta sitemap," or a centralized

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site map of all government websites. One user suggested that if the government were to require a metadata process, it would greatly improve customers' ability to find content.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- SEO as standard practice – 56 votes, 9 comments
- HTML5 and semantic content – 57 votes, 4 comments
- Enable findability by using sitemaps and robots.txt – 27 votes, 4 comments
- Metadata process – 21 votes, 3 comments
- Empower "Search Police" – 7 votes, 4 comments
- Standardized, humanized taxonomy – 3 votes, 5 comments

Theme 12: Enhance the universal cross-governmental search function

A number of ideas emphasized the need to develop a search functionality that could, with one search bar, effectively access all government data and information reliably and efficiently. A key suggestion was that searches should be able to access information from all agencies, without having to know which agency actually 'owns' the data. Another idea suggested that the government institute search functionality to locate nearby government services. One user cited a survey that was conducted for the government that found that 36% of the 5,000 people surveyed said they want a government only search engine that takes them to Federal, State and Local sites. This discussion was an opportunity to inform participants about USASearch, a government-wide search tool created by GSA. This led to additional recommendations about how to enhance USASearch and enable it to be used more broadly.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- Make all US bills, regulations, and court decisions searchable – 31 votes, 3 comments
- Users should be able to find gov services based on location – 29 votes, 7 comments
- All .gov sites should use search.usa.gov to power site search – 18 votes, 4 comments
- Localize search results – 16 votes, 1 comment
- Improve the search capabilities – 16 votes, 0 comments
- Cross-departmental searchability – 10 votes, 6 comments
- Users are able to go to search.gov to search for any gov site – 5 votes, 2 comments

Theme 13: Strengthen USA.gov

Several participants expressed the need to enhance USA.gov as the government's 'one stop shop'. They stressed that an easy-to-use index of all government websites would substantially improve access to federal information and services. They recommended improvements to make USA.gov more intuitive and able to direct users to content and services more effectively across the government. Some argued that the key to findability is properly labeled and indexable semantic content and relevant search.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- Index website – 21 votes, 6 comments
- Make USA.gov user friendly - show interaction between agencies – 12 votes, 2 comments
- Create a "buddy system" between agencies – 11 votes, 6 comments
- Leverage unstructured data & designated data pages/apps – 8 votes, 2 comments

- [Web directory to all websites](#) – 8 votes, 1 comment
- [Follow UK's directgov model](#) – 7 votes, 1 comment
- [National "catalog" of webpages](#) – 5 votes, 3 comments

Theme 14: Standardize and use web analytics to better understand customers' needs

The importance of web analytics was a consistent theme throughout the dialogue. Many users expressed frustration with the government's efforts to implement and use web analytics to more effectively inform management decisions. Likewise, users expressed the need for web analytics that work across channels, keep track of what a user has already done, and allow customized/personalized presentation of content.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Open web analytics for all .gov websites](#) – 53 votes, 12 comments
- [Web analytics center of excellence](#) – 19 votes, 4 comments
- [Analytics support](#) – 19 votes, 5 comments
- [Create smooth cross-channel designs and analytics](#) – 10 votes, 1 comment
- [Cross-channel analytics](#) – 6 votes, 1 comment

Theme 15: Allow more opportunities for the public to discuss and vote on government information online

There were a number of ideas related to online discussion, commenting, and voting on different types of government information. Some suggested it as a way to identify errors in content or to provide a gauge of satisfaction around certain websites. Other's emphasized the possibility for better public comment and discussion around the rulemaking process. One popular idea emphasized that the government must develop actionable next steps from online conversations. Generally, all agreed in the utility of facilitating greater public discussion online.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Enable easy ranking/satisfaction of content](#) – 29 votes, 9 comments
- [Make conversations actionable](#) – 19 votes, 9 comments
- [Better comment site](#) – 13 votes, 1 comment
- [Allow users to vote and comment on selected content](#) – 12 votes, 2 comments
- [Clearly understand citizen Input](#) – 10 votes, 3 comments
- [For collaboration, think structure, standards & procedures](#) – 4 votes, 1 comment

Theme 16: Improve quality of non-English content

Many ideas were submitted asking that the government improve the quality of non-English content though culturally relevant and correct contextual use of non-English languages. Poor translations were among the biggest complaints.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [Test multilingual content / design with representative users](#) – 30 votes, 6 comments
- [Bring funds/resources together & work on multilingual priorities](#) – 11 votes, 3 comments

