Congress Online

Assessing and Improving Capitol Hill Web Sites

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

General

- Our research included a comprehensive evaluation all 605 congressional personal office, committee, and leadership Web sites. Institutional office sites (such as House.gov and Senate.gov) were not evaluated. Thirty-five sites were identified as the best congressional Web sites: 15 sites received a Congress Online Gold Mouse Award; 20 sites received a Congress Online Silver Mouse Award. (Page 28)

- There is a digital divide within Congress between a small group of offices that host good to excellent Web sites and the vast majority that host fair to poor sites. Our evaluation of 605 congressional Web sites concluded that while 10% received grades of A or B, 90% received grades of C or below, suggesting that the large majority of sites have only begun to tap the communication potential available on the Internet. The grades for all sites can be broken down as follows: 2.5% received As; 7.4% received Bs; 58.8% received Cs; 26.3% received Ds; and 5.3% received Fs. (Page 23)

- There is a gap between what Web audiences want and what most Capitol Hill offices are providing on their Web sites. Constituents, special interest groups, and reporters are seeking basic legislative information such as position statements, rationales for key votes, status of pending legislation, and educational material about Congress. However, offices are using Web sites primarily as promotional tools—posting press releases, descriptions of the Member's accomplishments, and photos of the Member at events. (Page 55)

- While still comparably few in number, the best congressional Web sites have both increased in number and significantly improved in quality in recent years. A previous 1999 study identified only 12 model sites worthy of recognition, compared to 35 cited in this report. The best sites are providing better services than they did in 1999, updating information more rapidly, and have become comprehensive portals to the legislative branch of government. (Page 57)

- This research identifies a hierarchy of five building blocks of a successful congressional Web site. The best sites excelled in all five of these areas. The five building blocks are:

  1. **Audience**. The site demonstrates that the office has clearly identified its Web audiences (both those seeking information from the office and those that the office wants to target) and methodically built the site around those audiences.

  2. **Content**. The site provides content that is specifically targeted to meet the needs of the defined audiences, is up-to-date, attracts new visitors and supports the goals of the office.

  3. **Interactivity**. The site offers its visitors opportunities to express their views, and fosters on and off line communication.

  4. **Usability**. The design and information architecture of the site enhances the audiences' experience by enabling quick and user-friendly access to information and services.

  5. **Innovations**. The site employs creative features that enhance a visitor's experience by making it more interesting or easier to use. (Page 13)

- Offices that have created model Web sites have begun to realize significant benefits including: enhanced the service to constituents and the public; enhanced visibility and image; the ability to target and recruit specific audiences; providing unfiltered communications with audiences; new opportunities to build coalitions and grassroots support; and increased office productivity. (Page 9)

- The public increasingly is interested in obtaining information about Congress via the Web. The House received approximately 500 million hits to their Web sites in 2001. The best House sites report up to 3,000 "user sessions" per month (a Web measurement of the number of unique visits to a site). And one of the award-winning leadership sites (GOP.gov) recorded 1.7 million user sessions in 2001—an average of 140,000 sessions a month. At the same time, Congress is facing rapidly increasing competition from non-congressional sites that are seeking to become the online providers of information on Congress and its Members. (Page 9)

Institutional and Party Trends in Congressional Web Sites

- Of the 35 Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse sites that were selected, 24 (69%) are House sites and 11 (31%) are Senate sites. Of these sites, 22 (63%) are managed by Republicans and 13 (37%) by Democrats.

- In the House, Republicans received a greater proportion of the best Web site awards. Of the 24 House Gold and Silver Mouse sites awarded, 19 (79%) are managed by Republicans and 5 (21%) by Democrats.

- In the Senate, Democrats received a greater proportion of the best Web site awards. Of the 11 Senate Gold and Silver Mouse sites awarded, 8 (73%) are managed by Democrats and 3 (27%) by Republicans.

- Among committee sites, House sites received a greater proportion of the best Web site awards. Of the 10 committee Gold and Silver Mouse sites, 8 (80%) are House sites, 1 (10%) is a Senate site, and 1 (10%) is a joint committe site.

- Among congressional leadership, Republicans received a greater proportion of the best Web site awards. Of the 4 congressional leadership Gold and Silver Mouse sites, 3 (75%) are managed by Republicans and 1 (25%) by Democrats. All 4 of the winning leadership sites are in the House.

- Overall, Senate Member office sites had better grade point averages (GPA) than House Member office sites. On a 4.0 grading scale (with 4=A, and 0=F), Senate Member office sites had an average GPA of 2.12 (C), while House Member office sites had an average GPA of 1.67 (C–).

- Overall, on a 4.0 grading scale, the average GPA for Member offices was: Senate Democrats—2.61 (C+); Senate Republicans—2.10 (C); House Republicans—1.76 (C–); and House Democrats—1.58 (D+).

- Overall, on a 4.0 grading scale, Congress had an average GPA of 1.76 (C–).

INTRODUCTION

Members of the House of Representatives represent approximately 600,000 constituents, while Senators serve up to 35 million. Communicating with them, and providing the services they seek, are major challenges to which Representatives and Senators devote most of their staff's time and office resources. Member offices typically devote 30—60% of staff resources to answering constituent mail and helping constituents obtain services from the federal government. They spend considerable time developing newsletters and targeted mailings to inform constituents of the Members' activities. Full-time press secretaries are hired to maximize media coverage of the Members' work. And Members themselves spend most of their weekends back in their home states holding town hall meetings, making speeches, attending church services and eating at as many busy restaurants as possible. In short, Members and their staffs work exceedingly hard to communicate with, and hear from, as many of their constituents as possible.

Given this reality, it would make sense that congressional offices would enthusiastically devote a great deal of attention to developing outstanding Web sites. They can serve as "virtual offices" that provide constituents faster and more comprehensive services than has ever before been possible: Information that used to take offices days or weeks to provide off line can now be accessed by Web site visitors in seconds; and visitors to these sites can obtain the information they want 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Equally important, Web-based communications have the capacity to effectively, efficiently and inexpensively communicate with vast numbers of people and target information to selected audiences, making investments in Web sites very cost-effective for congressional offices of all types.

Yet, despite the significant benefits congressional offices would enjoy by developing effective Web sites, most offices are not devoting sufficient attention to developing them. In an extensive, year long study, the Congress Online Project evaluated and graded every Member, committee and leadership Web site. We found that of the 605 Web sites we studied, 10% received grades of A or B while 90% received grades of C, D, or F. This disparity between the "good to excellent" and the "fair to failing" sites represents a disconcerting "digital divide" within the Congress that indicates, by-and-large, that neither congressional offices nor the public they serve are yet reaping the benefits of this powerful new medium.

Offices with the best Web sites understand that as the number of Americans who rely on the Internet grows rapidly, it is imperative that they keep pace with their rising expectations for online service. They understand that they can reach and serve more people more cost-effectively through their Web site than they can through their off line services. They understand that users seek out sites that provide information and services—not commercials or self-promotion. They commit the time and resources to developing extensive and helpful information geared to meet the needs of their primary audiences, and they regularly update their content. They offer users a range of opportunities to express their views online, and they work diligently to ensure that their sites are well organized and easy to use. Finally, these offices understand that the entire office must be committed to developing and regularly maintaining and improving the Web site—including the Member.

> It will become increasingly difficult for Members of Congress to appear as credible representatives of the people if their communications practices and services are viewed as antiquated.

In contrast, the large majority of congressional offices treat their Web sites as ancillary to their duties, rather than integral to them. They don't see them as deserving priority attention and they devote minimal office time to them. They update them haphazardly or when time permits. They post content that highlights the activities and achievements of the Member rather than creating content specifically geared to meeting the needs of their audiences. They give inadequate attention to designing user-friendly sites. Finally, they use their Web sites to promote their off line services—or to encourage people to contact their offices by phone or mail—rather than recognizing that Web users want their needs met quickly online.

The wide disparities in the quality of congressional Web sites are not surprising given that Web sites are still a new technology. It takes time for any new technology to be effectively deployed. Innovators must first invent effective applications of the technology, and prospective users have to be persuaded, over time, to adopt them. In the case of Web sites, new management structures and practices have to be developed for routinely assessing, updating and managing them. Staff have to learn over time how to adapt their thinking and writing to the needs and constraints of the Web. Not surprisingly, the wide disparities in quality that we see across congressional Web sites are still apparent across commercial sites as well.

Even though there are understandable reasons to explain why congressional Web sites are not more advanced, offices need to recognize that there are potentially serious consequences to not addressing this problem promptly. First, the public is likely to become increasingly frustrated with, and critical of, Congress if its sites fail to keep pace with the more rapid improvements in commercial and other governmental Web sites. It will become increasingly difficult for Members of Congress to appear to be credible representatives of the people if their communications practices and services are viewed as antiquated. Second, the relatively slow progress of Congress in providing the public online access to the information that they want has encouraged a growing number of non-congressional entities to launch their own Web sites on Congress. These sites, by filling the void left by congressional Web sites, are now successfully competing to become the sites of first choice for people interested in the activities of Congress. And research demonstrates that once Web users find sites they deem reliable, they have little interest in trying other options.

Fortunately, the task of transforming "fair to failing" Hill Web sites into highly effective sites can be completed surprisingly quickly. There are no significant barriers impeding progress on this task. Development costs and maintenance costs are low compared to the costs of off line communications tools. Employing technically skilled Webmasters is not a critical ingredient for success. Most importantly, the prototypes for outstanding congressional Web sites already have been developed by our 15 Congress Online Gold Mouse Award winners. The challenge facing Members of Congress and their staff is, first, to increase their understanding of the capabilities and benefits of Web-based communications and how to use this new tool effectively. Second, offices must commit the time and strategic effort necessary to develop excellent Web sites. Third, they must fully integrate the maintenance of these sites into the work of their offices. This is significant work, but work well worth undertaking.

Virtually any office that follows the guidance offered in this study will be able to develop a greatly improved site—if not an award-winning site—within several months. The purpose of this report is to provide the blueprint for creating an outstanding Web site quickly and efficiently for those offices that wish to do so.

More specifically, in this report The Congress Online Project:
- Discusses the benefits to Hill offices of improving their sites;
- Describes the five building blocks of effective Hill Web sites;
- Summarizes our research findings about what the primary users of Hill Web sites want to see on congressional sites;
- Provides an overall assessment of how congressional Web sites are performing;
- Identifies and describes the 35 best Web sites on Capitol Hill (our 15 Congress Online Gold Mouse winners and 20 Silver Mouse Winners); and
- Lists common mistakes that impair the effectiveness of many congressional Web sites.

It is our hope that, by identifying the best Web sites in Congress and delineating the practices that make them the best, this report will motivate many more offices to rethink and revamp their Web sites. If Congress and the nation are to enjoy the significant benefits of digital communications—better informed citizens, improved communications between the elected and the electorate, greater accountability and trust in government, and increased operational efficiency—congressional offices must bridge this digital divide within the Congress…and bridge it quickly.

METHODOLOGY

Research

To provide guidance to congressional offices seeking to improve their Web sites, we set out to identify: 1) those elements or building blocks that were critical to the success of effective Web sites both on and off Capitol Hill, and 2) examples of excellence in congressional Web sites today. To do so, we conducted one year of extensive research, which included the following steps:

- **Focus Groups with Constituents.** We conducted eight focus groups with constituents nationwide to identify their general impressions of Congress, congressional communications, and congressional Web sites.

- **Interviews with Congressional Staff.** We interviewed more than 100 Senate and House management, administrative, and technical staff to determine their objectives for, opinions about, and experiences with congressional Web sites and Internet communications.

- **Industry Research.** We identified and analyzed the Web site standards and best practices in a wide range of industry sectors to determine how they might best be applied to the congressional environment.

- **Survey of Political Reporters.** We asked a small sample of government and political reporters inside and outside the Beltway to fill out a short e-mail questionnaire about their impressions and expectations of congressional Web sites.

- **Survey of Advocacy Groups.** We conducted interviews with practitioners in the field of electronic advocacy, an online survey of advocacy groups, and reviews of literature about electronic advocacy and public affairs to identify what advocacy groups want from congressional Web sites.

- **Reviews of Non-congressional Web Sites that Provide Congressional Information.** We examined a range of public, private, and non-profit sector Web sites that provide access to information about Congress and Members of Congress and/or foster interaction with Members of Congress to determine what information and features they offer to the public.

- **Reviews of Previous Evaluations of Congressional Web Sites.** We collected and analyzed the methodologies, findings, and recommendations of previous evaluations of congressional Web sites, including our own 1999 report, to identify what other research had already been done.

Identification of the
Building Blocks for Effective Web Sites

Through our research, we identified five building blocks that appear to underlie the success of the most effective Web sites on Capitol Hill today. These building blocks, in order of importance to the success of a Web site, are:

1. **Audience.** The Web site conveys a clear sense that the office has clearly defined its Web audiences, both those seeking information from the office and those that the office wants to target, and has methodically built the site around those audiences.

2. **Content.** The site provides up-to-date content that is specifically targeted to meet the needs of the defined audiences, will attract new visitors, and will support the goals of the office.

3. **Interactivity.** The Web site offers its visitors opportunities to express their views and fosters on and off line communication.

4. **Usability.** The design and information architecture of the Web site enhances the audiences' experience by enabling quick and easy access to information and services.

5. **Innovations.** The site employs creative features to enhance a visitor's experience on the site by making it more interesting or easier to use.

Together, these five building blocks encompass the most fundamental elements of effective online communication. These building blocks were selected not merely because they describe the current best practices in congressional Web sites, but also because we expect them to remain fundamentally consistent over time. At the same time, we believe that they provide enough flexibility to incorporate new Web standards and thinking that may occur in the months and years to come. For these reasons, they form the basis of our guidance to congressional offices and the basis of our evaluations of congressional Web sites. Each factor is described in greater detail in the "Five Building Blocks of Effective Congressional Web Sites" section of this report.

Evaluation

After we identified the five building blocks for effective Web sites, we used them to develop a process for evaluating all 605 Member, standing committee, and leadership office Web sites. Our goal was to be able to identify the current congressional Web sites that best incorporate these building blocks, in order to provide other congressional offices with models for their own Web efforts. This evaluation process was conducted between August and October 2001 and included the following steps:

- **Step 1: Rough Sort.** We defined qualitative criteria by which to measure each of the five building blocks and used them to assign letter grades to every Member, standing committee, and leadership Web site. Web sites receiving grades of A or B at this step were sent to the next step. A total of 253, or more than one third of congressional sites, went to Step 2.

- **Step 2: Fine Sort.** We conducted a more rigorous evaluation of the 253 remaining Web sites using clearly defined qualitative and quantitative criteria for each of the five building blocks. Using different evaluation instruments for Member, committee, and leadership Web sites, the Project Team assigned each site a letter grade for each key factor. The ratings for audience and content were weighted more heavily than the other three building blocks in the calcula-

tion of this overall grade. Using the grades for each key factor, the team assigned each site an overall letter grade. The sites receiving overall grades of A or B at this stage—60 total, or approximately 10% of congressional Web sites— were sent on to the next step.

- **Step 3: Expert Panel Review.** A five-member Expert Panel was asked to review the 60 Web sites. Each expert was responsible for reviewing 32 of the 60 remaining sites, which resulted in each site being reviewed by three panel members. The experts were asked to evaluate the sites according to their own experience and expertise, using the five building blocks as guidelines.

- **Step 4: Facilitated Discussion.** The results of the Expert Panel evaluations were discussed in a four-hour facilitated discussion to determine areas of consensus and disagreement.

