



Public approval ratings on federal Web sites down slightly

By [Aliya Sternstein](#) 04/28/09

Citizens' satisfaction with federal Web sites declined slightly after President Obama took office with visitors failing to see tremendous improvements under the so-called Internet president, according to a quarterly index that tracks opinions about public and private sites.

Government Web sites scored 73.6, on a 100-point scale, half a point lower than the previous quarter, but still higher than the 72.4 scored the same time last year, according to the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index for e-government. This quarter's index covers data from Jan. 1 through March 31.

Web professionals and scholars said several reasons could explain the dip in satisfaction with federal sites. First-time visits to federal sites increased, but users might have had unrealistic expectations of the impact Obama would have on government offerings online.

"It may be that new people coming to government Web sites for the first time, having experienced eBay and Amazon, didn't feel as happy with their experience," said Darrell M. West, vice president and director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "This could be a newbie phenomenon."

In addition, agency Web managers could be hesitant to change site content and functionalities until they receive guidance from the new administration, the Web consultants said.

While Obama immediately revamped WhiteHouse.gov and other executive branch sites, many agency and program sites for citizens have not yet received the same attention. Scores for program sites such as [Grants.gov](#) -- an online warehouse of information on federal awards -- declined disproportionately, compared with department and agency sites.

With a new administration, "there are questions about what the funding will be for those programs," said Larry Freed, president and chief executive officer of Foresee Results, a market research firm that sponsored this quarter's study. "People are not sure if [a site] is going to continue on" and be worth investing in, he added.

Still, in an era of big budget deficits, "there's an even greater imperative to use technology to innovate" as a "way for the government to become more effective," added West, who has conducted annual studies on government Web sites in the United States and worldwide since 2001. "We can't afford to keep doing what we have been doing."

The analysis points to the tough job market as another factor driving the dip in satisfaction. During a time of massive layoffs in the private sector, satisfaction with federal career and recruitment sites is down slightly compared with the previous quarter and year. Freed said the displeasure stems more from citizens' inability to

secure jobs than the quality of the sites.

"There is a big surge of people wanting to be a part of this administration. The number of applicants was just huge compared to what it normally is. People weren't able to find the jobs they were looking for," he said.

The performance of federal sites continues to trail government sites in South Korea and Taiwan, according to West. In other countries, near-universal Internet access and much higher Internet speeds allow citizens to interact with the government using the kind of sophisticated, new media tools Obama can only dream of, he noted.

The U.S. government recently began investing more heavily in the nation's high-speed Internet infrastructure, including \$7.2 billion in stimulus funding to increase access and usage in underserved areas. "There's no reason why we shouldn't do much better over the next two years," West said, adding that the first quarter results likely represent a temporary drop.

But analysis by ForeSee Results indicates it could take years to see noticeable differences in functionality and content on the average federal Web site. Satisfaction could "continue to decline as citizens wonder why the 'Internet presidency' has not brought quicker excellence to federal government Web sites," the study states.

"A hundred days is not a lot from a government perspective," said Freed. "It is a lot from an Internet perspective. Obama supporters are going to have a tendency to be more tech-savvy, Internet-savvy."

Web consultants said over the long run the Obama administration should improve government sites with the recent appointments of Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra and Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra. Both men are well-regarded in the IT community, the report states.

Many say public expectations of government Web sites will always outstrip the real-world ability of those sites. Doug El Sanadi, who distributes a weekly e-mail newsletter about state spending transparency on the Internet, said, "Given my experience in focusing on state transparency sites, I do think people have expectations that things take place at lightning speeds -- when the reality is that it can take much longer for the government to meet those needs and expectations than it does in the private sector."

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, agreed: "The public has created an amazing, huge and detailed encyclopedia in Wikipedia ... but it's nearly impossible to figure out what regulations apply to any business." Private efforts such as Harper's legislative-tracking site, WashingtonWatch.com, are attempting to fill in the gaps, he added.

But Harper also faults the new administration for unfulfilled promises. "President Obama said he would post the bills coming to him from Congress for five days before he signed them," he said. "His [batting average](#) on that promise fell to .071 last week."

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