- [Ensure high quality translation of website content](#) – 9 votes, 9 comments
- [Make strategy for sustainable multilingual online presence](#) – 9 votes, 2 comments
- [Create a federal localization team](#) – 8 votes, 7 comments
- [Don't assume content developed in English addresses all needs](#) – 8 votes, 1 comment
- [Create centralized translation glossary](#) – 8 votes, 1 comment
- [Reduce costs - only create highly relevant multilingual content](#) – 7 votes, 1 comment

Theme 17: Improve the findability, navigation and presentation of non-English content

Users specified the need to ensure that all content is as easily found and used in all languages. Complaints emphasized that non-English content is typically much harder to locate, and that consistent language experience across webpages and communication channels is important.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [If offering content in other languages, ensure that search works](#) – 17 votes, 5 comments
- [Provide notification if sending users to content in English](#) – 10 votes, 2 comments
- [Provide prominent access to sites / content in other languages](#) – 8 votes, 9 comments
- [Consistent language experience across web pages](#) – 5 votes, 0 comments

Theme 18: Improve access to government data sets to facilitate innovation

A number of citizens suggested that the government improve access to a larger number of data sets through a variety of different avenues, including APIs and data feeds. The general consensus was that by opening up this data for crowdsourcing, the government would derive great value from analysis and ideas generated by the general public.

Popular ideas within this theme include:
- [More raw data.](#) – 19 votes, 3 comments
- [Hurricane Center should have easier data accessibility](#) – 12 votes, 1 comment
- [Publish data online using open data principles](#) – 15 votes, 0 comments
- [Make all content on a .gov available via API](#) – 8 votes, 2 comments
- [Deliver data directly to web visitors' database systems](#) – 4 votes, 2 comments
- [Leverage unstructured data & designated data pages/apps](#) – 8 votes, 2 comments
- [Make US data from US websites available for free to US citizens](#) – 26 votes, 5 comments

Other Unique Ideas

This section highlights unique ideas that do not fit into the themes above, but warrant recognition and consideration.

- [Find ways for agencies to work together](#) – 65 votes, 3 comments
- [Institute effective social media emergency Plans](#) – 43 votes, 11 comments
- [Surveys and the Paperwork Reduction Act](#) – 32 votes, 3 comments
- [One resource (website) for all potential federal contracts!!!](#) – 20 votes, 2 comments
- [Allow personalization and customization of websites](#) – 17 votes, 6 comments
- [Create and maintain coding libraries for government Use](#) – 14 votes, 4 comments
- [Idea tournament](#) – 6 votes, 4 comments

- [Keep an eye on the budget - Enact a few ideas, not all](#) – 5 votes, 3 comments
- [Usability clinics in cooperation with universities](#) – 5 votes, 3 comments

Methodology

It was important to reach out across the country through an online venue that could be used to gather input from a broad range of individuals, organizations, and different levels of government. The .gov Reform Task Force reviewed previous online dialogues of similar size and scope to create a similar dialogue that would be compelling and inspire innovative ideas.

Selecting Topic Areas

The first step in developing the online Dialogue site was to craft clear, compelling questions to capture the complexity of the issues, while ensuring that the questions were understandable and engaging to participants. Through brainstorms with the .gov Reform Task Force, the project team developed content and questions to reflect the areas where the government could focus its reform efforts.

Eight central questions were developed for the launch of the Dialogue:

1. What practices, policies, and principles should guide the federal web in the next 5 years?
2. What can we do to improve the content on federal websites to make it more readable, engaging, and useful?
3. What can we do to improve the usability, navigation, and design of federal websites?
4. What can we do to improve how the public is able to search for federal content, via federal websites and commercial search engines?
5. What can we do to improve how services and transactions are delivered on federal websites?
6. What can we do to improve how content on federal websites is integrated with content that we maintain on social media and other third-party websites?
7. What can we do to improve universal access to government content online, regardless of device, technology or disability?
8. What can we do to improve how global audiences and people with limited English proficiency access federal websites?

Based on feedback from the first week of the Dialogue, four additional questions were added on September 23rd:

9. What can we do to improve access to government information and services beyond websites? For example, mobile, broadband, and other channels.
10. What can we do to improve how we use data, apps, APIs and similar technology to improve how we deliver information and services on federal websites?
11. What can we do to improve information technology and infrastructure to more efficiently manage federal websites?
12. What can we do to improve how federal websites protect privacy and security?