- **Step 5: Identification of the Best Practices on Capitol Hill.** Based on the facilitated discussion with the Expert Panel and the results of each step of the evaluation process, the Project Team made the final decisions about which sites would be recognized as Congress Online Golden and Silver Mouse Award winners.

This evaluation methodology is explained further in the appendices to this report. The evaluation instruments used for the evaluations can also be found on the Congress Online Project Web site at http://www.congressonlineproject.org/forms.html.

NINE BENEFITS OF A GOOD WEB SITE

One of the greatest obstacles to truly effective congressional Web sites is that many congressional offices remain unconvinced that Web sites are worth the time and effort they require. As a result, they are not devoting time and resources to developing this powerful communications tool. However, according to our research with the "leading edge" offices on Capitol Hill, most congressional offices are making a significant mistake. These offices told us that there are nine compelling reasons why Hill offices should devote greater attention to enhancing their Web presence. These nine benefits are listed below.

1) **Enhanced service to constituents and the public.** Web sites have opened the halls of Congress to the public around the clock, seven days a week. They have given offices the opportunity to create "virtual offices" that provide information and constituent services faster, more comprehensively, and to greater numbers of people than ever before possible. What's more, recent research by WorldCom shows that U.S. Internet users (now two-thirds of all Americans) would rather use Web sites than the phone or postal mail to get answers to their questions, if they can get the same answers in the same amount of time. Whether they are guiding constituents to the right resources in federal agencies; answering questions about the Members views on an issue; providing timely access to committee hearing transcripts; or updating the public on changes in the House and Senate floor schedules, the best congressional sites are providing access to valuable information and services more quickly than ever before and in the manner that most constituents want. And as all congressional offices know, providing excellent service is good politics as well as good government.

2) **Enhanced visibility and image.** Many offices contend that only small numbers of people are visiting their Web sites. They are right—primarily because their Web sites do not provide valuable information their audiences want. In contrast, the offices with the best sites are finding that the number of visitors using their Web sites is growing exponentially. These offices are using their Web sites to simultaneously provide general information to the public and targeted communications to meet the needs of selected audiences. The bottom line is they are significantly increasing their visibility and enhancing their image. One award winning House Member told us that his Web site now receives 2,500 user sessions each month. This Web volume equals the combined total of phone calls and postal letters the office receives monthly. The House Majority Whip's office reports 133,000 user sessions in a month, and GOP.gov reports an astonishing 1.7 million user sessions in 2001—or approximately 4,600 per day.

3) **Ability to target and recruit specific audiences.** The offices with the best Web sites are taking advantage of opportunities to do more than just meet the basic information and service needs of the people who visit their sites. They are using their Web sites to build ongoing relationships with their target audiences by providing them features and information to encourage them to become loyal customers. Some offices, for example, are providing subscribers issue-based e-mail newsletters, which allows the office to regularly communicate with people on the issues they most care about. In addition, e-mail newsletters provide links

to further information on their Web site, which routinely brings visitors back to the site. Other offices are devoting sections of their Web sites to becoming a valuable source of information on a specific issues which then become the "go to" Web sites for advocates and others interested in the issues. By providing features on their Web sites designed to communicate and recruit targeted audiences, the best offices are providing targeted information to their priority audiences, expanding their reach and increasing their overall political effectiveness back home and in Washington.

4) **Unfiltered communications with their audiences.** Web sites give congressional offices an opportunity to communicate directly with the public, rather than through the filter of the media. There has always been a tension between the press and elected officials over what is newsworthy and how the news should be portrayed. In this ongoing battle to define the message, Web sites allow Members of Congress to deliver their views directly to their constituents, or to interested audiences nationally, and they control the message.

5) **Opportunities to build coalitions and grassroots support.** Coordinating support for legislative initiatives is an important and time-consuming priority of all congressional offices—Member, leadership or committee. Web sites offer offices new tools for selling and promoting their agendas; seeking the input and buy in of other offices and organizations; coordinating, clarifying and communicating the message of disparate groups; and fostering grassroots support back home. The offices with the best Web sites are doing this through: e-mail issue updates designed to be sent along to friends; online "brochures" that advocates can print out and distribute; coordinated messages; and, of course, sections of their site entirely devoted to providing information about the Members' priority issues.

6) **Opportunities to foster greater accountability and increased public trust.** A recurring and overwhelming theme of the Congress Online Project constituent focus groups can be summed up in one word: accountability. Participants stated that Members who were more open, honest, and transparent, deserved greater trust. Web sites provide an easy, low-cost, time-efficient means of meeting this public desire for accountability, building trust, and enhancing the overall image of Members of Congress. More specifically, our focus group participants told us they wanted to see: Members' votes on the major legislation of the day and their rationale for them; position statements on key issues; and Members' schedules. One focus group participant, after seeing a Member's schedule on his Web site (in contrast to the other sites he reviewed) passionately declared, "I'd vote for him."

7) **Increased office productivity.** Effective Web sites allow staff to spend less time responding to public requests for simple information and services that do not require human intervention, and more time on tasks that do. By providing the most sought after information and anticipating and answering the most frequently asked questions online, the offices with the best Web sites are finding that staff productivity is increasing. Not only is online service much more efficient, it increases customer satisfaction by providing online visitors what they want and in the format they want. In short, Web sites help provide better service with less work.

8) **Opportunities to receive greater public feedback.** The best Web sites solicit feedback from visitors, which can be valuable data to any Member of Congress. Through online polls, "town halls," message boards, chats, and e-mail newsletters, Members of Congress can measure and better understand public sentiment on a range of issues. By monitoring their Web site statistics (visitor user patterns) and e-newsletter subscriptions, offices can identify the issues of greatest and least concern to the public. And they can collect this information rapidly and at next to no cost. Although the Web-based feedback is not statistically significant, it offers Members of Congress ongoing and useful insights into what their most engaged constituents care about. This data, in turn, can help offices better target their limited resources——on and off line.

9) **Opportunities to encourage greater participation in government.** Web sites enable congressional offices to better educate citizens about Congress and government, and encourage them to participate in the democratic process. Many congressional Web sites contain sections devoted to answering the students' questions about Congress. Others provide educational materials to help adults better understand the legislative process. Some committees are providing live audio and video of their proceedings, which opens committee hearings to millions of Americans, rather than to the few hundred who can fit into the hearing room. And the offices with the best Web sites on Capitol Hill opportunities for visitors to express their views and become more involved in government on and off line. This duty of educating the public and preparing the next generation of citizens is an important and time-consuming task to which Members of Congress devote significant time off line. The Members with effective Web sites geared towards this purpose do it better and faster, and they have the potential to reach many more people than ever before possible.

THE FIVE BUILDING BLOCKS OF EFFECTIVE CONGRESSIONAL WEB SITES

1. Audience

At its heart, the Web is nothing more than a communications tool, and the most important factors of any effective communication still apply on the Web: know your audience and target your content to it. As a result, the most fundamental factor for an effective Web site, on or off the Hill, is a clear and strategic understanding of who its audiences are.

However, the nature of the Web requires congressional offices to think of their audiences differently than they must for other forms of communication. Congressional offices think of much of their communications as targeted messaging. They identify the audiences to whom they want to market their messages and deliver their messages through one-way communications, such as mass mail, newsletters, press releases, speeches, op-eds, interviews, and public appearances. Congressional offices are used to being able to choose their audiences and target their messages.

On the Web, however, there is less opportunity for congressional offices to choose their audiences. Visitors come to a Web site for their own reasons and on their own initiative. Congressional offices do not have any greater ability to choose who will visit their Web sites than they have to choose who will call them on the telephone. They can attempt to anticipate and provide for their Web audiences, but they cannot think about their Web audiences in the same terms as they are accustomed to thinking about their other written communications. The Web is not an outreach or broadcast medium. It is a service medium. In broadcast, the goal is to communicate a single message to a wide audience. Service requires meeting the specific needs of diverse audiences. On the Web, audiences can generally be divided into two categories: seekers and recruits. Seekers are the people who come to congressional Web sites of their own volition to satisfy their own information and service needs. Recruits are the people that the office is *proactively* trying to reach, and they are often a sub-set of the seekers.

Seekers are the primary audience of a congressional Web site. Basically, they are the people that a congressional office is *reactive* to. They have questions that they want answered, and they come to a congressional Web site with that purpose in mind. Typically, these questions do not differ from those that congressional offices are used to answering off line. Congressional offices are used to satisfying seekers off line via responses to constituent mail, phone calls, questions at public events, and walk-ins to the office. They are used to providing information to seekers on an as-needed basis off line, but their needs can often be anticipated and satisfied by providing the same information online. Some of the key seekers of congressional information—on and off line—are:
- Constituents
- Reporters
- Interest Groups
- Students and Educators

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As noted above, recruits are the people whom an office is actively trying to reach, often targeted through outreach communications media, such as mass mailings. Congressional offices will want to build online relationships with their recruits by providing information off line that will bring the recruits to the Web site, or providing information online that will catch their eyes and encourage them to come back. Each congressional office should have different recruits, based on its individual goals, priorities, and outreach strategies.

The Web is not an outreach or broadcast medium. It is a service medium.

2. Content

Content is the most extensive and substantive factor of a congressional Web site, and it is inextricably linked with audience. If an office fails to clearly identify its seekers and recruits, it will be nearly impossible to provide the content that meets their needs and encourages them to return. Once its audiences have been identified, however, offices can create timely and targeted content that will:

- Enable constituents and stakeholders to receive excellent services;
- Support the goals and objectives of the office;
- Build strong online relationships with their visitors;
- Attract and retain visitors;
- Provide answers to frequently asked questions;
- Save time and money on constituent services;
- Strengthen the public's understanding of the Congress; and
- Foster the public's trust in the democratic process.

Congressional offices can do this for their Web audiences by being conduits, online, of the same high quality information and services they provide off line. Some examples of content that will meet the needs of many congressional audiences include:

- **Legislative Information.** Legislation is the essence of Congress, and congressional offices are the conduits of legislative information to their constituents. Constituents come to a congressional Web site to find out about the legislation on which their Member, committee, or leader is active. They also come to conduct general legislative research. Offices that are providing the most valuable legislative services to their constituents are those that use their Web sites to make it easy to find and understand legislative information and enable visitors to search Thomas—the Library of Congress' database of congressional legislative information. In our evaluation of congressional Web sites, we looked for floor statements, voting records, legislation sponsored and co-sponsored, committee assignments, a link to and search engine for Thomas, legislative schedules, and educational information on the legislative process.

- **Issue Information.** Most constituents are concerned with broad issues, rather than with specific bills. These concerns should be addressed on congressional Web sites. Constituents want to understand the issues that Congress is tackling, especially those that affect them directly. We searched congressional Web sites for information on a range of local district/state issues, national issues, issues the Member or committee is active on, as well as current "hot topic" issues.

- **Demonstrations of Accountability.** From our focus groups we learned that constituents feel very strongly that Members of Congress should demonstrate—both on and off line—their accountability to their constituents. They want to understand what the Member, committee, or leader is trying to accomplish and why. They want to know what the Members are doing, who they are meeting with, how they are voting, and how they can be reached. According to the participants in our focus groups, congressional Web sites can display accountability by providing Members' views on key issues, voting records, schedules, and examples of what a congressional workday entails. Some of this information, such as voting records, is available on third party Web sites, and when Members do not provide it, the constituents in our focus groups told us they feel as though the Members are trying to hide something.

- **Educational Information about Congress.** Our research shows that constituents feel it is important for congressional Web sites to serve as educational resources for their audiences, but offices are not generally providing it. One of our focus group participants—a teacher—told us an anecdote that demonstrates this need. In teaching her class about how a bill becomes a law, she went to her Representative's Web site, where she found no information on the subject. After searching other congressional Web sites without success, she settled instead for the ABC TV Schoolhouse Rock segment "I'm Just a Bill," which she used to teach her lesson. When seeking basic information about Congress, constituents look to Members of Congress first. If they cannot find the information, they will look elsewhere—and wonder why their Members do not provide it.

- **Constituent Services.** Constituents want access to basic congressional services and assistance without having to directly contact the office. According to our constituent focus groups, many constituents are reluctant to contact congressional offices, especially for simple guidance and problem solving, and are far more comfortable seeking assistance online. A detailed constituent services section on a congressional Web site can provide: answers to frequently asked service questions; the ability to initiate basic services, such as flag, tour, photo, and document requests, academy nomination processes, and internship and page consideration; instructions and guidance for accessing federal resources, including grants, small business assistance, student loans, immigration and visa assistance, passports, social security, veterans, and Medicare benefits, etc.; and access to a range of information, services, and resources that are commonly requested off line. This can save time for both constituents and staff, and may serve constituents not otherwise likely to contact the office.

- **References to Constituents and the District or State.** Constituents appreciate being acknowledged on congressional Web sites through: mention of specific constituent groups or individuals; schedules of town hall meetings and other events in the district or state; information about how legislation affects the region; and references to the people, places, and events back home. These features draw constituents in, and help mitigate the "inside the Beltway" image that is often attached to Members of Congress.

- **Contact Information.** Constituents want to communicate with their elected officials whenever and however they choose. Basic contact information, including telephone and fax numbers and the office's physical and e-mail addresses,

"If (Member schedules and voting records) were more accessible to us, our Congressman would be more accountable….If we made them more accountable, then people would be more apt to…trust them a little bit more."

—Focus Group participant

should be easily found on all Member, committee and leadership Web sites. Unfortunately, our evaluation process revealed that numerous sites buried this information, and some did not provide it at all. Others, meanwhile, went beyond the basics, providing staff contact information and specific instructions on how to schedule an appointment with the office.

- **Press Information.** According to our research, reporters are likely to use congressional Web sites to help them collect information for their stories on Congress and Members of Congress. Reporters look for up-to-date press releases, press release archives, photos of events, Members' rationales for their votes on key legislation, summaries of important national issues, and descriptions of Members' accomplishments in Congress. Press contact information also helps reporters know who to contact for statements.

- **Member Information.** Every congressional Web site should include a biography and photo of the Member or Chairman as background information. Promotional materials are also appropriate in the Member information section of a congressional Web site, because it is what visitors are looking for when they click to it. Audiences are seeking to learn about the Member's priorities, interests, accomplishments, experience, and expertise.

- **Information about Current and National Issues.** Certain issues and events resonate with the public nationally and grab their attention. As more and more visitors take to the Web for news, congressional Web sites have the potential to be a resource for information on these "hot topics." For example, human cloning recently provoked a lot of attention and a lot of action in Congress, which caused constituents to flood offices with their opinions. Congressional Web sites can address this and other issues of heightened public interest by highlighting recently-introduced bills, posting the Member's views on the subject, or linking to other reputable resources on the issues.

- **Links to Relevant Resources.** Links to additional information enhance the content of a Web site. They broaden the scope and depth of a site by offering access to more detailed and varied information than a single resource can provide. They can also increase credibility and provide a level of neutrality by providing links to information on other reputable and unbiased sources, such as the House and Senate Web sites, the Library of Congress, or federal agency Web sites.

"Congressional communications should be a two-way dialogue, but it's not."

—Focus Group participant

3. Interactivity

The Web provides a wide range of options for facilitating interaction between Members of Congress and their constituents. For congressional offices, fostering online interactivity can: keep constituents and other audiences informed; create ongoing relationships that foster constituent loyalty; further the Member's goals and legislative priorities; streamline and reduce staff workloads; and foster e-democracy.

We found through our focus group research that constituents are adamant that they would like interaction with their Members of Congress to take place online as well as off. Congressional Web sites can foster interaction with constituents

in a variety of ways. Congressional offices can use their Web sites to promote off line interaction by providing postal addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, and other contact information. In addition, the Internet offers many tools that can produce quality interaction—and even dialogue—between Members of Congress and constituents without that interaction having to take place in person or in real time.

