



DIGITAL DISCONNECT

The Gaps Between Government-to-Citizen Online Interactions.

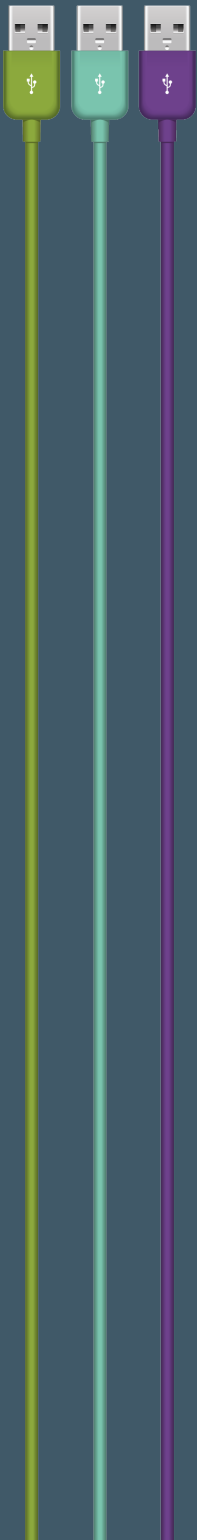
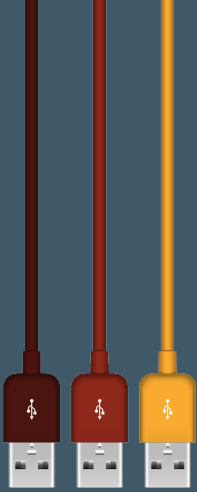


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	1
Key Findings and Analysis	4
Transactions	4
Figure 2.a	4
Figure 2.b	5
Interactions and Communications	6
Figure 2.c	6
Social Media	8
Figure 2.d	8
Figure 2.e	8
Figure 2.f	9
Recommendations	10

Over the course of six months, CivicPlus gathered assessments of more than 250 local government websites across the United States and Canada and surveyed more than 1,200 Internet-using citizens in the same countries.

The result is the CivicPlus Digital Disconnect Study, which analyzes the gaps between what citizens are wanting out of their local government websites, and how well local governments are doing at meeting those expectations.

*One-third of the
world's population
is now online*

Overview

Our world has never been more digitally connected. Nor has it ever been more physically detached.

According to a report from the Broadband Commission for Digital Development, one-third of the world's population is now online. People are becoming more and more connected digitally, spurred on through the rise in mobile technology, with more than six billion mobile subscriptions and three billion smartphones in use around the world today. By 2020, the Broadband Commission expects the number of devices connected to the Internet may outnumber connected people 6 to 1.

In the United States alone, there are 245,200,000 Internet users, according to Internet World Stats. The number is 26,900,000 in Canada.

The ways that people expect to interact and communicate is rapidly changing our world into an ever-more tightly interconnected network of digital transactions and interactions.

The most obvious effects of this shift can be seen in the business world, as online shopping and digital transactions – and the sale of the devices that make these interactions mobile – are driving the bottom line of the most successful companies, while brick-and-mortar businesses are feeling the strain of less foot traffic coming through their doors.

In this same way, governments at all levels, but most specifically at the local level, are trying to pivot and adapt to a new culture of online government.

Using the findings of two separate online questionnaires focused on digital government, CivicPlus sought to analyze and contextualize recent advancements specific to the public sector, to assess the current state of digital interaction between citizens and governments, and to analyze the gap between what governments are providing by way of digital services versus what citizens are expecting.

In a 2009 survey conducted for the Internet & American Life Project, the Pew Research Center reported that 82 percent of Internet users had looked for information or completed a transaction on a government website.

Of these online government users:

- 48 percent looked for information about a public policy or issue on a government website
 - 46 percent looked up what services a government agency provides
 - 41 percent downloaded government forms
-

Governments have not always been the quickest at responding to new technology or to providing digital services, though vast improvements have been made in the last five years. One of the best examples is the fact that many local governments are still figuring out how to dip their toes into the social media pool.