These twelve questions each became the basis for each 'idea campaign' in the online tool.

Incentives for Participation

One key aspect of ensuring participation in online dialogues is providing potential participants with a clear explanation of what they could expect to gain for their time spent submitting or rating ideas. In this case, participants had the opportunity to consider perspectives that they might not otherwise encounter and the opportunity to influence policymakers. The opportunity to influence policymakers was especially powerful, as these ideas will help inform the development of the first Federal Web Strategy and the update of the federal web policies. Almost 1,000 registered participants submitted, voted, and commented on the ideas, reflecting that this was an appropriate and worthwhile incentive for participation.

Conducting Outreach for Participation

The strategy for conducting outreach aimed to include industry leading experts and leaders in federal web management, as well as citizens who consume government information and services on the Web. Steps in the outreach process included:

1. Using "dialogue catalysts", including several well-known industry leading experts, to spread the word independently to their networks that this open dialogue was an excellent venue to get their voices heard, as well as to provide the government with specific advice on how to improve its web presence. Catalysts used their own blogs, websites, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media outlets to broadcast the message widely.
2. The .gov Task Force spread the word via existing email listservs, asking members to invite their own networks to participate in the dialogue.
3. The Office of Management and Budget and White House used its own social media presence to invite participants to engage in the dialogue.
4. Lastly, we used traditional press releases and media coverage

Dialogue-a-thons

One unique aspect of this online dialogue was the use of 'Dialogue-a-thons' to stimulate discussion around specific idea campaigns. Each of these events lasted one hour, during which participants were invited to submit, comment and vote on ideas in quick succession to facilitate focused conversation in a short period of time. Each dialogue-a-thon was sponsored by a dialogue catalyst who helped facilitate conversation and identify similarities between existing ideas. All information exchanged during these dialogue-a-thons took place using the online tool. There was no conference line or other type of direct communication used. Because the online tool consistently updates, it allowed for the participants to exchange ideas and comments in real time.

Conducting the Analysis

After the Dialogue closed on October 4th, 2011, a project team of the .gov Task Force conducted an analysis of the ideas.

The dialogue platform allowed the team to cross-reference ideas and comments submitted by participants in answering the campaign questions. The platform also provided the option to sort ideas and conversations by those with the highest ratings and the most comments. The ideas with the most

positive votes rose to the top of the list. Participants also had the option of 'tagging' specific ideas with key words and/or phrases in order to understand the interrelation between each of the ideas. Each of these capabilities of the tool helped the project team make informed decisions about the key 'themes' of the online dialogue.

The key themes were compiled by performing extensive qualitative analysis of each of the ideas and packaging similar ideas together to tell a common story, as represented in this report.

The team also collected and analyzed metrics on engagement and participation throughout the dialogue, using both the built-in analytics provided by the platform and a Google Analytics plug-in.

Measuring Engagement

Over the 16 days the Dialogue was active:

- There were 14,405 visits from 9,502 unique visitors who spent an average of about six minutes on the site.

- Visits were mostly split between direct visits[1] (51%) and referrals from other sites, including Twitter (47%). Search was a very low source of traffic (2%).

- There were 64,801 page views, with the average visitor looking at 4.5 pages per visit, and an overall "bounce rate"[2] of 51%.

- While there were visits from 111 countries overall, the majority were from within the United States (86.5%). Visitors came from 1,467 U.S. cities and all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia

Figure 1 shows how engagement, as measured by the total number of site visits, varied over the course of the Dialogue.

