

EXECUTIVE VIEWPOINT

A Conversation with

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USDA's digital manager talks about how to make citizen engagement the focus of digital services

What approach does the Agriculture Department take to citizen engagement?

One of Secretary Sonny Perdue's top priorities is to make USDA one of the most effective, efficient departments for citizen engagement. All our agencies have websites, and a lot of our sites – including Farmers.gov and USDA.gov – focus specifically on our customers.

And social media is a big part of it. For the first time ever, our secretary has his own Twitter handle, @SecretarySonny, which has grown to 34,000 followers since it started last year. It's the voice of the secretary, and it highlights everything he's doing, where he's been and who he's talking to.

Through IT modernization, we're looking at the tools we have and will find out what else we need to improve on engaging with citizens.

We also did a redesign of USDA.gov in March 2017. Our redesigned site has a feedback box, and we read all those emails and prioritize them. We have to make sure the funding is there and that the suggestions make sense. It's often everybody rolling up their sleeves and volunteering to step in.

How did you go about planning and redesigning USDA.gov?

We wanted to make it easier for people to quickly know what's happening across the department, so we added a "USDA in

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Social media is absolutely necessary because that's where people are. That's where news and information are being shared. It's a lot more engaging, it's a lot more real-time, and it's a lot of fun. Websites are important as our centralized information point where records are stored and where we direct folks, and social media is complementary.

How do you find out what customers want from USDA, and how do you use that information?

We have feedback mechanisms on our websites and social media feeds, including mailboxes, phone numbers and comment forms. We have them on Farmers.gov so our farmers and ranchers can tell us how we're doing.

Action" section. We added ways for people to sign up for email updates from any page. And we incorporated the U.S. Web Design System, which introduced us to more intuitive designs.

This is part of a strategic effort to improve on digital communications across USDA, strengthen collaboration with all USDA agencies and expand our digital capabilities. Our goals were to highlight more social and engaging content, put it at the public's fingertips, make better use of our digital real estate, improve site searches and information architecture, and have better viewing from any device. The site is built on a Drupal platform for more flexibility in content management, faster posting and multiple ways to share feedback.

We completed content-mapping tasks,

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archived outdated content and established new taxonomy, metadata and keywords for the site, which was supported by our site analytics.

How do you measure the success of your sites?

We have a digital analytics program, and building out that program is a top priority right now. That's important for making informed decisions and finding out what our customers' experiences are on the site.

We're going to tap into expertise to establish benchmarks about standard baseline data and about how people want to reach us. This will help inform our strategy. We're also looking at the different platforms to determine which reaches each audience. We want to look at all our platforms and see what the data is telling us.

What can be done on the back end to enhance citizen engagement?

It's definitely part of the conversation. We need IT to build the system(s). Before our redesign, we never gave a lot of thought to how the website and social media connect. Now we know if we're going to have meaningful data analytics, we have to have the right code on the site and the right toolsets. That's the biggest impact.

Accessibility, such as 508 compliance, is also a big issue, as is mobile use. We know that most people are looking at our sites

through mobile devices, so we have to make sure all our sites are mobile-friendly.

Our previous USDA.gov website was not fully mobile-friendly. We chose pages to create mobile versions of, so we had duplicative content. With our new site, we made sure all of it is mobile-friendly. It's a responsive design, and we've conducted testing with a number of different toolsets.

USDA has also started a departmentwide IT modernization, which includes websites and digital platforms. We're planning to duplicate our redesign across the department. Naturally, part of that will be making sure all sites are mobile tested.

How can agencies evolve with technology and citizen expectations for interacting with the government?

Agencies should always keep an open mind and be willing to look at various options. I'm really big on tapping into my federal networks and saying, "What have you guys done?" I've done that at numerous times and brought it back to my department, and it helped us.

They also need to make sure that everything – from user testing to search engine optimization to searchability, social media, multimedia, accessibility and digital analytics – is not an afterthought.

All those things need to be built in from the beginning. If they're not, you will miss the mark. It may not be mobile, it may not

be fully accessible, and it may not show up in search engines.

Data analytics can speak volumes. I can't tell you how many times things have been launched, then afterward someone asks if we can do data analytics. Well, you've already missed out on some critical data! You need to be talking about all these things from the very beginning.

How did USDA ensure the collaboration necessary to spread citizen engagement across the department?

We meet regularly through established groups that include our CIO council, our Digital Council and public affairs. They're distinct groups, but they overlap. It's important not only to share information, but also to build those relationships.

We're building our digital analytics program, and as part of that, I've met one-on-one with representatives from every agency and office in USDA. That has resulted in total buy-in. That takes effort and time, but it's critical to have that conversation.

We try very hard to make sure people throughout USDA have a seat at the table because there's a lot you miss when you're just talking through a computer. Making the connections and having the conversations go a long way toward ensuring success by increasing collaboration and making sure every team member plays a role and every stakeholder feels valued. ■