PREPARING FOR THE 112TH CONGRESS GOLD MOUSE PROJECT

Becoming One of the Best Websites on Capitol Hill

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# Agenda

1. About the Gold Mouse Project
2. What to Focus on First
3. What’s Next (After the Basics)
4. Managing a Successful Website
5. Top 10 Improvements To Make Today
6. Additional Resources

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## About the Gold Mouse Project

Identify best and innovative practices in House & Senate offices

Since 1998, CMF has assessed the quality of congressional websites

Based on:
- Focus groups with constituents
- Interviews with congressional staff, industry research, and
- Surveys of political reporters and advocacy groups
About the Criteria

• **Quantitative (Y / N):** whether or not a site had something

  “Does the site have a THOMAS search box?”

• **Qualitative (1 – 5):** how well the site did something

  “To what extent does the site provide information about major national issues?”

Translated into Grades and Awards

Criteria are weighted according to importance and factored into a formula that resulted in an overall numerical score for the site.

Scores are sorted within each category — Senate Member, House Member, Committee, and Leadership — standardized, and translated into letter grades.

Mouse Award are the sites that score an A- or higher. There are no pre-set number of awards. The top-ranked site in each category is recognized with the Platinum Mouse Award.
112th Congress Gold Mouse Project Timeline

- Spring 2011: Criteria updated and refined
- Summer 2011: Evaluations take place
- Fall 2011: Data analysis, grades assigned
- Winter 2011: Winners announced, results released

A Look Back at the 111th Congress

- AWARD WINNERS: 22% (135), 18% (113), 17% (108), 20% (127), 22% (137)
- n = 620
111<sup>th</sup> Congress: Republican Websites Scored Better

- Democratic websites outnumbered Republican websites 3:2
- "C" or higher:
  - Republicans 62%
  - Democrats 54%
Senate Sites Scored Better Than House Sites

• Most common Senate letter grade: “A”
• Most common House letter grade: “F”
• Not surprising, given that Senate offices generally have more financial and staff resources than House offices
Reactions from Real Award Winners

“We are very excited and honored to be recognized by CMF.”

“WOW!!!! THX U so much [...] The [Member of Congress] is very HAPPY that you have selected her website for such an honor”

Reactions from Real Award Winners

“We’ve been stuck at Gold for the last two evaluations!”

“It’s just a Bronze Mouse sort of a day.”
What To Focus on First

1. Usability
   “Can I navigate the website and find what interests me even if I’ve never used the site before?”

2. Timeliness
   “Is the information on the website up to date?”

3. Information on issues
   “What are the issues before Congress? What issues are important to the Member and/or district and what’s being done?”

4. Constituent services and casework
   “What services can my Member provide me with and how does the process work?”

Usability

The website’s readability, organization, ease of navigation, and look and feel

“Can I navigate the website and find what interests me even if I’ve never used the site before?”

20% of Member sites did not have a functional search engine
Can I navigate the website?

- Navigation tools including a site map and search bar
- Consistent and clear menu options make navigation easier
- The content is scannable with links to skip to different sections and to more detailed information
- Text, links, menu options are clear and easy to read

Timeliness

- All content up to date, including issue pages, vote rationales, accomplishments, video, and audio
- Information was considered timely if it was clearly from the current session of Congress

"Is the information on the website up to date?"

While 42% of Member sites had a THOMAS search box, only 22% searched the current Congress (111th)
Is the information up to date?

Links to all the latest relevant information, not just press releases

Write-up updated with the most significant, recent action

THOMAS links and search box are for the current Congress

Information on Issues

National issues, district/state-specific issues, the Member’s priority issues, and key vote rationales

“What are the issues before Congress? What issues are important to the Member and/or district/state and what’s being done?”

On a 5 point scale, the average Member website scored a 3.6 on national issues
What's being done about important issues?

The House Natural Resources Committee – Republican website includes hot topics and information for each subcommittee.

Related hearings and documents are also available.
Constituent Services and Casework

What casework is, how to start the process, the most common problems and solutions, online resources, links to federal agencies, and a privacy release form for constituents to download

“What services can my Member provide me with and how does the process work?”

49% of Member websites did not have information on how the casework process works

What services can my Member provide?

