

Constituent Communication in Cyberland

Using the Internet to communicate with constituents can be very effective.

By Pam Greenberg



It's a cyberworld out there and becoming more so every day as the World Wide Web and e-mail become ever more entrenched in society.

In fact, 143 million Americans—more than half of the nation—are online, and 2 million more are logging on every month.

With that kind of audience, savvy legislators are discovering it's very easy to reach out and touch their constituents via their home and office computers. And, in fact, research has shown that Internet users have a higher level of trust in government and are more likely to vote. Actually, more than 15 million Americans say they use Web sites as a tool for deciding how to vote.

"As people utilize the Internet to communicate, they are gaining confidence in the government and the process. Clearly, it is a way not only of connecting people, but also of making them feel they can make a difference and that they are, indeed, part of this participatory democracy," says Wisconsin Senator Bob Jauch.



Senator
Bob Jauch
Wisconsin

Pam Greenberg tracks legislative information technology issues for NCSL. Assistant Editor Dianna Gordon contributed to this story. NCSL's E-Communications Steering Committee has published a brochure "Making E-Communications Work, Strategies to Manage Web Sites and E-Mail." It can be found at www.ncsl.org/legis/lis/ecommwork.pdf

With these goals and numbers in mind, modern politicians are finding personal Web sites more and more attractive. They're an ideal way to provide citizens with 24-hour service and information; allow direct communication with constituents; and promote civic involvement and government accountability.

"The bottom line is that e-mail and Web sites are no longer choices. They're fundamental to modern communications," says Janet Caldwell, director of IBM's Institute of Electronic Government. "There's a new generation of voters who are really essential for legislators to reach. But it would be a mistake for legislators to think they are only reaching young voters with online activity. Some of the statistics indicate some of the most rapidly growing sectors are the elderly."

Although almost every state legislature provides a Web page for each lawmaker, there can be policies that limit information on those sites, as well as limited staff to help with Web upkeep. So lawmakers should think about having a personal Web page.

"Having your own Web site won't, by itself, make you a better lawmaker. But it's an excellent tool you can use to let the people you represent know what you're up to," says California Senator Debra Bowen.



Senator
Debra Bowen
California

To launch your own cyber adventure consider the following:

◆ Who is your audience, and what is your purpose? Think about including press releases, pages for kids and links to important government sites, such as the driver's licensing division, the Social Security office, hunting and fishing license information, and other valuable resources. Because a variety of people will be surfing your site, design it so anyone from a fifth grader to a senior citizen to a college professor will feel comfortable navigating it.

◆ Is your site accessible? The site must accommodate people with disabilities, as well as those who use older Web browsers and software. Just remember: If you are creating your site on a high-speed Internet connection with state-of-the-art equipment, most readers may not be able to download and read it easily. Most people usually use the software bundled with their computers, and many download information via telephone lines and older, slower modems. Free information on accessible sites and free resources can be found at www.w3.org/tr/wcag or bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/about.jsp

◆ What information will you put on your site? Citizens have rated contact information, including e-mail addresses, post office address and telephone numbers as important. You can add your stances on key issues with an explanation of votes. Information on how proposed legislation could affect your constituents also can be included, as well as bill tracking information and how a bill becomes a law. Add your biography—people want to know about you. On-line surveys and periodic newsletters help to keep a site interactive, a surefire way to attract and keep citizen interest.

"I think one of the most important things to remember as a legislator is to not feel so tied down in your approach to constituents on the Web," says Minnesota Senator Steve Kelley. "The Web is an informal place and having a sense of fun incorporated into your Web site can be welcoming to your constituents. It can encourage young people to communicate with you and learn from you about what is important in your state."

Be sure to update your site frequently. Updates can be scheduled around introduction of new legislation, new press releases or community meetings. Think about adding valuable links on a seasonal basis, such as to election information or links to tax forms. Respond to current issues in the news. All of this contributes to a live and vital site people want to visit again and again.

Rosita Thomas of Thomas Opinion Research held focus groups for the National Conference of State Legislatures to find out what citizens wanted in legislators' Web sites.

"They said they liked Web sites that contain bill summaries, and a rep's stand on bills and their voting record, including how they voted and why. They liked sites with a friendly and open tone and an easy way to contact the legislator. They also liked Web sites with community news and photos of their legislators connecting with people. Web sites that were easy to navigate were rated highest. For example, our groups liked picture icons that had a short descriptive label with the content behind them," she says.

FIND A VOLUNTEER

Now that you're all set for a venture into cyberspace, how do you get the technical help you might need?