But governments stand to realize huge benefits from moving toward a more digital experience with their residents.

According to Accenture's Digital Citizen Pulse Survey, released in early 2012, digital interactions cost 80 percent less than non-digital interactions and allow citizens and government staff alike to be more productive because they can conduct their government business more conveniently.

Clearly, governments can no longer afford to ignore or put off implementing digital interactions, as this CivicPlus study aims to highlight.

Objectives

The key objectives of the gap analysis between the Digital Citizen Survey and the Digital Community Engagement Assessment were to:

- Evaluate the current state of digital interaction between citizens and local governments
 - Confirm results collected from prior digital government studies and monitor trends in government digitalization
 - Gauge interest and assess the likelihood of citizens using a government website for online government transactions and interaction
 - Identify and compare citizen demand for increased digital interaction with the online services available on government websites
 - Determine if there was a gap between citizens' demand for more interaction and the online services local governments provide. If there was a gap, CivicPlus wanted to analyze why, and if there wasn't a gap, CivicPlus wanted to showcase how local governments are meeting and/or exceeding citizen demands and expectations.
-

Digital interactions cost 80 percent less than non-digital interactions.

*Initial findings
point toward
the existence of
a concerning
disconnect.*

Methodology

In May 2012, CivicPlus released its 6 Stages of Digital Community Engagement Assessment, an online questionnaire that allowed local governments to voluntarily answer a series of questions related to the features and services available on their websites. From the responses provided, respondents received a score assigning them to one of six levels on the Digital Community Engagement Scale™. Assessment scores ranged from one to 46 points, with higher scores corresponding to a higher ranking and lower scores earning lower rankings.

The highest rank of “Fully Engaged” for respondents earning 35-46 points on the Assessment was created as the optimal, albeit nearly impossible, achievement for a government website. The designation of “Fully Engaged” is reserved for respondents whose websites are essentially flawless in offering the best, most-innovative functionality and services for government transactions, two-way communication and transparency.

From static websites to fully engaged interactive online platforms, the 6 Levels of Digital Community Engagement are:

- Level one: Static (scoring 1-3 points)
- Level two: Emerging (scoring 4-8 points)
- Level three: Active (scoring 9-20 points)
- Level four: Receptive (scoring 21-25 points)
- Level five: Participatory (scoring 26-34 points)
- Level six: Fully Engaged (scoring 35-46 points)

In five months, 262 local governments in the United States and Canada completed the Assessment. Of the respondents, 62 percent earned a score of nine to 20 points equating to a ranking of “Active”. Generally, “Active” websites denote those which provide citizens with general, sought-after information as well as one or more transactional services.

In order to confirm assumptions of the tastes and preferences of citizens as well as to follow up to results from the earlier Digital Community Engagement Assessment, CivicPlus launched the Digital Citizen Engagement Survey in July 2012. Similar to the 6 Stages Assessment, the survey was conducted as a voluntary online questionnaire. The 25-five question survey asked Internet-using citizens questions related to the functionality of their local government website as well as the types of functionality they would like to see offered.

Accumulated over a period of six weeks, 1,269 voluntary citizen responses were collected from the Digital Citizen Engagement Survey.

Respondent data accumulated from both the Digital Community Engagement Assessment and the Digital Citizen Engagement Survey, although robust, was only intended to provide preliminary results. Because a conclusive result has not yet been provided, data continues to be aggregated. Nevertheless, initial findings include substantial evidence that points towards the existence of a concerning disconnect between the online government services being provided and the functionality citizens are most likely to use.