Figure 1. Total Visits to the National Dialogue on Improving Federal Websites

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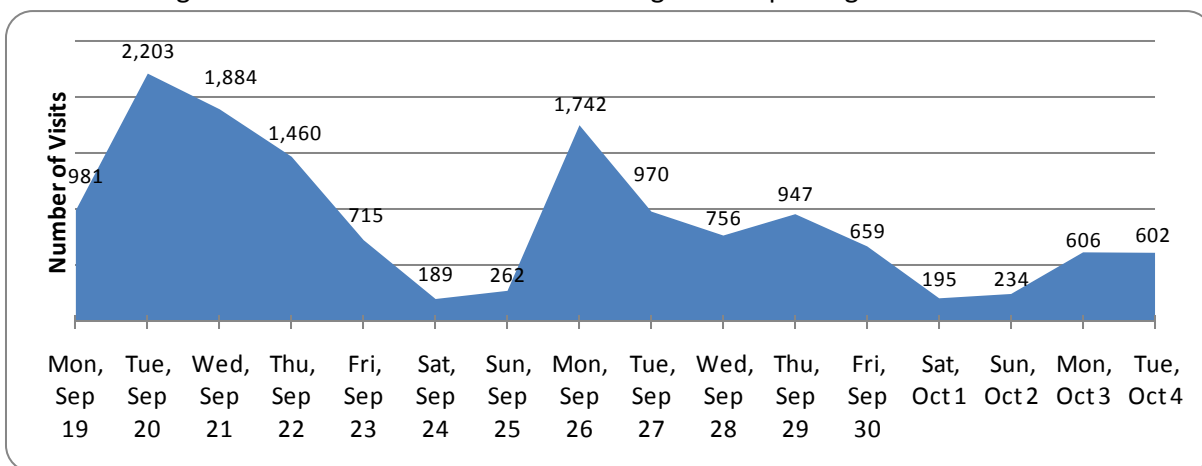
[1] Direct visits mean that the user typed the Dialogue URL directly into the browser, used a bookmark, or linked from a document or email message
[2] Bounce rate, as calculated by Google Analytics, is "the percentage of single-page visits or visits in which the person left [the] site from the entrance (landing) page"
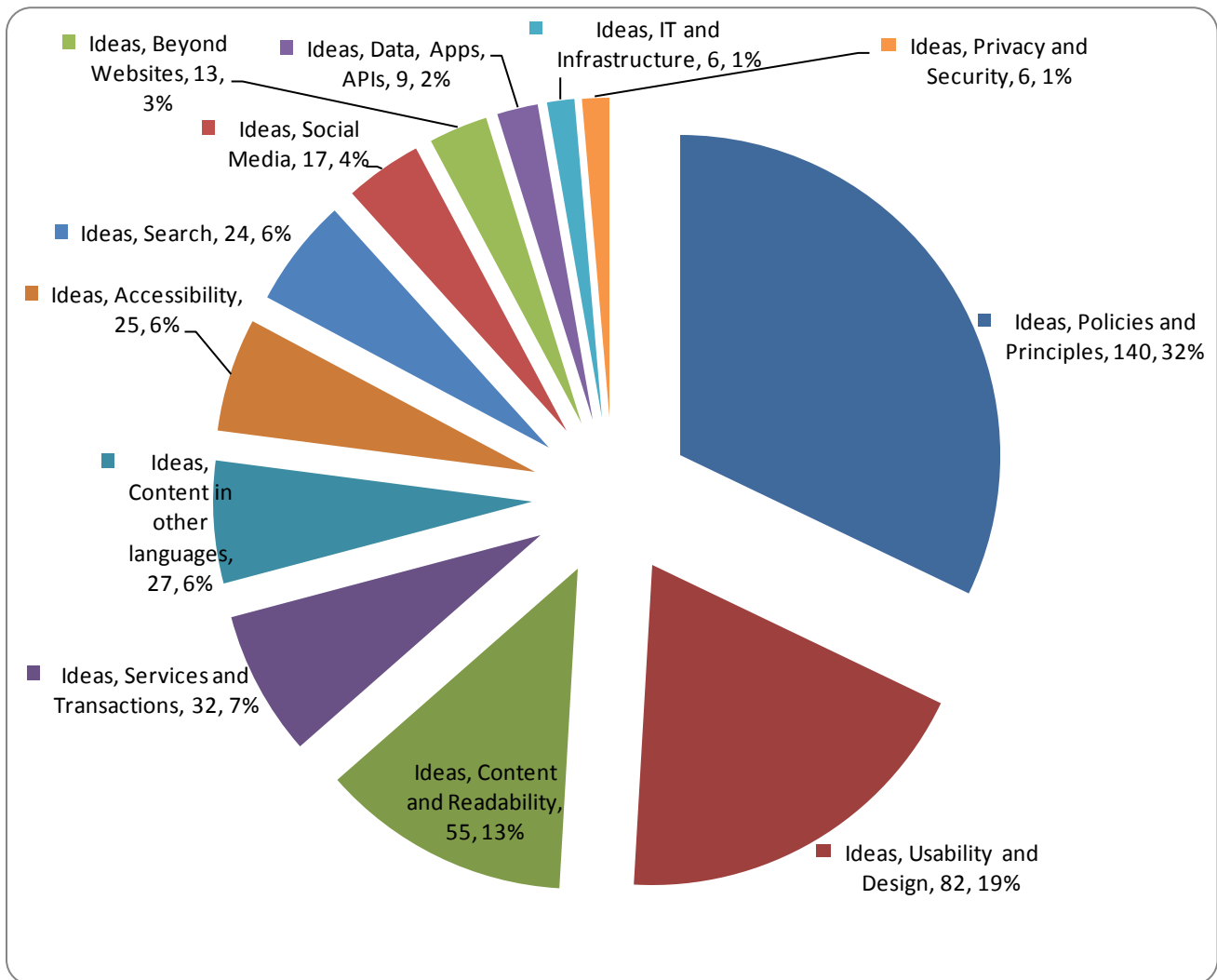
Measuring Participation