Features that promote interactivity on congressional Web sites are:
- Subscriptions to e-mail updates/newsletters;
- Online surveys and polls;
- Bulletin boards and chat rooms;
- Feedback and comment forms;
- Write Your Representative (a zip code based Web mail service available in the House of Representatives);
- Public e-mail address; and
- Staff contact information.

Few offices are using tools such as online surveys and polls, chat rooms, or bulletin boards, yet these tools, when applied strategically, can enhance the relationship between constituents and their Members of Congress. They can invite participation in the legislative process in ways that are most convenient for the constituent. They can also help streamline the communications process for congressional offices, since many of these opportunities for constituent communication do not require a reply.

One of the easiest and most preferred interactive tools, however, is e-mail. Most congressional offices currently provide e-mail addresses, Web forms, or links to Write Your Representative, though few are sending e-mail responses. Fewer still are sending out e-mail newsletters or issue updates, which, in the private sector, has proven one of the most effective online interactive tools available. E-mail newsletters enable constituents to opt in to receive updates from the office, enabling Members of Congress to communicate regularly with people who want to hear from them. This keeps constituents informed of action in Congress, important issues, and the Member's views and accomplishments. It can also foster loyalty and invite people to check the Web site regularly for timely information and important resources.

4. Usability

Usability—the ease with which visitors can access and use Web sites—can greatly affect the success of a Web site. Research shows that Internet users will put up with a difficult-to-use Web site if the content is very good, but if they have to work too hard or wait too long to find the information they came for, they are less likely to come back.

Usability is a critical factor for any Web site, but it is particularly important for a public or government Web site. Government Web sites, including those of Members of Congress, should be easy for all Americans to use, no matter how they access the Internet. The audience of a public Web site spans a wide range of technical knowl-

edge and ability, and the members of the audience will access the Web site with a variety of hardware, software, bandwidth, and access devices. For this reason, public Web sites must be designed with the lowest common denominator in mind. The elements of usability that are especially important in this regard are:

- **Logically constructed information architecture.** Easy-to-use Web sites organize information in a way that is logical to their audiences by using language, topics, and information groupings that make sense to them. Providing links in helpful and appropriate places throughout a Web site will also increase its usability. An example of effective information architecture is the Yahoo! Web site. This portal Web site organizes information in a variety of different ways and, through helpful links to related topics and information, enables visitors to quickly access information via any number of different paths.

- **Ease of navigation.** Easy-to-use Web sites enable visitors to move smoothly through the site by providing clear navigation bars, menus of options, and links. They also ensure that visitors do not get lost and always know how they got to a certain point and how to get out of it. If visitors have to use the "Back" button to move through the site, for example, the Web site is not very easy to use.

"Make them more user-friendly…it takes forever just to find what I'm looking for."

—Focus Group participant

- **Readability.** The content of easy-to-use Web sites is simple for visitors to read. Factors that impact the readability of a Web site include: the font size and style; the degree to which the font and background colors contrast; the absence of distracting moving animations, text, etc.; the length and structure of sentences and paragraphs; and the degree to which text can be scanned, rather than read in its entirety.

- **Timeliness.** Easy-to-use Web sites have content that is up to date and clearly dated, so visitors can tell if the information on which they are relying is from the 107th Congress or the 104th. Visitors also need to get the sense that the site is responsive to the important issues and concerns of the day. For example, the Members that still had smiling photos and upbeat-sounding welcome messages on their home pages after the tragedies of September 11, 2001 were untimely to the point of being inappropriate.

- **Consistency.** Usable Web sites will have consistent layouts, designs, formats, and menu bars on every page. This ensures that visitors can quickly and easily navigate the site without having to figure out something new on every page. Each page should follow the same pattern. For example, if a site's navigation menu is on the left side of the home page, it should be on the left side of all subsequent pages.

- **Load time.** Usable Web sites should take no more than ten seconds to load using a 56kbps dial-up connection to the Internet. Despite the growing availability of broadband connections, more than three-quarters of wired households in America still use a 56kbps or slower modem to connect to the Internet. Web sites that are not designed with this factor in mind risk losing most of their visitors, who will either be unable to access the site in its entirety or unwilling to wait for it to load. Most of the newer Web site development software programs have features that display the load time of a Web site. Load time—and several other important usability statistics—can also be evaluated by Web Site Garage (http://websitegarage.netscape.com/), a free online utility from Netscape.

- **Look and feel.** How a Web site looks and the tone that the design and graphics convey can also have a great impact on the usability of a Web site. Too many bright colors and moving objects can be very distracting. Non-standard layouts can be confusing. And too many graphics and photos can leave little room on a page for the content that visitors are seeking. Careful attention to layout, graphics design, color and other factors will ensure the site is user-friendly and also contribute to a pleasing, inviting, eye-catching design.

- **Accessibility.** Usable Web sites are accessible to all visitors, even those with visual impairments or other handicaps. The Internet has provided tremendous opportunities for people with disabilities to access information, purchase products, and interact with others in a way never before possible. Unfortunately, many common and "cutting edge" Internet technologies actually reduce the degree to which people with disabilities can access information on the Web via assistive devices and technologies. For this reason, usable Web sites follow the standards for accessible Web sites created by the World Wide Web Consortium (http://www.w3c.org) and adopted by the federal government.

- **Privacy.** Although privacy is not usually categorized as a usability issue, it is becoming an increasingly important factor in whether or not visitors trust a Web site—and if they don't trust the site, they won't use it. Privacy is especially important for government Web sites. Constituents want to know that their personal information will remain personal, and it is important—especially for public-sector Web sites—to assure them of this. Privacy statements should be included on every congressional Web site. They should be written in user-friendly language that is designed to put visitors at ease about what information the site is collecting, why, and what steps the office will take to safeguard any personal information. If a Web site asks for people's names, addresses, and zip codes before they can correspond with the office, the privacy statement should explain why the information is being collected and what will happen to it later.

The biggest privacy issue facing Web sites right now, however, is probably associated with the use of "cookies." Cookies are small text files some Web sites leave on visitors' computers, either with or without their permission. Cookies are often used to enable a Web site to "recognize" returning visitors and provide information targeted to a specific individual's preferences, which is an extremely user-friendly feature. However, cookies are considered by many to be a double-edged sword. The same technology that enhances a visitors' experience by providing targeted information can also be used for invasive marketing purposes. For this reason, cookies have a bad reputation, and many people use special settings on their computers to prevent Web sites from leaving them. If a congressional Web site leaves cookies on visitors' computers—and some of them currently do—the privacy statement should *very clearly* explain them. Privacy statements should describe what the cookie is, why it is being left, how the information in the cookie will be used, and whether or not the information will be distributed or used for purposes other than providing personalized information on the Web site. Even if the cookies are harmless and intended to improve the experience on a Web site, visitors are usually very wary of them.

5. Innovations

As noted earlier, innovations are the icing on the cake. The Web provides a range of innovative tools and capabilities, such as multimedia features, database access, real-time updates, high-resolution graphics, and countless others. However, since none of these features can serve as substitutes for good, audience-focused content, interactivity, and usable Web design, our evaluation process treated innovations as benefits, not necessities, and we did not penalize sites that lacked innovative features.

Innovations can help make a congressional Web site more interesting, easier to use, or more valuable to constituents. They are not necessarily the products of cutting-edge Internet technology, nor are they necessarily unique to a single site. They are the products of creative and strategic thinking about what features and devices will enhance a visitor's experience on a Web site. However, because most congressional sites lag behind current industry norms, some of the innovations we looked for in evaluating them would be considered standard elements on non-congressional Web sites. These would include, for example:

- Search engines
- Privacy statements
- Feedback forms
- Online surveys and polls
- Audio/video files
- Bulletin boards
- Chat rooms

Because many of these elements cannot be found on most congressional Web sites—which makes them innovative in the congressional environment—we made a decision to place them in the "Innovations" category. Generally, we found that the most valuable and interesting innovations on Hill Web sites are those that help the audiences find the information they came for quickly and easily, not those that enable a Web site designer to display technical talent. For example, some congressional Web sites included step-by-step casework guidance, database-driven Member schedules, glossaries of legislative terms, and first-person accounts from the Member about congressional activities.

Sometimes, tools that designers feel make the site more interesting and appealing do just the opposite—they inhibit use. Research shows that features designed to impress visitors, while serving no other discernible educational or communication purpose, not only frustrate visitors, but also tend to discourage them from continuing to use the site. In some cases, they may even discourage some users from ever returning. These innovations include distracting animations, graphics intense "splash" pages, introductory "movies," and menus that appear only when the cursor is held in a particular spot, to cite a few examples. While we do hope to discourage the use of these types of features, we did not, in our evaluation process, penalize sites that used them, unless they significantly inhibited the usability of the site.

ASSESSING THE PERFORMANCE OF CONGRESSIONAL WEB SITES

Using the five building blocks for effective congressional Web sites as our guide, we evaluated all 605 Member office, standing committee, and leadership office Web sites and assigned grades to each. In this section, we report the general findings of our evaluation in order to provide Congress with an overall assessment of its performance. Following is an analysis of the Congress-wide grade distribution, broken out in a number of ways that enable us to explore a range of interesting and important questions, such as:

- How are congressional offices performing overall?
- How do House Web sites compare to Senate Web sites?
- How do Democratic Web sites compare to Republican Web sites, Congress-wide?
- How do Democratic sites compare to Republican sites within each chamber?
- How do committee sites compare to Member office and leadership sites?

In addition to analyzing the overall grades of congressional Web sites, we also provide an analysis of the best Web sites on Capitol Hill – the 35 Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse Award recipients – by chamber, party, and office types (i.e. Member offices vs. committees). This enables us to identify and discuss trends in the best congressional Web site practices. Finally, we describe the Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse Awards, and name the 35 offices that received them.

Analyzing Grade Distribution Trends

Table 1 reveals a number of important insights about the performance of congressional Web sites. First, there is an extremely wide distribution in the grades and the quality of congressional Web sites in every category—House and Senate Member office, committee and leadership sites. Intuitively this makes sense. Web sites are still a relatively new communications medium and there is a wide divergence of opinion about their relative importance within Congress. Some offices see their Web sites as an office priority that deserve the attention of every person in the office, while others view their sites as of minimal importance that only deserve the part-time attention of one staff person.

Table 1: Grade Distribution by Office Type and Chamber

| | Member Offices | | Committees | | Leadership | Grade |
	House	Senate	House	Senate	Combined	Dist Total
A	0.9%	4.0%	9.1%	4.8%	27.3%	2.5%
B	5.5%	14.0%	18.8%	0.0%	9.1%	7.4%
C	59.6%	64.0%	42.4%	57.1%	18.2%	58.8%
D	28.2%	16.0%	27.3%	28.6%	36.4%	26.3%
F	5.9%	2.0%	3.0%	9.5%	9.1%	5.3%
GPA	1.67	2.12	2.06	1.62	2.09	1.76

Congress Online Project Grading Scale

To more easily convey how congressional Web sites performed in our evaluation, we developed a grading scale that reflects our evaluation process and our calculation of the grade point averages of congressional Web sites. Following is the scale we used and the method we used to assign each grade.

A = Excellent Sites. These are the Congress Online Gold Mouse Award winning sites. These sites outperformed all other sites at every stage of our evaluation process because they excel at every one of the five building blocks. Each was reviewed by at least six different people, including three members of our Expert Panel, and were determined to be the top tier of Web sites on Capitol Hill. These sites should serve as models to their colleagues of the current best practices for congressional Web sites.

B = Good Sites. These Web sites made it to our Expert Panel review, but did not receive the Congress Online Gold Mouse Award. They performed exceptionally well for the building blocks of audience and content, and admirably for the other building blocks. However, each had weaknesses—usually in the area of interactivity and/or usability—that prevented it from being considered an A Web site. The Congress Online Silver Mouse Award winners are among the B Web sites, though we consider them B+ sites.

C = Fair Sites. These Web sites were either assigned grades of C in the first round of our evaluation process, or they were determined to be significantly weaker in content than the B sites, upon more rigorous evaluation. For example, Member Web sites that lacked any constituent service information beyond a message to "contact my office" or press releases more than six weeks out of date would have been given grades of C. These sites performed solidly in interactivity, usability, and innovations, however, their performance in the other building blocks could not substitute for what they lacked in content.

D = Poor Sites. These were the Web sites that received grades of D in the first round of our evaluation process. They performed below average for audience and content, usually by providing generic information and severely limited content. Most also performed subpar when evaluated according to the other building blocks, as well.

F = Failing Sites. These were the Web sites that received grades of F in the first round of our evaluation process. These sites performed well below average for audience and content. They also usually had glaring usability problems—such as being severely out-of-date, taking well over one minute to load, using out-of-the-ordinary technologies, or having "under construction" notices, rather than content, in key areas of the site—which made the site virtually impossible for the average Web user to access and use.

Performance of Congressional Web Sites

Second, and most importantly, this table shows that 10% of the congressional Web sites received grades of A or B while 90% of the sites received grades of C or lower. This digital divide within Congress between those offices that have developed "excellent" and "good" sites and those offices that have "fair," "poor" or "failing" sites represents a problem and a missed opportunity. It indicates that the large majority of congressional offices are not developing effective Web sites and that neither congressional offices nor the public they serve are, in most cases, enjoying the substantial benefits of digital communications.

Figure 1: Grade Distribution in all Offices
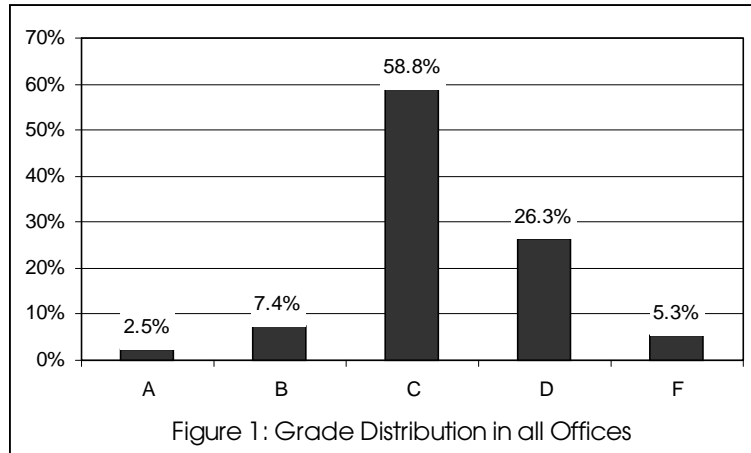
Third, Senate *Member office sites* are performing somewhat better than House Member office sites. Overall, 18% of the Senate Member offices sites compared to 6% of all House Member office sites received grades of either an A or a B. In addition, the collective grade point average (GPA) across all Senate Member offices is 2.12 (on a 4.0 scale) compared to a 1.67 average across all House Member office sites. This disparity in quality of Web sites is likely explained by the disparity in budgets between House and Senate Member offices. Senate offices have larger budgets and larger staff and, therefore, tend to devote greater resources to their Web sites.

Fourth, House committees are using their Web sites far more effectively than are their Senate counterparts: Table 1 indicates that while 27% of House committee sites received grades of A or B, only 5% of Senate committees received comparable grades. Furthermore, the GPA of House committees is 2.06 compared to a GPA of 1.62 in the Senate. This data suggests that House committees are doing a far better job of effectively using their Web sites to communicate valuable information to online visitors both internal and external to Congress.