Key Findings and Analysis

Transactions

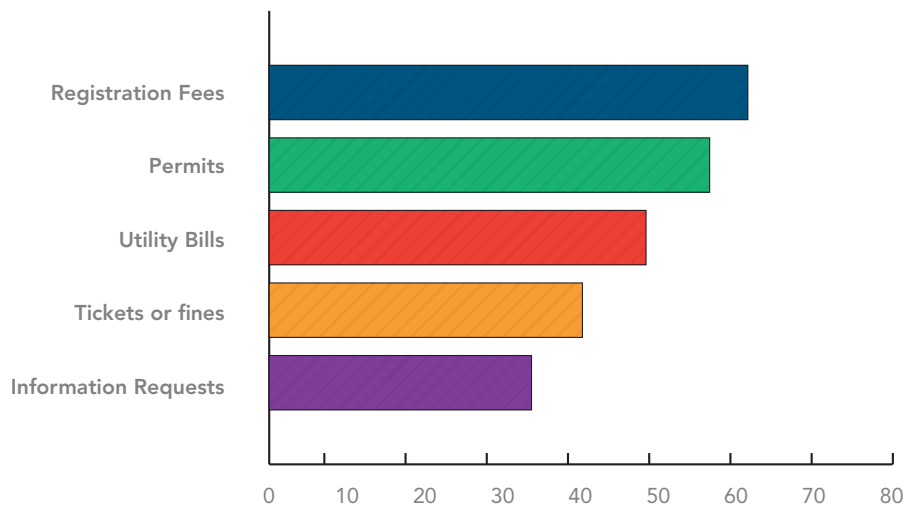
Transactional elements of a government website essentially allow citizens to complete some form of business with their local government organization online. Whether it is paying bills, registering for an activity or signing up for service, transactions within a government website proved to be among the most highly expected services citizens seek out in a government website.

Many of the transactional elements of citizen expectations fell within the realm of being able to make online payments.

The second most sought-after functionality by citizens was the ability to pay bills or fees through their government website, with 72 percent of citizens indicating that they would likely use these services if made available. Presented visually in Figure 2.a, more than half of the respondents - 61 percent - agreed that they would like to be able to pay registration fees through their government website; 53 percent would like to be able to pay utility bills; and 48 percent would like to be able to pay tickets/fines through the website.

72 percent of citizens would pay bills or fees on their local government website.

Figure 2.a If made available, what items would citizens most likely use their local government website to pay for?



In the accumulation of CivicPlus' 6 Stages Assessment data, it was found that 53 percent of local government websites offered online bill pay services for things like utilities and trash services; however, significantly fewer – just 23 percent – afford citizens the ability to pay parking fines and registration fees online.

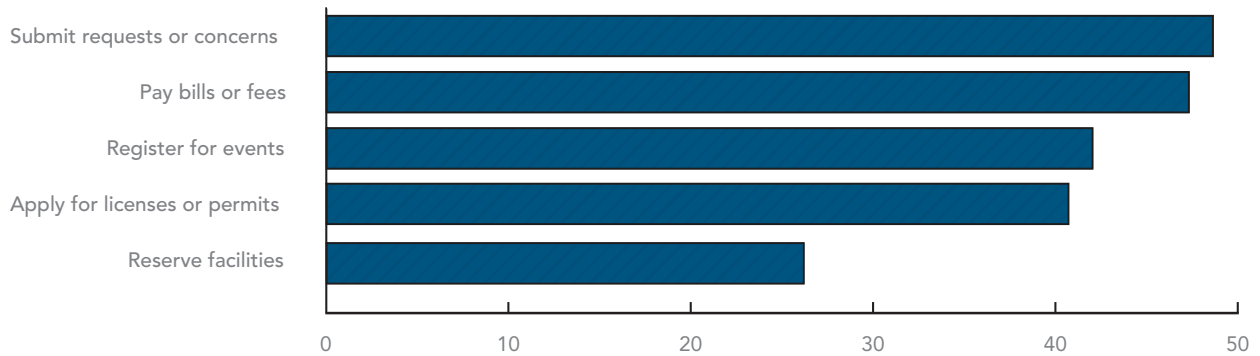
Additionally, the No. 1 type of functionality that citizens said they would most likely use on a government website was the ability to submit requests or concerns to their government organization.