Each area of casework has a description of what the service is, how to get help from the agency, and how to get help from the congressional office

Resources specific to the district and answers to the most common problems or questions
What’s Next (After the Basics)

5. District/State information
   “Is there information specifically for and about the state or district?”

6. Accountability
   “What is the Member doing in Congress?”

7. Legislative Process
   “How do Congress and the legislative process work?”

8. Floor Proceedings
   “What’s going on in Congress?”

9. Media Communication
   “Does the website include all the media created by the office?”

10. Communication Technology and Use of Social Media
    “Can users interact and connect with the office in different ways?”

District/State Information

Key district/state information, general and demographic information, map of the state/district, and local resources

“Is there information specifically for and about the district/state?”

27% of Member websites had links to census information about their state or district
Is there info for and about the district/state?

A map of the district, census data, a description of the district and what makes it unique

Accountability

The Member’s legislative activity, voting record, roll call votes, and sponsored and co-sponsored legislation

“What is the Member doing in Congress?”

54% of Member websites posted their voting records
What is the Member doing in Congress?

Links to sponsored legislation, voting record, and key votes by issue

Legislative Process

How Congress works, how a bill becomes a law, how Congress functions, what a Member does, and other educational resources

“How does Congress work?”

49% of Member websites contained information on how a bill becomes a law
How does Congress work?

Links to information on the rules, precedents, and procedures of the House.

The Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources has an extensive FAQ that touches on everything from the committee’s jurisdiction to the definition of “recess.”
What is currently happening in Congress, the chamber’s schedule, current floor proceedings, and the Congressional Record

“What’s going on in Congress?”

53% of Member websites had links to the floor proceedings

What’s going on in Congress?

Links to information on what Congress is doing, including the schedule for the week and what’s on the floor today.
What's going on in Congress?

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs includes a raw transcript and video of the hearings along with its schedule.

Member statements, witness testimony, and information on hearing accessibility are also posted.

Media Communication

The amount and quality of the media content, press releases, video, audio, and columns or op-ed pieces

"Does the website include all the media created by the office?"

While 98% of Member sites posted press releases, only 40% were sortable by topic.
Does the website include all media?

The latest information, from videos and newsletters, to press releases and commentaries

Links and information specifically for the press

Communication Technology and Use of Social Media

Facebook and Twitter, RSS feeds, blogs, social bookmarking, online polls or surveys, and any other new media tools

“Can users interact and connect with the office in different ways?”

83% of Member sites had RSS feeds
Can users connect with the office in new ways?

Official social media tools are linked to the official website.

Posts are tailored toward the medium and go beyond just a headline service.

Managing a Successful Website

It takes the whole office:

• Getting Buy-In From the Top
• Making the Website a Priority
• Formulating a Strategic Plan
• Allocating the Necessary Resources
• Creating a Team-Oriented Approach
• Meeting the Needs of Constituents on their Terms
6. Add links to chamber schedule and floor proceedings
7. Add links or guidance on how Congress works
8. Add Census and other demographic information about your state
9. Add press contact information
10. Connect your official Facebook, Twitter, or other social media tools to your website

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1. Use your website! Click on every link to make sure they are working properly
2. Test the forms on your website: email form, search feature, etc.
3. Update sponsorship and co-sponsorship links
4. Add guidance on how to best communicate with your office
5. Add links to roll call votes
Coming Soon

Additional Resources at pmpu.org

• Gold Mouse Project Page
  o Blogs
  o Resources and announcements

• Current and Past reports:
  o Findings from the 111th Congress Gold Mouse Project
  o 2007 Gold Mouse Report
  o 2006 Gold Mouse Report

• Your website grade and rank
  o Emailed to your Chief of Staff in April, contact CMF for a copy

• Customized Feedback:
  o Website report cards available for purchase at:
    http://pmpu.org/2010/04/21/website-report-cards/

Links to Mouse Award-winning Websites
Q & A

With award-winning panelists:

• John Clocker – HIR

• Lindsay Hamilton – Congressman Steve Israel

• Armstrong Robinson – Congressman Geoff Davis

• Betsy Barrett – Congressman John Dingell

• Neal Kirby – House Natural Resources Committee

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Comments? Questions?
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