Table 2: Grade Point Averages by Chamber (All Offices Combined)

	House	Senate	Total
GPA	1.70	2.06	1.76

In Table 2, we aggregate the GPA of all the Web sites *by chamber*. This table shows that Senate Web sites collectively were judged as somewhat better than the House sites (2.06 vs. 1.70 GPA). This differential is explained completely by the difference

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between House and Senate Member office grades (1.67 vs. 2.12 GPA). House Member offices accounted for 91.5 % of all House Web sites we studied; Senate Member office sites account for 80.6 % of all of Senate sites. The grade point average for all 605 Web sites we studied was 1.76. Similarly, this Congress-wide GPA is heavily tilted towards the House GPA as House offices represented 79.5 % of all the sites studied.

Table 3: Member Offices, by Party and Chamber

	A	B	C	D	F	Totals	GPA
Senate Democratic Member Offices	5.9%	13.7%	64.7%	13.7%	0.0%	51	2.61
Senate Republican Member Offices	2.0%	14.3%	61.2%	18.4%	4.1%	49	2.10
House Democratic Member Offices	0.5%	4.3%	56.6%	30.2%	8.5%	212	1.58
House Republican Member Offices	1.5%	6.6%	62.3%	26.3%	3.5%	228	1.76

Table 3 reveals that Senate Democratic *Member offices* are performing somewhat better than their Republican counterparts. Democratic offices collectively had a GPA of 2.61, while 20% received grades of A or B and 14% received grades of D or F. In comparison, Republican offices had a GPA of 2.10, while 16% received grades of A or B and 22% received grades of D or F. Similarly, House Republican *Member offices* are performing slightly better than their Democratic counterparts (1.76 vs. 1.58 GPA).
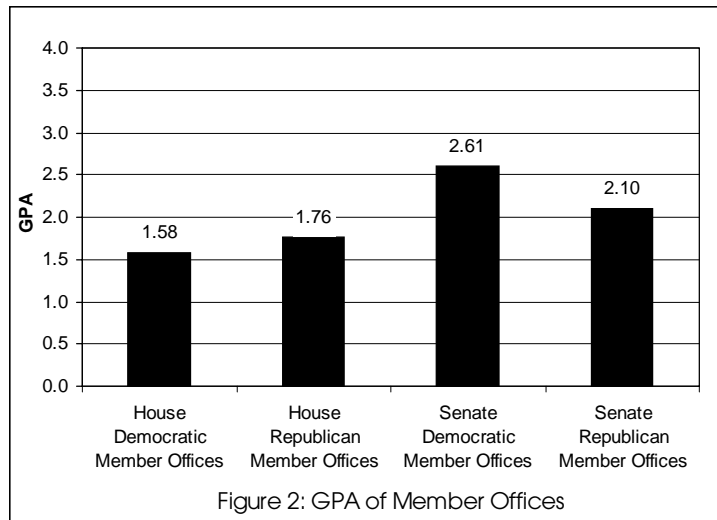

Figure 2: GPA of Member Offices

Table 4 demonstrates that House Republican *committee Web sites* were judged as far superior to the other committee Web sites. More specifically, eight of 15 House Republican committee sites (40% of the sites) received grades of A or B compared to only one of 13 House Democratic committee sites, one of 17 Senate Democratic committee sites and zero of four Senate Republican committee sites. The collective grade point averages of these committee sites (broken out by chamber and party) further documents this disparity.

Table 4: Committees by Party and Chamber
(Raw Numbers)

	A	B	C	D	F	Totals
House Republicans	2	6	7	4	1	20
House Democrats	1	0	7	5	0	13
Senate Republicans	0	0	0	3	1	4
Senate Democrats	1	0	12	3	1	17

(Percentages)

	A	B	C	D	F	GPA
House Republicans	10%	30%	35%	20%	5%	2.20
House Democrats	7.7%	0%	53.9%	38.5%	0%	1.77
Senate Republicans	0%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0.75
Senate Democrats	5.9%	0%	70.6%	17.7%	5.9%	1.71

Analyzing Trends in Award Winners

Figure 3 breaks out the 35 award winning Web sites by chamber and party. It reveals an important finding. Of the 11 Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse awarded to Senate offices, 8 (or 73%) were awarded to Democratic offices. Correspondingly, of the 24 awards won by House offices, 19 (or 79%) were won by Republican offices. This data suggests that in both the Senate and the House there is a clear divide in the quality of the Web sites based on party. *(Note: One award winning site, the Joint Committee on Economics, was created by Senate Republican staff and is currently managed by House Republican staff. For the purposes of this analysis, it is recognized in the House Republican category.)*

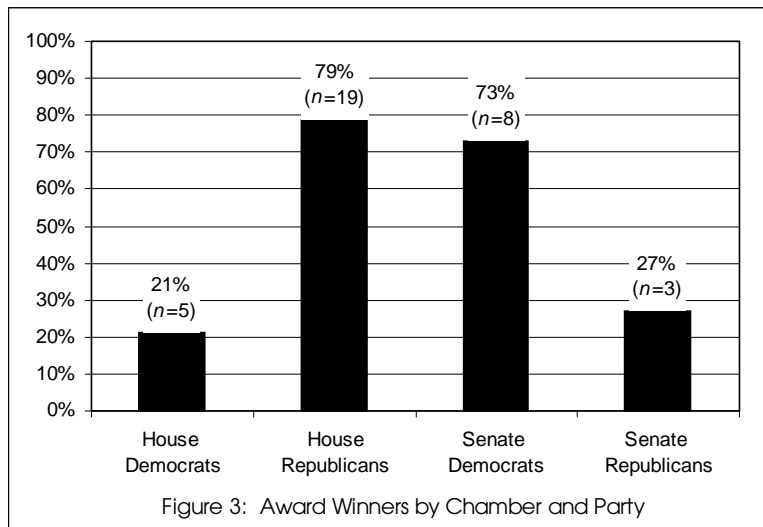Figure 3: Award Winners by Chamber and Party

Table 5 breaks out the 35 of the award winning congressional Web sites by office type and chamber. This table demonstrates three noteworthy trends.

First, all four of the award winning leadership sites are in the House. Three are Republican hosted sites and one site is hosted by a Democratic leadership office. No leadership site in the Senate won either a Congress Online Gold or Silver Mouse award. This data suggests that the House leadership offices better understand the value and power of effective Web-based communications and use them more effectively than their Senate counterparts.

Table 5: Gold and Silver Mouse Award Winner Distribution by Office Type and Chamber

	Member Offices		Committees		Leadership		
	House	Senate	House	Senate	House	Senate	Total
Number	11	10	9	1	4	0	35
Percentage	31.4%	28.6%	25.7%	2.9%	11.4%	0.0%	100%

Second, House Committees Web sites won far more awards than did the Senate committee sites. More specifically, of the 10 awards issued to committees, House committees won nine; only one Senate committee won an award. Furthermore, of these nine House committee sites, the majority party or the Republicans hosted eight of the nine.

Figure 4: Gold and Silver Mouse Award Winner Distribution by Office Type and Chamber
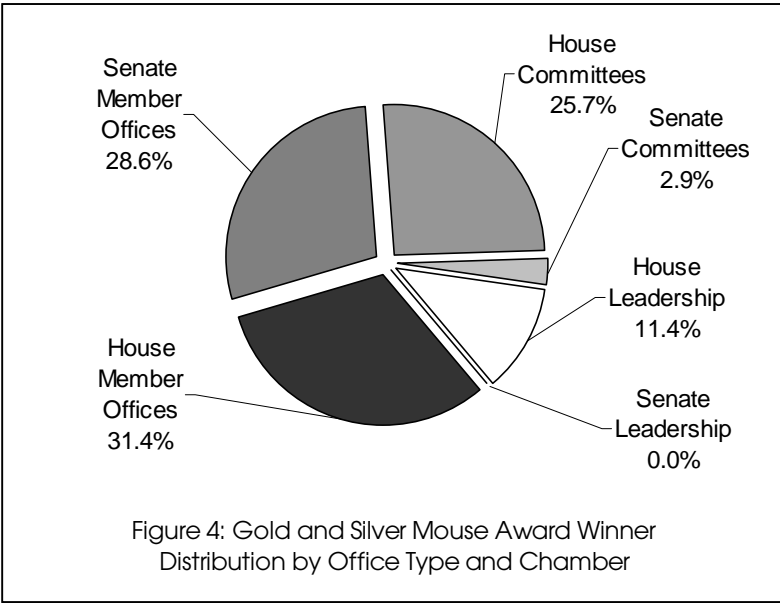
Third, of the 35 Gold and Silver Mouse award recipients, House offices won 24 or 68% of these awards while Senate offices won 11 or 32%. So, while Senate offices won far fewer awards than did House offices, this number needs to placed in context: Of the 605 Web sites we evaluated, 79.5% of the sites were in the House and only 20.5% were in the Senate (481 vs.124). In other words, Senate offices actually won a proportionately higher share of awards than did House offices.

The Best Web Sites on Capitol Hill

Each congressional office functions largely as an independently owned and operated small business. Thus, each is responsible for devising its own Web strategies and content, and determining how to create and manage its own Web site. Institutional offices provide hosting services (similar to those provided by standard commercial Internet service providers) as well a range of basic support options to assist offices and rules and policies to guide them. However, like any small business, every office must determine for itself the time, staff, and financial resources it will allocate to its Web site; whether to hire a consultant or vendor for assistance; the management policies and practices that will apply to the Web site; and a range of other decisions associated with developing and managing a Web site.

To acknowledge the offices that have taken these decisions in hand and created the best Web sites on Capitol Hill, we are presenting 15 offices with Congress Online Gold Mouse Awards, and 20 offices with Congress Online Silver Mouse Awards. A computer mouse is the key to most constituents' interaction with a congressional Web site, so we chose the mouse to represent the pinnacle of congressional achievement on the Web.

Congress Online Gold Mouse Awards

There are many congressional Web sites that are performing superbly when measured against one or two of the building blocks—Audience, Content, Interactivity, Usability, and Innovations—but only a few stand out as displaying high performance across all five of the building blocks.

Our evaluation identified four Senate Member Web sites, four House Member Web sites, four committee Web sites, and three leadership Web sites that deserved recognition for incorporating every one of the five building blocks. These are our A sites, and the sites to which we award the Congress Online Gold Mouse Award. There may be other congressional Web sites that surpassed them in one of the building blocks, but none performed better across the board.

Congress Online Silver Mouse Awards

Our evaluation process also identified six Senate Member Web sites, seven House Member Web sites, six committee Web sites, and one leadership Web site that deserve the Congress Online Silver Mouse Award for their online practices. These are 20 Web sites to which we assigned grades of B, but which, though they outperformed the rest of the B sites, had details that prevented them from receiving Congress Online Gold Mouse Awards. To provide other congressional offices with models for each of the building blocks, however, we separated these sites according to the building block—Audience, Content, Interactivity, Usability, and Innovations—that most stood out on the site.

Following are detailed descriptions of the best Web sites on Capitol Hill. Since the first and second round of Web site evaluations were conducted during August 2001, the results do not reflect changes, updates, or redesigns that may have been made to sites that were eliminated during the first two rounds of evaluations. We continued to study the 60 sites that were reviewed in the third round of evaluations up to mid-November 2001, and changes and updates that occurred during that time are reflected in the final results and in the following site descriptions. We will be conducting the same evaluation process of congressional Web sites in August—November 2002, and offices that have conducted major redesigns of their Web sites since August 2001 will have the opportunity to vie for inclusion among the best Web sites of 2002.

THE BEST WEB SITES ON CAPITOL HILL

Congress Online Gold Mouse Award

Senate Member Web Sites
Senator Jeff Bingaman (D–NM)
Senator Barbara Boxer (D–CA)
Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R–TX)
Senator Patrick Leahy (D–VT)

House Member Web Sites
Representative Kay Granger (R–TX)
Representative Michael Honda (D–CA)
Representative Mike Pence (R–IN)
Representative Richard Pombo (R–CA)

Committee Web Sites
Senate Budget Committee—majority
House Committee on Energy and Commerce—majority
House Committee on Energy and Commerce—minority
House Committee on Rules—majority

Leadership Web Sites
Speaker of the House
House Majority Whip
House Republican Conference

Congress Online Silver Mouse Award

Senate Member Web Sites
Senator Dianne Feinstein (D–CA)
Senator Bob Graham (D–FL)
Senator Mary Landrieu (D–LA)
Senator Carl Levin (D–MI)
Senator Don Nickles (R–OK)
Senator Fred Thompson (R–TN)

House Member Web Sites
Representative Tom Allen (D–ME)
Representative Chris Cannon (R–UT)
Representative Brad Carson (D–OK)
Representative Mark Green (R–WI)
Representative Nick Smith (R–MI)
Representative John Thune (R–SD)
Representative Heather Wilson (R–NM)

Committee Web Sites
Joint Economic Committee—majority
House Budget Committee—majority
House Resources Committee—majority
House Science Committee—majority
House Small Business Committee—majority
House Standards of Official Conduct Committee—majority

Leadership Web Sites
House Democratic Caucus

CONGRESS ONLINE
GOLD MOUSE AWARDS

Senate Member Offices

Senators are responsible for representing the interests of every resident of their state, but when the median state population is around 4 million, keeping residents informed of and engaged in the activities of the Senator and developments in Congress is a huge challenge. Senators Bingaman, Boxer, Hutchison, and Leahy are using their timely, well-targeted, informative, and user-friendly Web sites to overcome the challenge and help them better communicate with and serve their constituents and other target audiences.

Senators Bingaman and Leahy were among the first Members of Congress to have their offices post Web sites. They are from New Mexico and Vermont, respectively—not the most populous or most "wired" of states—but they both saw early on how the Web could help them perform their duties more effectively. As early adopters of the Internet, these offices were proving grounds for the use of the Web in the Senate. Through trial and error, they have learned how to use their Web sites to provide the content and services their constituents need and to communicate their legislative priorities and accomplishments effectively. And, in part due to their long-standing emphasis on their Web sites, these two offices are among the few whose Web sites also were listed among the best Web Sites on Capitol Hill in the 1999 report, *Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use*.

In contrast, Senators Boxer and Hutchison represent two of the largest and most populous states in America—California and Texas—and both states have high percentages of Internet users. Since Internet use is so prevalent among their constituents, it made sense for these Senators to use their Web sites as tools to communicate with them. And because their Web sites can contain vast amounts of information, they can be more responsive to their diverse audiences than ever before possible. By providing their audiences with greater access to resources targeted to their needs and interests, these Senators can communicate with—and hear from—far greater numbers of their constituents online than is possible off line.

All four of these offices understand the benefits of providing outstanding Web sites that meet the specific needs of their seekers and build relationships with their recruits.

Senator Jeff Bingaman (D–NM)   bingaman.senate.gov

From the first click it is clear that Senator Bingaman's Web site was designed with its audiences solidly in mind. The site not only provides the information and services its audiences need, it also tries to anticipate questions and provide the answers and information visitors need when they need it.

Everything, from the language to the special features, seems geared to be welcoming and helpful to the residents of New Mexico, the Senator's key audience. Additionally, through a variety of innovative means, the site helps its different audiences easily identify the content most relevant to them. For example, a **prominent map of New Mexico** on the home page provides visitors from throughout New Mexico

with one-click access to recent press releases relevant to where they live. There are also different **sections targeted to the needs of specific audience groups** —first time visitors to the site, frequent visitors, students, educators, small business owners, those seeking legislative information, those seeking assistance, and those interested in learning about New Mexico. This enables visitors to identify for themselves the audience into which they fit, and to quickly get to the information that fits their needs. The home page also highlights the **features recent visitors most sought** in recent months, which enables visitors to quickly find popular information, based on the patterns of previous visitors.