58 percent of government websites allow citizens to report issues, concerns or requests online.

As it were, governments are doing moderately well at responding to this desire, as 58 percent of government websites currently offer the ability for citizens to report issues, concerns or requests online for things like potholes, broken street lights, graffiti, and other commonly reported issues.

Other transactional services that citizens indicated they would most like to use on a government website included: the ability to register for events, the ability to apply for licenses or permits, and the ability to reserve facilities (see Figure 2.b below).

Figure 2.b What functionality would citizens most likely use, if offered on their local government website?



Interactions and Communications

As governments seek increased citizen engagement in this digital age, they must offer more ways to interact and communicate online. With 99 percent of citizens accessing the Internet at least once per week and 49 percent visiting their local government website during the same time period, there is an expectation of government websites to provide more everyday connectivity to citizen users.

Interactive websites foster engagement because they focus on the citizens and actively encourage participation, a welcome change for most Internet-using citizens. In CivicPlus' research, 70 percent of citizens agreed that their level of interaction on a local government website increases with the amount of interactions available.

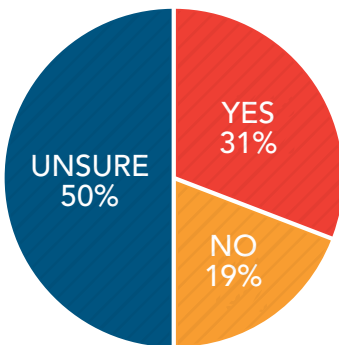
Currently, the top three reasons citizens visit their local government websites are to read announcements or newsletters, view calendar events and access agendas or minutes.

However, more than half of citizens are unsure about the actual features and functionalities provided to them on their local government website. There is an obvious disconnect between what citizens think is available and what is actually offered on local government websites. This is most likely the result of poor existing communication and promotion. A few examples of the citizens' uncertainty are visually represented as pie charts in Figure 2.c.

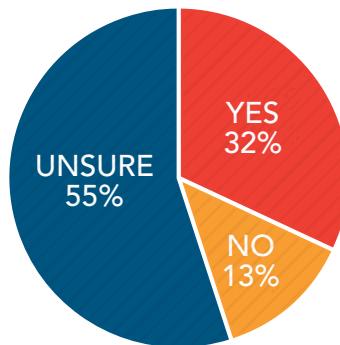
What citizens think is available & what government sites actually offer, is the obvious disconnect.

Figure 2.c

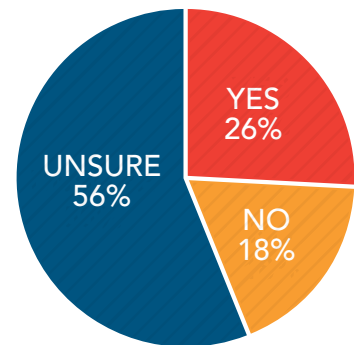
"Are you able to pay for community services through your local government's website?"



"Are you able to submit a request or ask a direct question through your local government's website?"



"Are you able to fill out and submit forms through your local government's website?"



Local government websites hold the unique potential to interact with an ever-growing population of digitally connected residents to gauge popular opinion and drive decision-making, but:

-
- Only five percent of local government websites indicate having real-time streaming video capabilities
 - Only 17 percent host live online focus groups for citizens
 - And even though 70 percent of community residents agreed that they would likely make public posts and join in conversations with other citizens about community improvement, only 21 percent of local government websites allow public posts and conversations between citizens.
-

Despite more governments having access to website features and services capable of such advantageous functionality, only 34 percent of local governments implement citizen-sourced strategic plans from feedback received on the municipal website. Citizen-sourcing is the strategic, positive gathering of citizen-driven ideas and input regarding civic initiatives and issues, usually by way of online citizen idea submission tools and/or online citizen voting capabilities.

