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## Public views agency websites as transparent, collaborative

BY ALIYA STERNSTEIN 05/19/2010



FORESEE RESULTS

Larry Freed, president of ForeSee Results, says **transparency** is about sharing information, not just about data.

An index that measures citizens' perceptions of the transparency of federal websites increased slightly in the past quarter, with the Defense Department showing one of the highest percentage jumps in its score.

The index score for [defense.gov](#) rose 5 percent from a 75 in December 2009 to a 79 in March, according to ForeSee Results, the market research firm that conducted the assessment. Defense's rating likely increased because the department reworked its site in December 2009, said Larry Freed, president and chief executive officer of ForeSee. He noted the left-hand side of the site now offers social networking tools that people can use to connect with Defense on popular commercial sites such as Facebook and Google Buzz.

"I think the significant change and the appearance of open communication between Defense and its visitors really increased perceptions of transparency," Freed said. "It really points to a really successful relaunch and redesign."

ForeSee developed the E-Government Transparency Index in 2009 to measure the public's perceptions of how transparent agencies are based on the agencies' websites. The research confirmed that those sentiments increase citizens' trust in a particular agency. To gather its findings, ForeSee surveyed 54,000 Internet users, at random, when they visited one of the sites that opted to participate in the study. An online questionnaire that uses the methodology of the American Consumer Satisfaction Index would pop up when the user accessed the particular site.

The first survey, completed in December 2009, measured 14 federal websites and the latest survey, which concluded in March, included 23 federal sites. The aggregate transparency score increased 1 point to 76 from December 2009 to March.

"This increase does not merely reflect the addition of new sites into the index that are doing better; when we look at only the subset of 14 sites from last quarter's index, we see an increase of the same magnitude, indicating that public perceptions of transparency are increasing over time," the report stated.

ForeSee Results briefed Nextgov on the findings that are scheduled to be released on Wednesday afternoon.

When asked to what they would attribute the increase in their site's score, Defense officials provided links to announcements about website features that were required of all agencies by a December directive on open government. Officials did not provide any other details or comments.

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The top three sites in ForeSee's analysis were the home pages for the [Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion](#) (which had a score of 84), the [National Human Genome Research Institute](#) (83) and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) information center (81).

Participants were asked questions such as how thoroughly the sites disclosed information about what the agency does, how quickly information was published online and how accessible that information was on the sites.

The National Human Genome Research Institute, which ranked third in the survey, and [U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services](#), which ranked fourth, are new to the index and relatively small, according to the study.

The nature of the institute's site might be its best attribute from a consumer standpoint, Freed said. The agency's mission is to advance the understanding of the structure and function of the human genome, which is the complete set of DNA, and its role in health and disease. "This is obviously a very complex concept, but they've done a very good job of organizing the information," he said. "The information is there, and it's there on a timely basis."

The site recently posted a narrative and accompanying video about an international team, which included researchers from the institute, that produced the first whole genome sequence of the Neanderthal. The research suggested that up to 2 percent of the DNA in the genome of present-day humans originated in Neanderthals or in Neanderthals' ancestors - a discovery that shines a light on evolution.

"I am surprised and delighted that the public gave NHGRI's website, [genome.gov](#), the second highest transparency score of all government websites in the survey," said Larry Thompson, communications director for the National Human Genome Research Institute, a part of the National Institutes of Health. "NIH is a medical research organization, so our information tends to be fairly challenging. At NHGRI, the Web team works hard to write clearly and rationally organize the information into related groups with accurate labels."

The information on [Genome.gov](#) is updated frequently because of the agility of the agency's communications staff, he said. "I come from a journalistic background, and we run our shop like a newsroom in a lot of ways," Thompson said. "And we believe basically in telling stories ourselves."

Freed said he was taken aback by the score that the USCIS earned. "My first instinct is that these are noncitizens [who took the survey] and they are probably more suspicious, but that may be the wrong way of looking at it," he said. "They are people that want to become citizens and [their sense is that USCIS is], 'Telling me what I need to know.'"

In September, the agency unveiled a refurbished website that now gives applicants real-time information about the status of their cases, as well as the processing time frames for specific forms at specific offices.

"When we announced our redesigned website last fall, we wanted to ensure that it reflected our commitment to listening to the public and creating a better experience for the hundreds of thousands of USCIS customers we serve," said Alejandro Mayorkas, the services director. "Based on the results of this survey, it is apparent that we are on the right track. We are proud that the public sees our website as transparent and open. It is that trust and confidence that is critical to our continued success in responding to the nation's citizenship and immigration needs."

The authors acknowledged the assessment is not comprehensive, representing a small portion of the thousands of federal websites. They also said government officials operating these sites volunteered to quantify and publish their performance, which indicates a pre-existing bent toward disclosure. "Even sites that appear to have lower scores in this short list of 23 would certainly be higher than the bottom of the pack in a comprehensive index of federal government online transparency," the report stated.

Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, said he was surprised the ACSI study was evaluating websites as a way to help agencies become more transparent. "The conversation today about transparency is way, way more about data and making data available and it's not at all about websites, which are nice but are sort of a half measure that allow the agencies to structure the conversation in narrow ways," he said.



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Harper added, "Society can do so much more -- reporters, researchers, advocates, political scientists can do so much more -- with data. Websites were cool. They still are. But I don't think that going through and ranking government websites is a useful thing to do."

Freed said transparency is about sharing information, not just about data. "Exposing more data will not solve our transparency problems, but sharing information will, and websites are an absolutely critical piece of the way that agencies and departments communicate information with citizens," he said.

He noted President Obama formulated an open government initiative his first day in office that adheres to the principles of communication, collaboration and participation with citizens and between agencies. "So how those groups perceive transparency is what really counts the most," he said.

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