The Senator's Web site also does a remarkable job of understanding where its audiences are liable to become confused or need assistance, and of providing the guidance confused visitors need. For example, the constituent services section has a **step-by-step casework guide** to help constituents needing assistance with federal agencies. A **glossary** is provided for those who are not familiar with legislative terms. **Answers to frequently asked questions**—in the left margins of many pages—ensure that visitors have the information they need when they need it. **Detailed pop-up descriptions of photos** answer questions about the photos and make it easier for disabled visitors to "see" them with text-based browsers.

Through a **clear e-mail policy** and guidance about the **correspondence procedures of the office**, the site also provides assistance to visitors uncertain of how to communicate with them. Clear policies help put the audiences at ease about communicating with the office and ensures that their communications can be processed by the office efficiently. Additionally, the site enables visitors to register to receive e-mail issue updates from the office, so they can keep informed of Senator Bingaman's activities and the critical issues pending in Congress.

> By providing their audiences with greater access to resources targeted to their needs and interests, these Senators can communicate with—and hear from—far greater numbers of their constituents online than is possible off line.

Senator Barbara Boxer (D–CA)   boxer.senate.gov

One of the most striking things about this site is its extensive content. Every section provides detailed content and ample options for accessing the resources and information audiences are audiences are seeking. For example, each of the **issue sections** contains extensive, but very readable, overviews of the issue. Each section also describes the Senator's accomplishments and legislative action in that area and provides links to relevant legislation and information on other Web sites. The **feature pages** are devoted to timely topics related to special events, such as Earth Day and Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Each feature page provides a discussion of the event and the issue to which it relates, along with links to relevant resources on and off the Senator's Web site.

This Web site also includes a variety of features that emphasize Senator Boxer's commitment to providing for her audiences. For example, there is a **Spanish-language section** geared to the needs of Spanish-speaking constituents. The site also provides excellent **links to California agencies** and other resources that constituents can use to get the California-specific information and services they need. A **"Spotlight on California"** selects a different California Web site each week to highlight.

The site also has an extensive section devoted to an audience that is clearly important to Senator Boxer: children. The **kids' page** answers questions kids often have about the Senator, Congress, and important national issues. The kids page also provides

links to a range of interesting and relevant resources on the Internet that children can use to learn more about Congress, government, and the world.

Californian kids and adults alike are encouraged to interact with the office on and off line. E-mail is welcome, and office **e-mail policies** are clearly stated in plain view. Visitors can register their views via regular **surveys on timely issues** on the site. They can also subscribe to receive any or all of the nine **e-mail newsletters** that the Senator sends. Additionally, the office encourages interaction off line by providing complete office contact information on the home page, and on a contact page that can be accessed from anywhere on the site.

This site was clearly crafted with usability in mind, and it provides a variety of user-friendly features. For example, the information architecture allows visitors to follow clear and **logical paths** to the information they are seeking. The content was **written for the Web**, with clear headings, short sentences, and bullets that make pages easy to read or scan. Additionally, most of the pages provide—in the right margins—**highlights of relevant resources**, which provides one-click access to the new, commonly requested, or topical information audiences want.

Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R–TX)　　　hutchison.senate.gov

Senator Hutchison's Web site demonstrates the art of usability. It is an easy-to-navigate, no-nonsense Web site that clearly shows the importance of keeping out of the way of the audience. The home page is **set up as a portal**, with limited text and many links to key information. This makes the site extremely user friendly because it provides access to a great deal of information with just a few clicks. Additionally, every other page of the site is formatted so a quick scan enables visitors to figure out whether or not the page contains the information they came for. Clear headings, logical organization of information, and real-world terminology help make this possible, as does the spare text on most pages.

It is readily apparent from the site that the office understands the needs of its audiences. The home page provides easy access to targeted information on a wide range of **key national issues**, **services** the office provides, Senate and House **legislative information**, **educational information** about Congress, **information about the Senator**, and more. The casework page provides everything a constituent needs to know about casework, but didn't know to ask. It contains a concise, easy to understand **explanation of what casework is**, information about **how to initiate a casework request**, and **information about the agencies** with which the office regularly provides assistance. There are detailed descriptions of the kinds of **cases associated with each agency** and **links** to the most relevant pages of the agency's Web site—usually the home page and a frequently asked questions page or assistance page. The site also provides the same kinds of annotated descriptions and direct links on its **"Other WWW Sites"** page, which helps give visitors a sense of whether the link will take them to the information they seek. These details go a long way toward helping constituents find general information, answer simple questions, and offer basic services that can be provided without staff or agency intervention.

One of the most striking features of this Web site, however, is the issue sections. There are **16 different issue pages**—more than are available on almost any other Member Web site—that are clearly chosen with the audience, not the Senator, in

mind. Like the home page, each issue page is organized as a portal, with limited text, but abundant links to **speeches**, **press releases**, **articles**, pertinent **Web sites**, and links to Congressional Research Service **issue briefs** on the topic. This information is logically organized from most to least recent, so it is easy to use. Through this wide range of information, constituents can learn how the Senator feels about the issue, what she is doing about it, what Congress is doing about it, how to get assistance and services related to it, and where to get an unbiased assessment of it. Few congressional Web sites provide this depth and range of issue information.

Senator Patrick Leahy (D–VT)   leahy.senate.gov

Senator Leahy's Web site puts a human face on Congress. The site is friendly and very audience focused, yet it provides high-level, detailed, and extensive content about the Senator, issues and legislation, services, and Congress. The site's content is **accessible and helpful**, and it never assumes that visitors come with all the information they need to understand a particular topic. It provides easy access to a wealth of background and educational information that visitors can choose to read on an as-needed basis.

One of the outstanding aspects of the site is its success in conveying the **Senator's key issues and agenda** without being too political or self-promotional. It accomplishes this with user-friendly information architecture and content. For example, the home page is formatted so the first thing visitors notice on the site is information about Vermont. Americans read from left to right, so their eyes are drawn to the upper left corner of a Web site, just as they are when reading a book. In this location, Senator Leahy's Web site highlights Vermont and provides links to constituent services just below. This innovative **layout** immediately conveys that constituents come first. However, the center of the page—the most visible area of the page, but not the first place visitors look—is about Senator Leahy and his legislative agenda.

The issue pages also convey the Senator's agenda in an approachable way. Each of them begins with a brief statement of the Senator's **position** and **accomplishments**, followed by an extensive list of **links** to sources of more information. The resources include links to the Senator's **speeches** and **press releases** about the issues, but they also include links to **legislation**, **statements and documents** by other Members of Congress, and Web sites that contain content related to the issue. This gives constituents abundant resources to learn what they want to learn about the issues.

Like the issue pages, the constituent services, "office," and press pages all provide detailed content and links targeted specifically to the needs of the audiences of this Web site. Each of these sections is formatted with a user-friendly design that enables visitors to scan the available information. The constituent services page provides information about, and links for assistance with, **11 different casework issues**, from immigrations and visas to international adoptions and railroad retirement benefits. The office page provides detailed information about **internships**, service **academy nominations**, the Senate **page program**, and the **law clerk program**. It also provides **"pretty good privacy"** (PGP) public key encryption information, so the audience can encrypt their messages to the Senator, if it makes them more comfortable.

Finally, the office page provides detailed office **contact information**, though this information is also found in the footer of every page of the site. The press page provides links to **current press releases**, which are formatted so that one's eyes are immediately drawn to the topic of the press release, rather than the date. This makes it easy for visitors to scan for topics that interest them. Additionally, the press page provides a **searchable archive** of past press releases.

House Member Offices

House offices have fewer constituents than do most Senate offices, but they also have fewer resources and staff, which makes maintaining an effective Web site an even greater challenge. Representatives Granger, Honda, Pence, and Pombo overcame the challenge by being strategic and creative in their thinking about their Web sites and about how to distribute Web responsibilities throughout the office.

All four offices have fully integrated their Web sites into their office strategies and information management processes. This has enabled them to quickly identify, approve, and post important content their audiences need. Reps. Honda and Pence are freshman Members of Congress who factored their Web sites into their offices from the outset. They devised Web strategies and procedures at the same time they developed their other office strategies and procedures. Reps. Granger and Pombo, on the other hand, are veteran Members who worked hard to adjust their existing communications and management practices to fully integrate their Web sites.

Rep. Pombo designed his Web site in house. The other three offices hired Web design vendors to help them execute their Web sites. Rep. Honda worked with designers primarily to develop the look and feel of his Web site. In addition to working with designers on the look and feel of their Web sites, Reps. Granger and Pence also worked with vendors to create Web sites that are easier than standard Web sites to update, manage, and provide special features on."

In 2001, the House of Representatives allowed Web design vendors to provide "content management" services that enable House offices with non-technical staff to quickly and easily modify their Web sites—and see the changes on the spot. They also enable safe and secure updates from any computer with an Internet connection. They make it easy to provide special features, such as e-mail newsletters and online town halls, without in-house technical staff or large time commitments. They provide flexibility to quickly and easily add new features, documents, and photos and graphics and change the look and feel of the site. These services require an initial investment of $10,000 or more for all the bells and whistles. However, Reps. Granger and Pence—and a handful of other House offices—determined that the time savings to staff, the improved communications with constituents, and the opportunity to reach greater numbers of constituents with timely and relevant information than is possible off line made the investment worthwhile. They have been pleased with their decisions.

All of these offices see strategic planning and careful selection of content as the keys to the effectiveness of their Web sites. They see themselves as the conduits between their constituents and Congress, and they all take advantage of the opportunities their Web sites offer to: keep their constituents informed—sometimes up to the minute—of their views and activities; provide resources about Congress and legislation; serve

> Their Web sites are highly informative resources that free staff to spend less of their time providing constituents basic information, and more of their time working on legislative priorities.

and engage their constituents; and solicit feedback. As a result, their Web sites are highly informative resources that free staff to spend less of their time providing constituents basic information, and more of their time working on legislative priorities.

Rep. Kay Granger (R–TX)   kaygranger.house.gov

Rep. Granger's Web site conveys the impression that she understands and wants to hear from her audiences. The home page is business-like, but a touch of whimsy is added through colors and icons, which makes the site welcoming and makes Rep. Granger seem approachable. Every page of the site has office **contact information** prominently displayed, as well as a box to enable visitors to sign up to receive her **e-mail newsletters**. The home page has a **poll** to enable visitors to express their opinions on timely topics. And the "Contact Us" page has a **Web form** to enable constituents to provide feedback.

The content throughout the site is short, to the point, and clearly targeted to meet the needs of the audiences. It is deceptively simple and direct, however, as it is evident that the office worked hard to distill vast amounts of information into a concise format targeted to meet the needs of the audiences. The issues and constituent services sections, for example, provide access to a wealth of information in such a user-friendly way that it's easy to forget how much work must have gone into its creation.

A link called **"Kay on the Issues"** provides Rep. Granger's views on important national issues, along with links to further information on and off her Web site. A section called **"Commonly Asked Questions About Congress"** provides answers to questions about a range of legislative procedures, including "How does a bill become a law?" and "What are the requirements for being a Member of Congress?" The issues section also provides access to important **legislative information**, such as legislation Rep. Granger has sponsored, legislative activity in the House, and House leadership Web sites.

The **constituent services section** includes a "one-stop shop" for **help with federal agencies**. It identifies the most common problems constituents have with federal agencies and provides guidance, answers to frequently asked questions, and links to help solve them. It also provides helpful **staff information**, with short, friendly, first-person biographies of each of the Washington and district staffers. Each describes what their duties are and how they help constituents. This promotes interactivity with the office and helps visitors better understand how the office operates, why it operates that way, and who to contact if they have a question the Web site does not answer.

Rep. Mike Honda (D–CA)   www.house.gov/honda

Rep. Honda's Web site is a crisp, inviting, and very usable site that helps make Congress—and the Member—accessible to its audiences. From the first glance at the home page visitors can see that the office makes an effort to ensure that the Web site reflects the issues on the minds of both the Member's audiences and the Member. For example, when we first visited the site in August 2001, the **feature on the home page** focused on the energy crisis in California, which was the key issue facing California that summer. After the tragedies of 9–11, however, the office was one of the first to post information and links to help constituents give and receive assistance.

The site also had features for Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, and New Year's, each with links to useful and relevant resources and information. This changing content keeps the site timely, but it also personalizes the site for its audiences, who can see the current events that matter to them reflected on the Representative's Web site.

Through both its **constituent services** and **"About our District"** sections, the site continues to reflect Rep. Honda's interest in, and understanding of, the needs of his constituents. Both of these sections provide pragmatic information constituents can use. For example, rather than providing tourism information in the "About our District" section, this Web site provides links to **historical and economic information**, links to **colleges and universities** in the district, links to the Web sites of **political and government entities**, and other information geared toward constituents, not tourists. Similarly, the constituent services section provides links to helpful information constituents can use to get assistance from the office or from a federal agency.

The site also provides access to important legislative information. A section called **"Mike in Congress"** describes Rep. Honda's **priorities** and provides **links to relevant legislation**. The **legislative information** section provides many user-friendly links that make it easy to learn about **bills before Congress**, **how Congress operates**, what is happening on the **House floor**, and a variety of other legislative topics.

The site also encourages interactivity by explicitly urging constituents to **contact the Member** electronically with questions and ideas, and it provides a variety of ways to do so. In addition to a **Web form, e-mail address, and contact information** for both of his offices, Rep. Honda also provides a **survey** to enable constituents to express their views on current issues that affect the district. Constituents are further offered the opportunity to subscribe to receive one or all of his **14 e-mail newsletters**.

Rep. Mike Pence (R–IN)   mikepence.house.gov

Rep. Pence's Web site provides both thorough content and innovative features that make this site one of the most dynamic in Congress. For example, Rep. Pence provides a **daily audio update** on his Web site. His background in radio led him to want to provide short daily speeches on his Web site, so his office purchased low-cost, low-tech equipment to enable him to do so. Visitors can also download short **videos** of the speeches Rep. Pence gives on the House floor on a regular basis. (Unfortunately, he has been unable to provide audio and video updates since mid-October 2001, when his office was closed due to anthrax contamination.)

Rep. Pence's Web site also provides innovative features to enable his audiences to communicate their views to him. Visitors are invited to subscribe to a variety of **e-mail newsletters** and provide feedback via **periodic polls**. The site also provides **information on the staff** (including names, titles, areas of responsibility, and the office out of which each works) and a **calendar of upcoming events** that the Member will be attending. These are rare features on congressional Web sites, and including them sends a clear message that both Rep. Pence and his staff are accountable and accessible to constituents.

While noteworthy for its innovations, this site also meets the basic information

needs of its audience. For example, the site contains information about more **constituent services** than do most congressional offices, including information on **grants, education loans, small business assistance**, and commemorative and **Presidential greetings**. Each of these sections provides brief guidance and user-friendly answers to **frequently asked questions**, which provides a clear context for the information and services it presents. The site also presents Rep. Pence's **views on important issues**, links to **legislation** he has sponsored and co-sponsored, **current and archived press releases and speeches, weekly messages, and op-eds**, which give the audiences access to a full range of resources to learn the Member's priorities and interests. Additionally, the site invites interactivity by providing a Web form to enable electronic communication, as well as office contact information.

Rep. Richard Pombo (R–CA) www.house.gov/pombo

From the first impression of the Web site, one can tell that Rep. Pombo is his own man. Rather than the standard congressional mug shot, the **photo** on Rep. Pombo's home page shows him wearing a casual denim shirt and a cowboy hat. The **writing on the site** is in a casual, forthright style that gives the impression that Rep. Pombo is in touch with the everyday lives and interests of his constituents. These features help give both the site and the Member character. They also make Rep. Pombo seem approachable.