Furthermore, the medium by which citizens interact and communicate with local governments is changing. While the majority of citizens indicate using a desktop or laptop computer to access their local government website, the frequency of smartphone/tablet usage is no doubt increasing as mobile Internet access increases. Twenty-five percent of citizen respondents access their local municipality's website from a smartphone, and 19 percent from a tablet device; but only 35 percent of local government responses indicate their municipal website has an optimized mobile display.

35 percent of local government responses indicate their municipal website has an optimized mobile display.

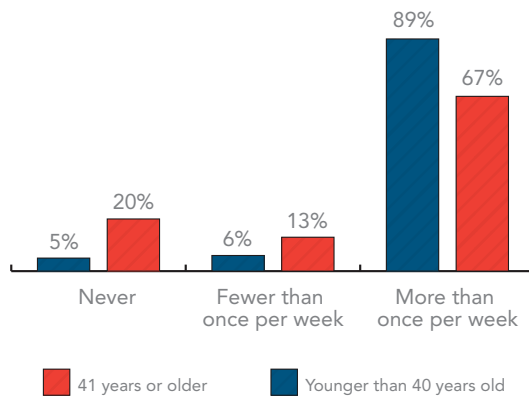
Communication methods are an important factor many governments must take into consideration with their websites, as sending information to citizens that are on-the-go becomes an expectation. However, only 54 percent of local governments offer email subscription services to residents, while 84 percent of citizens said email was the best way to communicate with them. Citizens are also looking more toward social media as a means for communication.

Social Media

A recurring pattern in the Citizen Survey responses indicated that many citizens would be more engaged with their local government if they knew about the online services that were available to them. Results from the survey also suggest that there are many opportunities for local governments to engage the community, especially the younger generation, through the use of social media.

More than half of citizens, 55 percent, who took the survey use social media at least once a day – 73 percent at least once a week (see Figure 2.d).

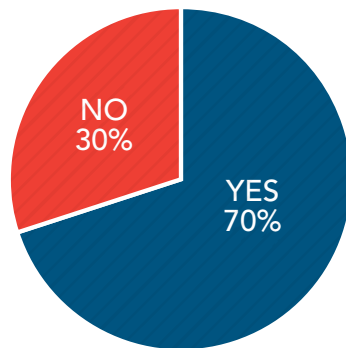
Figure 2.d How often do you use social media?



55 percent of citizens use social media at least once per day.

But how do these users interact with their local government? Shown in Figure 2.e, 70 percent of all Citizen Survey participants said they believe it's important for local government to use social media to connect with citizens.

Figure 2.e Is it important for local government to use social media to connect with citizens?



36 percent of citizens said social media is the best way to communicate with them.

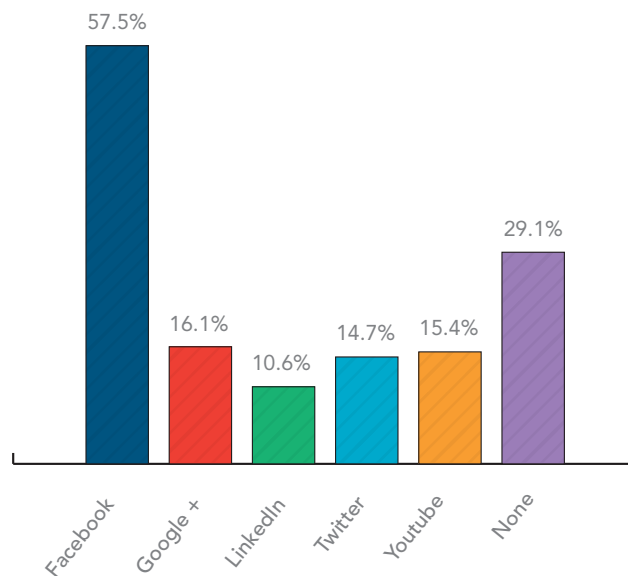
Not only do they feel it's important, but 36 percent said social media is the best way for government to connect with them. Second only to email, social media was preferred more than print mail, newspapers and text message alerts.