Using the built-in analytics of the online idea generation tool, we tracked participation in the Dialogue to gauge level of interest and activity in the campaign areas and to inform design of the dialogue-a-thons and outreach activities. Overall, the Dialogue produced:

- 436 unique ideas, 1,663 comments, and 8,259 votes

- 999 registered participants[3] of which 766 (77%) were active, contributing at least one idea, comment, or vote

Users were more active in some campaign areas than others. Figure 2 shows the number of unique ideas produced in each area. Note that campaigns generating the lowest number of ideas (Beyond Websites; Data, Apps, APIs; IT & Infrastructure; Privacy and Security) were those added in the second week.

Figure 2. Total Ideas by Campaign Area

Ideas, Beyond Websites, 13, 3%
Ideas, Data, Apps, APIs, 9, 2%
Ideas, IT and Infrastructure, 6, 1%
Ideas, Privacy and Security, 6, 1%
Ideas, Social Media, 17, 4%
Ideas, Search, 24, 6%
Ideas, Accessibility, 25, 6%
Ideas, Content in other languages, 27, 6%
Ideas, Services and Transactions, 32, 7%
Ideas, Content and Readability, 55, 13%
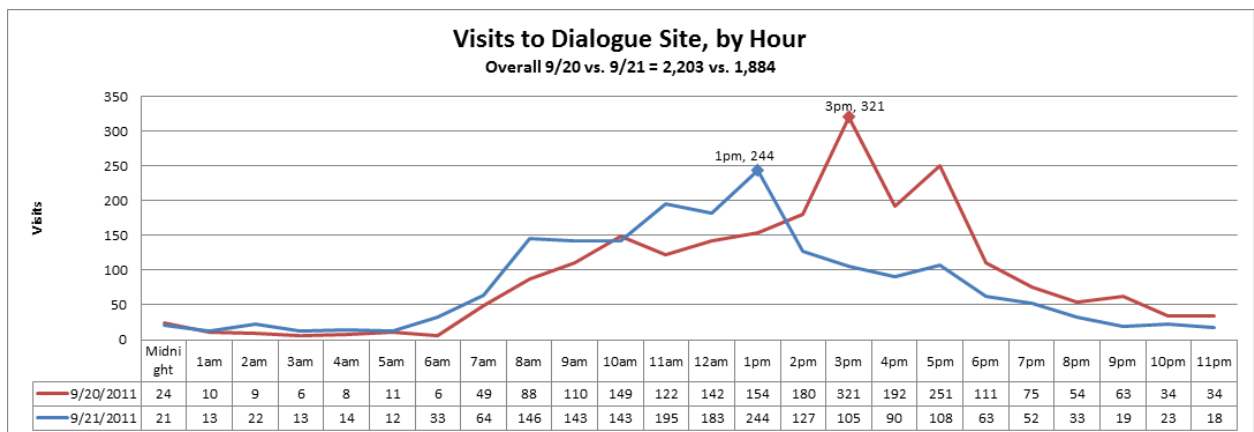Ideas, Usability and Design, 82, 19%
Ideas, Policies and Principles, 140, 32%

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[3] Registration was required for visitors to the site to submit ideas, or comment, vote, or tag others' ideas

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Best Practices

A set of best practices for conducting online dialogues was generated from the National Dialogue effort. Some of the best practices below were utilized based on experiences from previous online dialogues.