The degree of interactivity that Rep. Pombo provides on his Web site reinforces the impression that he is accessible. The site provides a **regular poll** through which visitors can express their views, along with the results of the poll after the polling period closes. Despite the fact that constituents understand that the poll is neither scientific nor binding, they appreciate the opportunity to express their opinions, all the same. The site also provides a **bulletin board** that displays e-mail messages which constituents have sent to the office via the Web form on the site, and which they have given permission to have posted. Constituents can choose to send e-mail privately to Rep. Pombo or they can choose to participate in the public bulletin board.

Rep. Pombo is also clearly interested in helping his audiences understand how Congress works. The **section for students** provides an **educational reference guide** to information about Congress, as well as information about **internships** in the office and the **military academy nominations** process. The **issues sections** each provide **overviews** and **recent press releases** pertaining to one of the nine important national issues addressed on the site and offers **links** to educational and legislative resources to help visitors learn more. The **government assistance section** provides **answers to frequently asked questions**, as well as **links** to resources that offer constituents assistance with a federal agency, writing grant proposals, or a range of other possible needs.

Another handy feature that increases the usability of the site is the **ability to search Thomas**, the Library of Congress' legislative database, directly from the home page. The upper left-hand corner of the home page—just under the photo of Rep. Pombo—has two boxes in which visitors can enter either a bill number or keywords to find legislation they seek. Since legislation is a major reason why citizens visit congressional Web sites, this feature significantly enhances the value.

Surprisingly, however, few congressional Web sites provide this ability.

Standing Committees

Committees have a challenging job figuring out what to include on their Web sites. They produce enormous volumes of information in an ever-changing environment. Many of the documents that committees create are too long or change too often to be provided easily on a Web site, yet most are public record and of enough public interest to be in high demand.

Committees are feeling increased pressure to become more transparent through e-mail, online distribution of the full range of committee documents, Web video and audio feeds, and more thorough Web sites. Demands for increased transparency, combined with the rapid pace of committee work and competing internal and external political pressures, make it particularly challenging to create committee Web sites that satisfy the demands of their many audiences.

But a few have pulled it off with aplomb. The majority office of the House Committee on Rules, the majority and minority offices of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and the majority office of the Senate Budget Committee have made their Web sites important resources for their key audiences. They have thought strategically about the competing needs of their many stakeholders—including Member offices, reporters, and lobbyists—and attempted to provide the vast and timely information that will satisfy these stakeholders' basic needs. A variety of motives have driven their efforts, including time savings for staff, more rapid distribution of important documents, savings on printed materials, and improved media and public relations. The result in each case, however, is an informative, interesting, and up-to-date Web site that provides the key documents and resources stakeholders seek.

All of these committees also offer online interactivity, which is unusual for committees. The three House committee Web sites provide Web forms to enable visitors to contact them, and the Senate Budget Committee maintains a standard e-mail address for people to use. These are rare features on committee Web sites because, to date, few committees have created the new management processes or purchased the expensive hardware and software they would need to handle the high volumes of e-mail messages they would receive, were they to accept them. Because committees' actions and decisions interest people throughout the country, the volume of e-mail to committees would likely surpass volumes sent to Member offices many times over, especially on contentious and high profile issues. Committees do not have the resources or infrastructure to accept and respond to high e-mail volumes. In fact, few committees today accept e-mail. However, citizens do want to communicate with committees that handle the issues and legislation about which they feel strongly, and these four committees have successfully responded to that desire.

97% of advocacy group leaders want to communicate directly with committees online.

Senate Budget Committee (majority)   budget.senate.gov

In its role drafting the annual budget for Congress and monitoring the budget of the federal government, the Senate Budget Committee handles very complex information that is often difficult for novices to grasp. However, the federal budget is an important issue that regularly catches the eyes of the media and the public. As a result, the committee must pro-

vide its information in a way that budget experts on and off Capitol Hill, reporters, and the public can all use. Meeting the needs of this combination of expert and novice audiences is a challenging job, but the Senate Budget Committee is equal to the challenge.

Visitors enter the Web site via one of the few **user-friendly "cover pages"** on Capitol Hill. Usually, a home page that has no information and that requires visitors to click to another page before they can begin to find the content they came for is a waste of visitors' time. This cover page, however, serves an important purpose. It provides visitors with four important content options—"About the Senate Budget Committee," "Visit the Democratic Web site," "Visit the Republican Web Site," and "Hearings and Testimony." This enables visitors to focus their search for information with a single mouse click, which dramatically enhances the site's usability.

Once on the majority Web site, visitors are struck by the abundance of timely information and options that clearly indicate that the committee understands how to meet the needs of its diverse audiences. The home page **highlights current issues and legislation** the committee is handling by providing short, non-technical **summaries** of the issues and user-friendly **links** to other information, such as **press releases**, **transcripts** of hearings, **statements**, **charts and graphs**, and other related documents. This method of providing, at once, both **educational overviews** of the issues and **one-click access** to a variety of relevant resources is a masterful way of making the site more usable to both expert and novice users. Budget experts can quickly access the documents they need without having to wade through basic information, and budget novices can review background information before they take their next step.

The same format serves reporters equally well. And because the home page is regularly updated to reflect the **key issues of the day**, all of the audiences are encouraged to check back on a regular basis to determine the status of key legislation.

The most impressive aspect of this Web site, however, is the **"Chart Library"** section. In the course of its business, the committee regularly produces charts, graphs, and statistical information to help explain very dense and complex budgetary information in compelling and user-friendly formats.

In addition to providing comprehensive information that enables their audiences to self-serve, the Budget Committee makes it easy for visitors to contact them. They maintain a **public e-mail address**, and they provide a list of **staff and their issues and responsibilities**. This helps visitors know who they need to contact for any further information.

House Committee on Energy and Commerce (majority)   energycommerce.house.gov

The House Committee on Energy and Commerce is one of the highest profile committees in Congress. It handles legislation on a range of issues critical to the economic functions of the country. It is single-handedly responsible for a sizable portion of the lobbying industry. As a result, the committee has a major challenge in communicating with and serving its many diverse audiences. To this end, it has developed an effective Web site that not only informs, but also reduces the workload of committee staff.

The site's home page contains **highlights of recent committee actions** and activities, which are regularly updated when the committee is in session. This makes

work easier for both the committee staff, who respond to fewer phone calls and e-mail messages requesting the information, and for their audiences, who can get the information they need when they need it.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this Web site is that it has provided individual pages for **54 timely issues** that the committee handles. Each issue page has a list of **committee documents**—correspondence, news releases, hearings—arranged in a user-friendly, **most to least recent** list. The list includes **dates and summary information** that enable users to decide whether or not the document contains what they want. This format, combined with the issue-based organization and the timeliness of the information, makes this one of the most user-friendly issue sections on Capitol Hill.

The committee also incorporates helpful innovations that enhance the usability of the Web site. To help their audience find what they're looking for as quickly and easily as possible, the Web site has a **site map** and a **search feature**. Every press release has a link to a **printer friendly version**, which is a great way to help conserve visitors' paper and printer toner. The committee provides their longer documents in **Adobe Acrobat format**, which makes them easier to read on paper if visitors print them out. Shorter documents, meanwhile, are provided as simple Web pages, which makes them easier to access and read online. Additionally, the committee periodically provides **audio and video** of key committee proceedings, which is an innovative way to enable visitors to see and hear for themselves what happened. This feature also provides unprecedented public access to committee proceedings, since people do not need to be in Washington to watch them.

The site provides a full complement of **committee documents**, **background materials**, **jurisdiction** and **membership** information, and extensive **archives**. It also provides the committee **schedule**, and offers audiences the opportunity to **subscribe to receive notices** of schedule changes via e-mail. Through its extensive and audience-focused content, interactive and innovative features, and user-friendly format, the Commerce Committee Web site provides excellent service to its many audiences.

House Committee on Energy and Commerce (minority)   www.house.gov/commerce_democrats

Of the 36 standing committees in the Senate and House of Representatives, only 18 have minority Web sites. This is, in part, due to the fact that minority offices face greater obstacles in creating their Web sites and attracting visitors than do their majority counterparts. Minority Web sites usually exist as sub-sections of the majority Web site. In addition, minority offices do not control the activities of the committee, nor do they control the procedures that drive committee business. This makes it difficult for minority offices to provide much of the official information that the committee's principal Web audiences are seeking. However, minority offices have a very important role, and their information is of interest to an important, albeit smaller, audience interested in "the other side of the story." It is in this role that the Web site of the minority office of the Commerce Committee excels.

The minority Web site provides substantive content, access to important resources, and detailed **opinion statements** that explain the minority's views on key issues

and legislation without seeming hostile or overtly partisan. Through timely content provided in a non-confrontational and user-friendly way, the minority Web site proves itself to be an effective counterpoint and complement to the majority Web site.

The home page provides highlights of the **opinions of the minority** and of the Ranking Member on current and upcoming issues and legislation. The site is **updated regularly**, with at least one new feature posted every day that the committee is in session. This site helps visitors better understand committee debate and make more informed decisions about where they themselves stand on the issues.

The Web site increases its relevance and its usefulness to its audiences by linking to information on the majority Web site. **Links** throughout the site offer visitors easy and complete access to the **official committee information** on hearings, committee schedules and markups, and committee correspondence and publications. By providing these links, the minority enables their visitors to use their Web site, rather than the majority Web site, as their source for key committee information, if they choose. However, the minority site organizes the links to the information according to the **issues and priorities of the minority**, and it is written in **language** that expresses the minority views.

Additionally, the minority site provides access to a wide range of minority-prepared documents that are not provided on the majority Web site, such as **dissenting views** and a range of **statements**, **correspondence**, **speeches**, and **Dear Colleague letters** written by the minority. These are organized both **by topic and by date**, a user-friendly way to enable visitors to access the information they seek in the way that is easiest for them.

House Committee on Rules (majority)   www.house.gov/rules

The Committee on Rules plays a pivotal role in defining how technology and the Internet will affect the legislative process in the House of Representatives. The committee has been exploring how the Internet and Web sites can be integrated into the legislative environment, and through its own Web site, the committee has been trying to implement what it has learned. The effort has certainly paid off.

The function of the Committee on Rules is procedural and internal to the House of Representatives, but it is a very powerful committee, since its decisions affect how legislation is managed on the House floor. The primary audiences of its Web site are Members of Congress and their staffs. Through its work researching and defining rules and procedures for the House, however, the Committee on Rules collects a wealth of information about how the House of Representatives and Congress operate, which is of great value to citizens. Consequently, the Committee on Rules uses its Web site to provide this information to the public, as well as Congress. The depth of content it provides quickly demonstrates that this committee has invested considerable time in developing an interesting and valuable Web site.

The Committee on Rules Web site is simple, unassuming, and without many graphic or design elements to get in the way of the content. The site is regularly updated with new committee documents, and the **newest information** is prominently highlighted on the home page to enable quick and easy access. The committee has, in fact, developed a reputation for getting information up on the Web site so quickly

that congressional staff have come to rely on the Web site, rather than committee staff, as their source for up-to-date **committee decisions** about legislative procedure. As a result, the number of phone calls the committee receives requesting documents—especially **hearing transcripts**—has dramatically declined.

To better serve its audiences, the committee pays careful attention to their **Web site statistics**. When they notice trends in the number of visitors who are accessing particular information, they adjust the site accordingly, moving the most popular information to the most visible locations, in order to improve the usability of the site. For example, the committee noticed that one of the most popular features on the site was the **educational information about Congress**. As a result, it decided to highlight that information on their home page under a section called **"How Congress Works,"** which provides access to a wealth of information on congressional rules and procedures.

The Committee on Rules also serves its congressional audiences by providing a range of valuable online services, including: guidance on procedural issues to ensure that legislative and floor procedures are followed; the **Parliamentary Outreach Program** newsletters on procedural issues; and descriptions and schedules of their **Parliamentary Procedure classes**. This provides busy congressional staff with easy access to this valuable information any time they need it.

The site also provides staff with an up-to-date **committee schedule**, an online **form for submitting amendments**, access to **special rules** and **special announcements**, information about the **jurisdiction** and **members of the committee** to help staff navigate the legislative rules of the House. This, along with the thorough content provided for the general public, makes this Web site one of the most audience-targeted and pragmatic Web sites on Capitol Hill.

Leadership Offices

Congressional leadership offices have an array of responsibilities to the Congress, their party, their Members, and the public. Each leadership office serves a specific and defined purpose within the leadership structure, whether it be overall spokesperson for the party agenda, or internal organizer of Members. The House and Senate each have different leadership structures, and the parties in each chamber use different strategies to accomplish their goals. The eight House leadership Web sites and three Senate leadership Web sites all vary significantly in purpose, function, and content. (Some leadership offices do not have Web sites.)

The wide and diverse responsibilities of the leadership offices can make it challenging to define the audiences for their public Web sites and determine what content those audiences want. The Speaker of the House, the House Majority Whip, and the House Republican Conference, however, have effectively translated their leadership roles and agendas to their Web sites in useful, informative, and innovative ways.

As majority leadership in the House of Representatives, these three offices hold a great deal of power in Congress. Their actions and agendas have significant impact on the legislation and politics of the Congress. Their views are of great interest to the general public and lobbyists. They also control information that informs the views and

actions of Republicans and Democrats in Congress, reporters, and lobbyists, and the public. By providing this information effectively on their Web sites, they can reinforce and strengthen the influence of the individual leaders, the leadership, and the party in new ways that could never have been pursued before the Web.

Each of these offices is an exclusive source for critical congressional and political information. The Speaker is the highest authority in the House of Representatives. He possesses the authority to control the actions on the House floor and to steer the legislative agenda of the majority and of the House. The Majority Whip is responsible for ensuring Member support on key legislation to the party agenda, and his office produces the schedules and information critical for knowing which bills will be considered on the House floor and when they will be considered. The Republican Conference is the collective body of the majority party in the House of Representatives. The Conference provides a forum for coordinating and communicating the party's agenda. Thus, each office brings visitors to their Web sites for information only they can provide.

> GOP.gov had 1.7 million user sessions last year.

These offices use their Web sites to develop online relationships with their visitors and advance the House Republican agenda. By providing access to critical congressional information their audiences need in a timely and user-friendly way, these offices attract visitors. By providing access to critical congressional and political information, interactive features, and innovations that adds value to their information, these offices encourage visitors to return. And by operating in concert to promote the agenda of the majority, these offices make their Web sites powerful tools for their own advantage and the advantage of the party.

Speaker of the House   www.speaker.gov

The Speaker of the House is the authority in the House of Representatives. He holds the highest office in the House, and he is one of the most powerful leaders of his party. As such, he has the highest profile of any Representative, and his views and activities are of great interest to reporters and the public. To a certain degree, the Speaker also represents the House of Representatives itself, as he embodies the tradition of the institution. Because of his significant responsibilities, however, the Speaker does not have the opportunity to communicate directly with, or hear from, nearly as many citizens as he would probably like. Fortunately, the Speaker's Web site provides the general public opportunities to interact with his office.

Speaker Hastert's Web site provides detailed content about key issues. Each of the Speaker's issue sections provides an **overview** of the issue, with access to a more **in depth summary**; a list of **press releases** on the issue; and **links to resources** on the Web that provide further information. This very user-friendly format enables the Speakers' audiences to read as much or as little about the issues as they would like, and it provides a clear sense of the Speaker's legislative priorities and the priorities of the Republican party.