Find a Web savvy volunteer who can help build your site, says Senator Cheryl Jacques of Massachusetts. "I was fortunate to find supporters who came in and were willing to lick stamps and carry signs, but who also happened to have this skill.

"They set up the initial campaign site, and they continue to maintain and support it for me. The site serves two purposes—it's a campaign site," she says "but it's also used throughout the year as a way to build grassroots support for issues I'm working on—things like identity theft and other issues, where it helps to put a human face on the issue. It also serves as an electronic meeting place—people learn how to get involved and how to take action on bills."

Jacques also has an electronic newsletter and more than 500 people have signed up for it. "The bottom line advice for other legislators is to keep your eyes open for talent—you never know who is out there if you don't ask the right questions," she says.

You may also find a Web design firm in your district that is willing to design or host a site for you. Expand your technical knowledge so that you can update or add information to your site as needed. Most Web site hosts charge fees for this, and volunteers may not always be reliable. The wired generation expects instant service and new and fresh information each time they surf a site.

"One of the most exciting parts of the focus groups was the amount of energy and enthusiasm that the participants had after looking at the Web sites. Many commented that they had no idea that such sites existed," Thomas says. "While they seemed excited about it, they were also a little frustrated because it was very hard for them to know how to start looking for the Web sites. So one of the things we clearly need to do is better marketing and letting our constituents know how to reach their legislators."

E-MAIL EVOLVES INTO A KEY CONTACT

Now that you've established a Web presence, there is another component of the Internet you may find just as valuable, and that is e-mail. A fast, cheap and easy way to keep in touch with constituents and supporters, e-mail is a tremendous asset that is becoming a preferred means of communication by a majority of Americans.

"My e-mail contacts greatly increase my personal contact with my constituents," says Virginia Delegate Joe May. "I am able to correspond with a much larger number of constituents on a personal basis via e-mail than I was ever able to do by telephone or face to face."

Every legislator in the nation can use e-mail through services provided by the legislature or a personal account.

Advantages are that it:

◆ Encourages citizens to communicate with lawmakers by providing easy access to elected officials.

◆ Improves two-way communication and builds trust, allowing lawmakers to connect personally with the public in any location and at any time. It can also ensure a quick direct response unfiltered by the media.

◆ Increases efficiency and reduces costs. It is generally less expensive than postal or telephone communications for both citi-



Senator
Cheryl Jacques
Massachusetts



Senator
Steve Kelley
Minnesota



Delegate
Joe May
Virginia

zens and legislators. A private account will require an initial investment in equipment and regular payments to an Internet service provider. But most, if not all, legislatures allow lawmakers to set up official accounts.

E-mail does, however, have its drawbacks.

One of the downsides is sheer volume, especially when a hot issue arises. In light of this, most e-mail aficionados establish guidelines to manage the electronic mail. One of the first steps is setting up e-mail rules or filters to sort and prioritize the posts (for example, select "Tools," then "Message Rules" in Microsoft's Outlook Express).

Creating separate accounts for business and private mail; using autoreply for standard responses to frequently asked questions; and directing people to your Web site or Web e-mail form can also help you manage e-mail.

One thing to consider before using e-mail to deal with constituents and the interested public is to research the laws of your state concerning electronic correspondence: Is it or is it not a public record?

Since most people who post e-mail expect a response, think carefully when formatting an autoreply. A good message tells the recipient that the response is being sent automatically, includes a thank you for the contact, gives a time when the recipient can expect a personal response, and requests the sender's name and address, if it is not already provided. You also can give your address and telephone number, as well as the address to your Web site and other pertinent state, county or city sites.

Thomas says her public opinion research indicates that e-mail is a growing preferred communication tool. And she says that focus group participants tell her that they don't hear enough from their elected officials.

"They said that e-mail gives them time to carefully communicate their concerns, and it makes them less nervous," she says. "They agreed that the key to successful two-way dialogue was to get a quick response, even if that response was an autoreply. But they want the autoreply to give them an idea

when to expect a personal reply. Several said that a response from a knowledgeable staffer would be just as acceptable as a response from the representative.

"Participants in our focus groups also said they would like to receive issue-oriented e-mails or newsletters, especially if they could select specific newsletters that deal with topics that they are interested in hearing more about," she adds.

Depending on your state laws, you might also include a notice that e-mail may be subject to freedom of information laws and could become part of the public record.

Even the most fanatic technophobe must grudgingly admit that technology in the 21st century has the potential to elevate communication between citizens and lawmakers to a new level. The hope is that this new freedom of communication will increase citizen involvement and build public trust and confidence in government. Personal Web sites and e-mail are just the beginning. 