- The .gov Task Force utilized a group of industry experts from outside government during the project. Throughout the course of the National Dialogue, the 'Dialogue Catalysts' were instrumental in generating awareness and buy-in, as well as participation from key stakeholder groups. The catalysts provided ongoing advice to the project team and the .gov Task Force during and spent a number of hours contributing their best ideas to the National Dialogue. By submitting ideas and commenting and voting on other ideas, the catalysts stimulated discussion amongst participants and helped to identify the pros and cons of each idea.

- Website analytics were used throughout the project to track the traffic, visitors, and the geographic location of participants on the online dialogue. By generating a daily analytics report, the project team and .gov Task Force were able to adjust to changing participation dynamics and tailor the communications strategy accordingly. For example, if there were minimal ideas generated in the 'Search' idea campaign, the project team might utilize strategies to reach stakeholders interested in search more effectively. In other cases, if a large amount of traffic was generated from certain geographic areas, such as Washington, D.C., strategies to reach stakeholders 'outside the beltway' might be utilized.

- Dialogue-a-thons were a useful idea to generate real-time discussion using the Ideascale platform. During the two week Dialogue, an hour long block was set aside for each campaign. During that time, participants were invited to submit real time ideas, comments, and votes. Coupled with focused outreach efforts around each idea campaign, the dialogue-a-thons increased traffic to the online dialogue during the sessions. The graph below shows the spikes in traffic during two of the dialogue sessions.

Visits to Dialogue Site, by Hour
Overall 9/20 vs. 9/21 = 2,203 vs. 1,884

	Midnight	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12am	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm
9/20/2011	24	10	9	6	8	11	6	49	88	110	149	122	142	154	180	321	192	251	111	75	54	63	34	34
9/21/2011	21	13	22	13	14	12	33	64	146	143	143	195	183	244	127	105	90	108	63	52	33	19	23	18

Lessons Learned

The most important lessons learned from the Dialogue are outlined below:

- During the Dialogue, it was decided that additional campaigns would be added to ensure that all subject matter was covered comprehensively. These campaigns included:

    o Beyond Websites
    o Data, Apps, & APIs
    o IT & Infrastructure
    o Privacy & Security

    Unfortunately, the new campaigns did not generate as many ideas, votes or comments as the original campaigns. This can be attributed to their late addition. However, a more concerted, focused outreach effort was needed to support the addition of new campaign topics mid-course to ensure greater activity in the new campaigns. Where possible, future online dialogues should incorporate all campaigns at the onset of the public discussion.

- Another important lesson learned was that all campaigns should be uniform in their level of specificity. In this case, the "Policy" campaign was overly broad, and had a disproportionate amount of activity, drawing discussions that may have otherwise been conducted in the other campaigns. As a result, data analysis was marginally more complex and it was consuming to find and compile ideas that pertained to specific types of subject matter across idea campaigns.

- Throughout the outreach efforts, some methods were more effective than others. Most effective for this demographic of participants was Twitter. Notable spikes in traffic were observed after tweets were issued from the White House Office of New Media. The catalysts for the Dialogue also blogged and tweeted about the effort, which generated interest from a distinct and informed selection of stakeholders.

- Dialogue-a-thons generally helped drive traffic to the online dialogue site during set times for real time discussion. However, once participants arrived at the site during the dialogue-a-thon, in some cases they were unsure if there was a conference call to join or whether there was a web-ex or virtual meeting that would take place. This created confusion and detracted from the dialogue-a-thons. The lesson learned is that the online dialogue tool is not always ideal for real time interaction. A chat room or web-ex throughout might help to guide dialogue-a-thons in the future.

- Generally, one lesson learned was that more outreach was needed for certain stakeholder groups. Specifically, there was lower turnout of the following:

    o Non-government participants: Through analysis of the registered participants, it was clear that a large majority of those that submitted ideas, commented and voted were government employees.

- o Participants from outside Washington, DC: Web analytics showed that the majority of participants were from the area around Washington, DC.

- o Technically-savvy participants: The campaigns that were more technical received less interested and garnered fewer ideas, votes and comments. In general, more technically savvy participants would have enriched the dialogue around data, apps, APIs, and infrastructure. More targeted outreach to this stakeholder group could have improved participation.

- During the second week of the Dialogue, participation levels were not as high as they were in the first week. To address this, the Dialogue was extended during its second week to add two additional days. There was not heavy participation during the additional days. The lesson learned was that a heavier and more sustained marketing campaign for the second week would have been more effective than adding an additional two days.