The **"Newsroom"** section of the Speaker's Web site is another user-friendly way to access information about the Speaker's issues, priorities, and accomplishments. This section of the site is designed for use by a variety of audiences. For example, the latest press releases are posted **chronologically** so reporters can access the

most current information. The press releases are also organized **by issue**, so citizens wishing to know the Speaker's opinions on a variety of topics can access them easily. Additionally, the Newsroom provides access to the Speaker's **speeches** and **briefings**, and to **archives** of older press releases.

This site also recognizes that it receives frequent visitors who want access to historical information. The site addresses the needs of these visitors by providing them access to historic documents, including the **Declaration of Independence**, the **Articles of Confederation**, the **Constitution**, and some of **President Lincoln's speeches and writing**. Additionally, the site provides access to updates from the Architect of the Capitol on the progress of construction of the **Capitol Visitors' Center**.

It also sets the tone for the Republican party, which is carried through in different ways on the Web sites of the House Majority Whip and the House Republican Conference. These three sites independently support the role of their respective leaders, but they work together to build support for the Republican agenda, while also providing citizens access to important non-partisan congressional and legislative information.

Office of the House Majority Whip   majoritywhip.house.gov

Rep. DeLay, the House Majority Whip, has been using his Web site as an important communications tool for several years. He and his office have thought strategically about how to translate the leadership role of the Majority Whip into a Web site that satisfies the needs of both internal congressional and public audiences. They have also thought strategically about how to use the Web site to communicate effectively with their audiences and advance both Rep. DeLay's goals and the goals of the Republican party.

The home page of the Majority Whip's Web site is welcoming and easy to use. It has a crisp, clean look and professional feel. In part by tracking their **Web site statistics**, the office identifies the content their audiences are most interested in, and they adapt the home page to make it as easy as possible to get to that information. For example, the office found that the **Whipping Post** and the **Whip Notice**, the daily and weekly schedules of upcoming legislation on the House floor, are among the most popular information on the Web site. As a result, they placed links to these notices prominently on the home page.

Although these documents were originally intended for Members and congressional staff, they are crucial to lobbyists and citizens who follow legislation, as well. Prior to the Web, however, access to the Whip's schedule was limited by time and distribution constraints. Now the Whip can provide public access to this critical information—they even provide **e-mail updates** to anyone who request them—without increasing staff workload or expense. To further assist the Whip's audiences in their efforts to learn more about what is happening in Congress, the home page also provides a link to the **text summary of floor activities** maintained by the Clerk of the House and a **list of links** to important legislative resources.

The home page is divided into three columns. The first contains links to the information the audiences seek most often, such as legislative schedules. In the second column are brief summaries of recent press releases and links to the full press releases, which convey Rep. DeLay's **legislative priorities**, actions, and views on timely issues. The third column contains featured items that will interest some visitors, but which they did

not come to the site to find. Features highlighted here include **internship information**, a link to Rep. DeLay's **Member office Web site**, and a link to a **special issue section** regarding children's issues. This format fosters usability, since it is clear, concise, and easy to figure out, and by placing the most sought after information on the left side of the home page, it demonstrates that the audiences' needs come first.

Another feature that signals the Majority Whip's interest in meeting his audiences' needs is the **Web form** that enables visitors to send e-mail to the office to provide feedback to the Whip or express their views. This is an important interactive feature for a leadership office, since citizens often want the opportunity to interact with the high profile Members in leadership positions. Providing citizens with the ability to interact electronically with the Majority Whip indicates that he is accessible to all citizens and interested in what they have to say.

House Republican Conference   GOP.gov

The House Republican Conference Web site is a content-rich and innovative Web site that makes use of high tech Web features to user-friendly and well-targeted ends. The Republican Conference is pushing the boundaries of what is possible for Congress on the Web and applying practices in line with some of the best practices for private sector Web sites, which has made them a valued resource. So valued, in fact, that the site had **1.7 million user sessions** last year.

GOP.gov, as the site is known, is a vast repository of content about Republican Members, committees, legislation, and the Republican agenda. The content is written and formatted to be as usable and easy to understand as possible, but its simplicity belies its depth. Every section of the site provides access to sophisticated background, educational, political, and legislative information without being overwhelming. GOP.gov does this by applying **industry best practices** for Web site design and usability. The information architecture of the site is similar to those of other large-volume Web sites, such as America Online or Amazon.com, which highlight the most timely and relevant information to their audiences on the home page, and provide easy access to the other key areas of the site. For example, GOP.gov highlights **up to date news** from Republican Members on the home page, along with links to **"hot topics,"** or the most frequently accessed areas of the site. It also provides easy access to **Committee Central**, a repository of up to date committee information and the **Dialog**, which is an online discussion board. Additionally, the home page provides highlights of **upcoming events** Republican Members are involved in. Each of these links enable visitors to easily "drill down" to the information they came for by following logical, easy to figure out paths through the vast resources available on the site.

GOP.gov also uses innovative technology to provide visitors with **customized versions of the site** if they choose to register their preferences. The technology is similar to that used by My Yahoo!, My AOL, and other customizable Web sites. Visitors **choose their preferences** from a menu of options that includes issues of national interest, issues in the Republican agenda, and the names of Republican Representatives on which they would like to be updated. Once visitors register their interests, the home page will **provide information on the specific topics**

that interest them every time they return to the site. This is one of the most innovative features currently in use in Congress, but it is also one of the most controversial, since it requires the use of **cookies**. In fact, as a result of the use of cookies, there was a lack of consensus among the members of the Congress Online Project expert panel about awarding this Web site.

The members of the Expert Panel, like the public at large, disagreed about the appropriateness of using cookies. Some argue that cookies are always inappropriate because they represent an invasion of privacy. Others contend that cookies can be used appropriately, as long as any information collected is used only for the purposes stated explicitly and in detail in the site's privacy policy. Still others feel that the threat to personal privacy is a small price to pay for the added convenience cookies provide. This debate has not yet been resolved, either on the expert panel or in public opinion.

Controversy withstanding, GOP.gov deserves kudos for pushing the envelope for Congress online in such an audience-conscious, content-rich, usable, interactive, and innovative way. This site is an example of what a legislative Web site can do. And their efforts have been well rewarded. In addition to the 1.7 million user sessions on the site last year, GOP.gov is regularly sending out **75,000 topical e-mail newsletters** from individual Members to visitors who requested them.

CONGRESS ONLINE
SILVER MOUSE AWARDS

Audience

Senator Fred Thompson (R–TN)   thompson.senate.gov

One of the most impressive features of Senator Thompson's Web site is his section on legislative priorities. This section provides his audiences with specific issue and position information in his high priority legislative areas. Issues of importance to the Senator, such as reforming government (he's the Ranking Republican on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee) and national security (he's on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the National Security Working Group), are well represented by the numerous topics under each of these headings. Senator Thompson also addresses state-specific information with Tennessee-related issues as well as "national" issues such as Social Security and tax relief. The Web site includes a detailed statement of the Senator's position on these issues, information on legislation related to the issue, while press releases and statements are included at the bottom of the page. Visitors can also choose to view the issue page in a printer-friendly format, rather than a full-graphics version, which is a handy feature for constituents and reporters alike. By providing this comprehensive issue-based content, Senator Thompson enables his audiences to easily find the information they're looking for on the Web, rather than contacting the office, saving valuable staff time and resources.

Rep. Nick Smith (R–MI)   www.house.gov/nicksmith

The Web site of Rep. Nick Smith employs innovative practices to better meet the needs of his primary audience—constituents. Rep. Smith has created a kind of "casework triage" Q&A process, which uses a "Problem Solving Wizard" to identify the kind of problem constituents are experiencing and helps them match their needs with targeted information and services online. Constituents help themselves without staff assistance by simply selecting options that most closely resemble their problem, and the navigation tool guides them to helpful resources. Another feature helpful to visitors is the home page's "NewsTicker," directing constituents to current news and frequently updated information. Usually featured on the NewsTicker are recent press releases and statements by Rep. Smith, links to the Congressman's weekly column, CRS reports and the date when the Web site was last updated. Rep. Smith's Web site also uses a message board, monthly survey and e-mail newsletter to interact with and engage citizens in the democratic process.

Joint Economic Committee   www.house.gov/jec

This is a content-rich site that serves as the online presence for what could easily be one of the most confusing committees in Congress. First, the committee is one of four joint committees, or committees that have both Senators and Representatives sitting on them. Since most committees have memberships comprised of only Senators or only Representatives, it can be difficult to understand the composition and purpose of a joint committee. Second, the committee's mission is to review

economic conditions and make recommendations for changes in macro economic policy, which could seem a somewhat inaccessible topic for many Americans. The committee clearly recognizes these challenges and addresses them by providing clear, concise, detailed information that helps visitors not only understand how the committee works and what it does, but also helps educate them on economic policy issues. The site also provides information targeted to economic experts, with abundant links to economic indicators, studies, and other resources. All in all, this site does an exceptional job at understanding that its information must cater to diverse audiences with a wide range of knowledge of economics.

House Committee on Resources (majority)   resourcescommittee.house.gov

The Committee on Resources has a pretty difficult task when it comes to identifying and providing for their audiences. This is a committee that handles a variety of high-profile issues, which makes their information of constant interest to lobbyists, grassroots organizations, and the media. They also handle many issues that touch on individual lives of many Americans, which makes them the recipients of more requests from citizens—and from congressional Member offices on behalf of citizens—than most committees receive. The Committee on Resources clearly created their Web site to try to be responsive to the needs of these audiences and, at the same time, free some staff resources to focus on the day-to-day committee business. Their Web site provides access to abundant and up-to-date information, documents, committee and subcommittee schedules, historical and educational information, and more, which helps ensure that visitors can find what they need from the committee without making a phone call. The committee also enables visitors to subscribe to one or more of their e-mail lists to receive updated information from them.

House Committee on Small Business (majority)   www.house.gov/smbiz

This is a committee Web site that provides comprehensive legislative information for its audiences—primarily small business owners. The Committee on Small Business site details legislation originating in, referred to, and passed by the committee. Brief descriptions of the bill and its purpose are given with more detailed information available for those visitors who seek additional information. This information is written in clear, understandable language rather than legislative terminology that may confuse some visitors. The site also includes links to the Library of Congress' Thomas bill summary and status as well as full text versions for each bill. The legislative content on this Web site gives small business owners the information they need on legislation and issues affecting them, their business and their employees.

House Democratic Caucus   housedemocrats.house.gov

The Democratic Caucus is the organization that brings the Democrats in the House of Representatives together and provides a forum for coordinating and communicating the Democratic agenda. As such, their audience consists of Democratic Members and staff, as well as citizens interested in the Democratic perspective in

Congress. The Democratic Caucus serves these audiences by providing user-friendly information about the Democrats in the House and the issues that matter most to them. To help coordinate House Democrats, the site provides brief biographies of freshman Democrats, links to the Web sites of the Democratic leadership, links to Democratic caucuses and coalitions in the House, and information about the 17 Democratic task forces. This information provides Democrats with information about and access to one another. Additionally, the site fosters the goals of the House Democrats by providing a link to Democratic Leader Gephardt's weekly Democratic Focus column, press releases from the Caucus, and brief descriptions of the goals of each Democratic task force. The site also provides an innovative "You be the Judge" section, which provides information about the Democrats' "Families First Agenda," links to the Families First Web site, and the opportunity for visitors to subscribe for e-mail updates from the Caucus.

Content

Senator Dianne Feinstein (D–CA) feinstein.senate.gov

One of the most interesting features of Senator Feinstein's Web site is a section composed of "Legislative Information Brochures." These brochures are Adobe Acrobat files that contain detailed information about the issues of key concern to the Senator, including the California economy and the fight against cancer, that constituents and interest groups can download, print out, and distribute for themselves. Grassroots organizations and other activists will find this feature very helpful, since it provides them valuable information and an authoritative source supporting their issues. And, if these organizations are distributing the brochures, the Senator's message can be communicated widely without taxing office resources. Senator Feinstein's Web site also provides detailed information and links to relevant resources on these and other issues within the body of the site, so visitors interested in learning about the Senator's issues do not have to download the Acrobat files to do so.

Senator Carl Levin (D–MI) levin.senate.gov

Senator Levin's Web site is thorough and informative, and it provides some of the most comprehensive issue information we found on a congressional Web site. The home page features links to information on 25 current and committee-related issues. Each issue page explores a topic in detail in the first person and describes the Senator's position and work he has done on the issue. Links to additional resources, such as press releases, statements, audio and video clips, and external links are also frequently included to enable visitors to learn more, if they choose. Thus, the Senator provides his audiences with ample resources to understand his stance on the issues and collect the information they need to form their own opinions.

Rep. Tom Allen (D–ME) tomallen.house.gov

Rep. Allen's Web site is content-rich and innovative. It is also one of the few congressional Web sites that provide a schedule, which is one of the many things that make this site noteworthy. At the beginning of each month, the office enters the

schedule of public events for the upcoming month into a database. Every day, the database generates the schedules for the next day, the rest of the week, and the rest of the month. The schedule is not intended to be comprehensive, which would be impossible to provide in the ever-changing congressional environment, but rather a general calendar of opportunities constituents will have to see and hear Rep. Allen. This provides a clear sense that Rep. Allen is accessible and accountable to his constituents, but it does not place undue burden on staff by requiring them to update a detailed schedule every time things change.

Rep. Allen's Web site is…one of the few congressional Web sites that provide a schedule….

Rep. Chris Cannon (R–UT)   www.house.gov/cannon

Rep. Cannon's Web site is a content-rich site that is especially noteworthy for the way it handles discussion of the Representative's key legislative issues. The home page highlights current issues and provides links to further information, press releases, statements, and legislation about the issues addressed. The Issues section provides overviews of nine national issues, along with Rep. Cannon's views on each and links to further information. The Legislation section briefly describes bills the Congressman has introduced in the 107th Congress, rather than using links to the summaries provided by Thomas, as do most congressional Web sites. Rep. Cannon provides his own overview of each bill—which includes the date it was introduced, the purpose of the legislation, where the bill is in the legislative process—and then links to the full text on Thomas. Presenting the information in this easy-to-understand format allows the Congressman to effectively serve his constituents' legislative concerns online, while freeing up valuable staff time and resources.

House Committee on the Budget (majority)   budget.house.gov

The House Committee on the Budget uses its Web site to provide its audiences with informative and educational material. The federal budget is confusing to a large portion of the general public, but the information on this site makes the budget and related legislation easy to understand. For example, a "Budget Tutorial" provides links to basic information on the budget. The "Budget Monitor" describes the impact of events and legislation, such as the war on terrorism, on the federal budget. And "Budget Week," a weekly newsletter printed when the House is in session, summarizes budgetary issues in upcoming legislation. Additionally, the site provides numerous charts and graphs that help make the federal budget easier to grasp.

House Committee on Standards   www.house.gov/ethics
of Official Conduct (majority)

The Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, also known as the Ethics Committee, has a narrow, yet crucial, jurisdiction. The committee provides guidance to Members and House staff about the Code of Official Conduct, so it is of particular interest to House offices. It is also responsible for investigating and making decisions about alleged violations of the Code of Official Conduct, which is of interest to reporters and the public. The Ethics Committee Web site does an excellent job of serving these diverse audiences while simultaneously maintaining the discretion

required of a committee with such sensitive jurisdiction. The site provides the complete Code of Official Conduct, as well as "Highlights of House Ethics Rules," which answers frequently asked questions and provides important forms and information to guide House staff through the most common ethics questions. The Web site also provides valuable information for lobbyists about gifts and campaign contributions in order to ensure that they do not violate House ethics rules. And to satisfy reporters' and the general public's interests in committee decisions on alleged ethics violations, the site provides easy access to the committee's investigative reports. Through its Web site, the committee is now able to meet the needs of more congressional staff far more efficiently than it was in the past.