Municipalities appear to be on the right track in meeting citizen's social media expectations. Of the local governments that took the assessment, 74 percent indicated that they post content through social media accounts. Seventy-eight of the local governments that post content take it one step further by allowing citizens to post or comment, with 70 percent actually responding to those citizens through social media.

However, there was a gap found in the findings. Despite the fact that citizens said they want to connect with their local government through social media, only 46 percent said that they are currently following their local government on social media. This could be because many municipalities have been slower over a long period of time to adapt to using social media as a way to engage residents and may have only recently begun actively using social media, mainly because of legal concerns regarding open record laws or workload issues related to maintaining social media accounts. Additionally, some municipalities may be using social media, but have not used it to effectively reach out to citizens and promote the various channels.

So while it's not clear whether the gap is from local governments being inactive on social media or that citizens are simply not being made aware of their local government's social media presence, what is clear is that many people said they would follow their local government on social media if given the opportunity. If made available to them, 71 percent of citizen survey participants selected at least one social media channel on which they would follow their local government (see Figure 2.f).

Figure 2.f If made available, which of the following social media platforms would you use to follow your local government (select all that apply)



Recommendations

Each component of the study provided useful insight about the digital citizen and its digital government. Perhaps the most telling statistics to come from the CivicPlus research was the identifiable disconnect between what citizens know they can achieve via their local government website and what many local government websites actually offer. More than half of citizens surveyed said they were unsure when it came to understanding the basic features, services and functionality available to them on their local government websites (refer back to Figure 2.c).

Transactions. Seventy-one percent of citizens would pay for community services through a local government website and 30 percent knew if such functionality was available to them. Meanwhile, 53 percent of local governments provide online bill pay services.

Interactions & Communications. Seventy-eight percent of citizens said they would submit questions or requests to their local governments online, and only 31 percent knew if such functionality was available to them. But the Assessment findings found that 83 percent of local governments allow citizens to suggest ideas online for public comment.

Social Media. Seventy percent of citizens would follow their local government on at least one social media platform if made available, and only 46 percent currently follow their local government on some form of social media. The Assessment found that 74 percent of local governments post content through social media accounts.

More than half of citizens said they were unsure when it came to understanding basic features, services & functionality on their local government website.

Local governments are continuing to adapt to the digital needs of their citizen, and disconnect is potentially unavoidable. But an obvious need for better communication and promotion of website capabilities exists and measures can be taken to reduce the impact of the disconnect while increasing digital community engagement.

The long-term cost savings – in both hard dollars and in staff and citizen time saved – associated with the adoption of digital citizen engagement practices should be at the forefront of a government organization’s website plans. Add in the factors of convenience (citizens can interact with and become involved with their government no matter where they are, at home or on the move) and accessibility (they are able to engage with their government anytime during the day or night, not just during office hours), and local governments have a lot of persuasive forces that spin the compass needle inexorably towards increasing their digital citizen engagement efforts.

Education also is paramount to a successful digital government. Governments must not only seek to offer more by way of online services and functionality, but they must also strive to educate their citizens on the interactive capabilities as they are made available.

Governments need to establish a process for promoting their websites, the functionality available and the different ways in which they seek to communicate with citizens. Determine the best media to reach citizens in the physical and digital world and tout the functionality offered. Then hopefully, with improved edification, the disconnect will shrink.



*Want to know how your community measures up?
Take the 6 Stages of Digital Community Assessment at:
www.DigitalCommunityEngagement.com*

+ GET CONNECTED

Are you ready? Since our founding in 2001, we've been dedicated to working with municipalities to make the work of online government easier and more efficient. Today more than ever, you need affordable innovation delivered by people who care. We are the new normal. Welcome to the world of community engagement. Welcome to CivicPlus.

CIVICPLUS.COM

888.228.2233