

Executive Viewpoint

A CONVERSATION WITH RICK DELAPPE

DeLappe discusses how Recreation.gov continues to transform itself to meet ever-changing user needs.



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How has the field of digital services evolved since the launch of Recreation.gov?

Obviously, technology has evolved significantly since the early 2000s. We didn't even have smartphones then, so we weren't thinking of things like apps and all the tools now available through tablets and phones. Back then, government had the mindset that we had to figure out what we were going to deliver to the public and what they would need from a digital experience.

Now we're much more focused on finding out from the public what they want and what they need, instead of us trying to decide for them. So a significant change in the delivery of digital services is first looking at it from a different perspective.

How is Recreation.gov changing to meet new user expectations?

We've had a long-term contract with a provider of reservation services and trip planning, which is what you see on Recreation.gov today. That contract is nearing its end, so we've had to develop a new request for proposals to get a service provider to deliver reservation services and all the associated trip planning. That RFP really took a different shape from the original to incorporate tenets from the U.S. Digital Service's playbook, such

as focusing on user experience, more open and sharable data, and a variety of new technology that supports what people expect today.

The first playbook tenet is we will strive to understand what people need first. We'll do that through a number of forums and approaches, considering things like focus groups, on-site user testing, user observation and continuous feedback. As we evolve through this development process, we will learn a lot. We'll also be able to incorporate new things we learn along the way.

What do you see as the keys to effective online engagement?

We've always accepted user feedback through online surveys and open-ended comments. We recently added facility ratings and reviews. We listen to calls coming into our call center and provide feedback to the agents to continually improve those interactions. We closely look at customer satisfaction surveys and see how we can continue to improve. We get feedback through e-mail and social media, along with analytics on how the site is performing. We'll continue to do all those things and try to be a little more robust in that kind of customer engagement.

What we didn't have was an efficient or effective way to make changes in feedback response. It was challenging to respond in a

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quick and meaningful way. User expectations change all the time; as does technology. We want to evolve along with it and keep pace.

We want to move to an agile software development process, which will help us evolve the user experience more rapidly. When we receive feedback that needs to be addressed quickly, it'll be much easier to do that by inserting it into an upcoming sprint, instead of a year's planning process to develop the documentation and everything else needed to make changes.

What policy or governance issues are essential to address?

In terms of governance, we've been fortunate to have a strong leadership commitment to the program and to this approach. Our partner agencies have been very supportive of the work we have done and in developing the new contract we will be working on soon.

It's also critical for us to stay in sync with our fee programs. Reservation services are always generally attached to the fee programs of all our federal recreation partners in some way. Being aware of their needs and requirements is essential in delivering a system that complies with their policies and procedures and helps them manage their programs.

Also, we want to do our best to remain aligned with the USDS playbook. That addresses the entire digital experience and the management of programs like this. When the playbook came out, I read through it then read through it again. We were looking for advice in a lot of those areas, so I was very happy to see this helpful tool. It also led to direct personal engagement with folks from the USDS and the General Services Administration's 18F program. It was helpful to have that kind of expertise involved in writing requirements and evolving our vision.

What are the most challenging aspects of delivering services online?

Where we might have campgrounds managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service, the business rules supporting those services are similar. In more complex areas such as permitting, the rules, regulations, policies and management decisions for how they provide natural resource and visitor protection evolve on separate paths.

To support those policies and regulations, we have to design custom software. Often, the software can't be repurposed because

it's unique to that one location. For example, one of our partners manages river access in Oregon. The river flows through federal land and state land and is adjacent to tribal land. There's a lot of interest from commercial outfitters that support recreation on the river. Their management plan is like nothing I've ever seen. They have a custom solution that works for them, but so far, we've had no opportunities to repurpose the custom development elsewhere.

The challenge in delivering services is meeting the unique needs of so many places. There are a lot of good reasons they have unique needs. They evolve out of local circumstances, and they're often built with the community. They're not decisions a land manager and agency can just change overnight.

By using a more flexible, configurable and agile approach in developing a new platform, we hope to support a much broader range of individual needs without complete redevelopment and extend our support services to more programs within our partner agencies.

What is your vision for the future of Recreation.gov?

Recreation.gov is the place where people can get excited about their next vacation. We hope our content inspires visitors to explore America's public lands and waters. And most importantly, our service makes it easy and fun to plan their adventures. To achieve this, we must understand what people want and expect in a trip planning tool.

Recreation.gov has the potential to be an interagency resource that doesn't take the place of the agency websites or information portals, but actually supports and complements them. We're committed to open data and sharing as much as possible through an API-centric architecture to let the system ingest a variety of data from different sources and share data so we can meet people where they are. If you want to reserve a campsite and you're on Facebook, there's a way of integrating that so people don't have to go to more than one website.

Almost everything we do these days with our phones, tablets and computers ties into “where is it?” and “how do I get there?” So we definitely want robust search and advanced geospatial capabilities. Finally, information security will obviously be of the utmost importance. It always has been. We don't talk about it, but we're very much involved in making sure our customers are protected.