Interactivity

Senator Mary Landrieu (D–LA)   landrieu.senate.gov

Senator Landrieu's Web site is an innovative and sophisticated Web site that takes advantage of an inexpensive technology to offer a unique interactive feature on her site. Using CU–SeeMe software, a videoconferencing program, Senator Landrieu conducts online chats with students across Louisiana, who pose questions and offer comments to which the Senator responds. Information about how to schedule a chat, a video of the Senator discussing why she values the chats, descriptions and pictures of past chats, information about how to set up the technology, and a form to place requests online are all provided on the site to better enable the chats. This seemingly high-tech feature is actually easy to use and gives constituents (and students) the feeling that Senator Landrieu is accessible and wants to hear from them. The Senator also shows her accessibility to adult constituents by providing easy access to contact information for every one of her offices; a "feedback form" that enables visitors to register their views on a range of current issues; a Web form to send her e-mail; and a complete staff list so visitors can know who they need to contact with different questions. Thus, Senator Landrieu uses both high-tech and low-tech features on her Web site to enable a tremendous amount of interactivity with her audiences.

> Senator Landrieu conducts online chats with students across Louisiana, who pose questions and offer comments to which the Senator responds.

Rep. Brad Carson (D–OK)   carson.house.gov

Rep. Carson's Web site states that it is an "online, interactive Congressional office…a one-stop shop for many important constituent services" and it certainly is just that. Besides providing constituents with numerous "issue pages" and the opportunity to voice their opinions through online surveys, Rep. Carson actually interacts with constituents through an "online town hall." Oklahomans can comment or pose questions to the Congressman, and he responds personally by posting the answers online. The responses are nicely categorized by issue, which allows visitors to learn the Congressman's views about topics that most interest them. This innovative feature provides an important service to constituents by creating a forum for the boss to directly respond to their concerns. In addition, it enhances constituents' sense of congressional accountability, a critical concern for many citizens. An added benefit is that, because the Congressman posts his responses online, constituents can find answers to many of their questions on the Web site without having to contact the office for assistance.

Usability

Senator Don Nickles (R–OK)   nickles.senate.gov

The Web site of Senator Nickles employs a layout not typically found on congressional sites. The portal-style home page allows visitors to see at a glance all the information available on the site. Every section of the site provides a consistent navigation menu at the top of the page, with a changing navigation menu along the left side of every page that lists the links available in that section. This ensures that the visitor will never get lost on the site and can easily navigate within the different sections. The site also provides content in a very user-friendly way. The text on each of the pages is easy to read and easy to scan, and none of the pages are cluttered with distracting graphics or too many competing sections that can confuse visitors. Links are clear and the language is easy to understand. All these factors clearly indicate that the site was planned with careful consideration for how visitors use the information and how they will most easily be able to use the site.

Rep. Mark Green (R–WI)   www.house.gov/markgreen

Rep. Green's Web site has three usability features that made it stand out from other congressional Web sites. First, Rep. Green has one of the few "Bobby-approved" Web sites on Capitol Hill. Bobby (http://www.cast.org/bobby/) is a test created by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) to determine whether or not a Web site meets the standards for accessibility by the disabled. Web sites that meet the standard are encouraged to display the "Bobby-approved" icon, which Rep. Green does, making him one of the early congressional adopters of accessibility standards. Second, the Congressman provides a text-only version of the site, which meets the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) standards for accessibility—a higher standard than even Bobby requires. This ensures that all visitors can access and use the site, whether or not they use a standard graphical Web browser. Finally, the Web site provides access to video clips in either high bandwidth or low bandwidth options. This enables visitors with low-speed modems to access the clips more easily, while also ensuring that visitors with high-speed connections have access to the high quality video possible to provide with higher bandwidth.

(Rep. Thune's) detailed privacy statement also provides trust by clearly conveying his policies on what information is being collected by the site, why it is being collected, and how it is being used.

Rep. John Thune (R–SD)   johnthune.house.gov

Rep. Thune has one of the most functional and usable Web sites on the Hill. It scored high marks across several usability criteria in our evaluations, such as ease of navigation, readability, consistency, look and feel, timeliness, and privacy. Stationary navigation bars on the left side and bottom of the page ensure that visitors don't get lost on the site. Visitors can navigate within each section (without having to use their browser's back button) and click through additional links for more information. The crisp and clean site design, using blue and red colors, feels professional without seeming too glitzy. Graphics are limited to pictures in the site's photo gallery, except for one head shot of the Congressman, making the site easy to load and easy to read. In addition, Rep. Thune's site is up to date and uses clear and concise language, written for South Dakotans. The Congressman's detailed privacy statement also provides trust by clearly conveying his policies on

what information is being collected by the site, why it is being collected, and how it is being used. This privacy policy is one that should be emulated by other congressional offices.

Innovations

Senator Bob Graham (D–FL)   graham.senate.gov

Senator Graham's Web site contains numerous innovative and interactive features, but two are particularly noteworthy. An interactive map of Florida on his home page provides constituents with access to information about some of the "workdays" that Senator Graham has conducted in their region of the state. These workdays, which are of themselves an innovative concept for a congressional office, are days the Senator spends on the job with constituents—forest rangers, construction workers, police officers, radio co-hosts, and more. Through the Web site, details about and photos from selected workdays are provided. Occasionally the Senator also provides his stance on, or regional information about, topics related to that line of work. This feature gives constituents a context for legislative initiatives and for Senator Graham's work in the Senate. Another innovation on the Graham site is the ability to e-mail press releases to others. This unique feature, available through an icon on each press release page, encourages citizens to participate in the democratic process by sharing information and making it easier for constituents to spread the word about the Senator.

> Another innovation on the Graham site is the ability to e-mail press releases to others. This unique feature… encourages citizens to participate in the democratic process by sharing information and making it easier for constituents to spread the word about the Senator.

Rep. Heather Wilson (R–NM)   wilson.house.gov

Rep. Wilson's Web site contains several innovative features designed to engage constituents. "Heather's Town Hall" encourages constituents to communicate with one another on issues that matter to them by providing an open forum for constituents to post their views and respond to the views of others. The "Mailbag" periodically posts comments and questions constituents have submitted to Rep. Wilson. The "On-line Chats" section provides information about upcoming online chats Rep. Wilson is hosting for constituents. Other innovations on this Web site include a weekly "postcard" from Rep. Wilson about timely issues and topics on Rep. Wilson's mind. An events calendar provides information about upcoming events Rep. Wilson will be attending, as well as information about how to schedule a meeting in the district or Washington. A "Press E-kit" provides photos and information for reporters to use in their stories. And an "En Espanol" link on the site provides a Spanish version of the site for Spanish-speaking residents of New Mexico.

House Science Committee (majority)   www.house.gov/science

The Science Committee is one of the few House committees now providing video Webcasts of committee and subcommittee hearings. Congressional staff can watch Science Committee hearings from their offices, while lobbyists and reporters are

saved a trip to the Hill. Webcasts also engage the public in the legislative process and show them where the real action on Capitol Hill is—in committees. Webcasts allow more people to view committee hearings, and with added convenience. Additionally, the Science Committee Web site also includes "hearing charters" for most hearings. A hearing charter, posted before each Webcast, usually describes the purpose of the hearing and includes the witness list and information on the legislation or topic to be addressed at the hearing. Sometimes recent developments on the issue, specific legislative information, or even possible questions or issues to be discussed at the hearing are also included.

MISTAKES CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES ARE MAKING

While the number of congressional offices viewing their Web sites as virtual offices is gradually increasing, congressional offices are still making mistakes. Listed below are the mistakes we saw most often. Some of them were so grave that they prevented several otherwise good congressional Web sites from being considered for the Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse Awards. Most of them are fairly easy to remedy, and by fixing them, offices can make their Web sites much more useful, easier to manage, and more accessible to their audiences.

- **Promoting the boss, rather than informing the audiences.** Most congressional offices are using their Web sites to promote the Member or committee's activities and accomplishments and describe the services and information they can provide, if visitors contact them off line. The Web site can be a very powerful tool for promoting the Member, Chairman, Ranking Member, or Leader, but this should not overshadow providing useful and unbiased information citizens, reporters, and advocates are seeking. These audiences want congressional Web sites to be the conduits for congressional and legislative information, not the filters of it. The content on congressional Web sites should not all be framed in terms of the Member's role in the events and legislation discussed, and it should not exclude information about important issues and activities in which the Member is not actively involved.

- **Failing to provide what audiences are seeking.** Based on our research, there is a distinct disconnect between what citizens, reporters, and advocates say they want from congressional Web sites and what most congressional offices are providing. The key audiences of congressional Web sites want basic legislative and issue information; opportunities to express their views; the ability to learn about Members, Congress, and the legislative process; and the ability to keep track of action on issues that are important to them. Congressional offices excel at responding to constituent and stakeholder needs off line, but most have failed to translate their information and services to their Web sites in ways that provide their audiences with "virtual offices," accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- **Failing to keep the content fresh and updated.** Legislative information changes every day, and the Web site should keep up with these changes. Congressional offices should also check their Web sites regularly to be sure that old information is updated, archived, or removed. Even if the content is not updated every day, clear dates should indicate when a site was last updated so constituents do not have to question the relevance or reliability of the information. During our evaluation, we saw many sites that had not been updated in several months or more, or that had significant portions "under construction" in August 2001, during our evaluation process. Some of the most embarrassing mistakes the Congress Online Project Team saw were offices that had not updated their bill sponsorship links to point to information for the 107th Congress. Many offices still pointed to 106th Congress bill sponsorship information, and some still pointed to 104th and 105th Congress information!

- **Failing to write for the Web.** Another common mistake congressional offices are making with their content is not writing for the Web environment. Through our research, the Project Team noticed a tendency among congressional offices to employ

"Most Web sites are too promotional in nature and they're often not updated regularly."

—DC-based reporter for local newspaper

long pages of text formatted for the written page, not the Web page, so visitors have to wade through a lot of information to find what they came for. The best Web sites provide concise content that is easy to scan, with highlighted keywords, headers, links, and bulleted lists that make it as easy as possible for visitors to quickly determine whether or not the page contains information relevant to their needs.

- **Creating slow loading Web sites.** Two thirds of all Internet users in the United States still access the Internet with 56kpbs or slower modems. Internet research shows that if a site takes longer than 10 seconds to load, visitors are likely to lose interest and go elsewhere for the information they seek. Our evaluation found that about 50% of Member Web sites take more than 45 seconds to load, and nearly 20% take more than one minute! Only about 10% of Member Web sites take less than 15 seconds to load. These long load times are usually the result of high-resolution graphics and "high tech" bells and whistles, such as Java popup menus, ActiveX features, and Flash "videos." There is definitely a place for photos, graphics, and high tech features on congressional Web sites, but only if they are formatted for slow modems or placed in separate, clearly marked sections that people can avoid, if they wish to. Web sites should always be designed with the lowest common denominator in mind, especially when it comes to features that affect download time. Congressional offices do not want to turn their visitors away before they even have a chance to see the content on the site. To test the load time of a Web site, a congressional office can use free tools, such as Netscape's Web Site Garage (http://www.websitegarage.com).

- **Providing superfluous information and features.** Many congressional offices are providing information and features designed primarily to entertain visitors. However, visitors come to congressional Web sites for information about legislation, issues, Congress, and Member, committee, and leadership offices, not for fun and games, movies, local news and weather, or demonstrations of cutting-edge technologies. If residents want state and local news, they will turn to state and local media Web sites. If tourists are considering a visit to the state or district, they will go to tourist-oriented Web sites. If people want to play games, there are lots of great gaming sites out there. These are the logical choices for such information, and chances are slim that anyone visiting a congressional Web site is looking for anything but congressional information. Other features are added benefits, if they don't get in the way of what visitors are actually seeking, but if visitors don't find the congressional information they came for, superfluous information is not liable to impress them or entice them to return. For this reason, congressional offices are best served by focusing their time and resources on identifying and providing the information visitors are coming to the site to find.

- **Failing to follow through with innovations.** Some innovations require so much technical skill or such extensive updates that they end up draining office resources and are quickly forgotten. For example, we saw a number of Web sites that had been offering regularly updated audio or video clips, but they clearly had given up on the idea months before and just left the old audio and video on the Web site. Offices should think carefully about how much time an innovation is going to take to maintain, and either set up an effective management process to keep it fresh, or leave it out if it seems that it will be too time consuming.

CHANGE FACTORS BETWEEN 1999–2001

In 1999, the Congressional Management Foundation conducted a similar, though less rigorous, evaluation process of congressional Web sites, which resulted in the report, *Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use*. Our research shows that, over the last two years, a growing number of congressional offices have begun to view their Web sites as key information and communications resources for their audiences.

For example, in 1999 most congressional offices were using their Web sites as billboards. They served more as "advertisements" for the Members, committees, and leaders than as resources for constituents. At most, the average congressional Web site in 1999 provided:

- Long "Welcome to my Web Site" messages on their home pages;
- Biographical information;
- Descriptions of the accomplishments of the Member, Chairman or Ranking Member, or Leader;
- Descriptions of the information and services constituents could receive if they contacted the office;
- Press releases (mostly out of date);
- Lists of links to other Web sites, such as the committees on which the Member serves, the Library of Congress, or federal agency Web sites; and
- Tourism information about Washington, D.C. and their district or state.

Precious few congressional Web sites were actually enabling constituents to access online the information and services they needed. Only a small percentage of offices provided e-mail addresses, issue information, regularly changing features, or any degree of interactivity. In fact, there were so few offices that went beyond the "billboard" that it was very easy to recognize the best sites on Capitol Hill. In 1999, only 24 congressional Web sites were considered for that recognition, and only 12 were actually recognized in the report. In 2001, those numbers more than doubled. There were 60 congressional Web sites in contention for recognition as Congress Online Gold or Silver Mouse Award winners, 35 of which received awards.

Additionally, in 1999, there was a clear distinction between the congressional offices that understood, and attempted to capitalize on, the opportunities of their Web sites and those that did not yet "get it." In 2001, however, the distinction was less clear. There were still a number of billboard Web sites in Congress. These Web sites received grades of D or F in this evaluation, depending on the age of materials, such as press releases and links to legislation. In general, however, congressional Web sites have improved. More sites include up-to-date information designed to help their audiences serve themselves, which shows that more offices have begun to understand the importance of their Web sites to constituents. However, many offices still seem confused about what to provide for constituents and why. For example, many offices have tried to provide extensive information on their Web sites by posting the text of their press releases, speeches, issue papers, and other documents, but since it was not targeted to its audiences or well-organized, the information was very difficult to use and understand. These sites usually received a C in our evaluation, depending, again, on the timeliness of documents

and links. The next step for these offices will be to organize the information and put it into a context that their audiences will understand, just as the Congress Online Gold and Silver Mouse Award winners have done.

In our estimation, there are several important trends that have occurred since 1999 that can account for the move toward better congressional Web sites. These are:

- **Greater Focus on Audience Needs.** Today, increasing numbers of congressional offices are approaching their Web sites from the perspective of their audiences. The best offices are responding to the needs and interests of their audiences by tracking trends in audience correspondence; anticipating hot button issues; following trends in state, local, and industry media; tracking Web site statistics; and requesting feedback from their audiences about how the Web site can improve. Thus, these offices are better targeting the information, services, and resources they provide to the needs of their audiences.

- **Greater Integration of the Web site into the Office.** In 1999, almost all congressional offices saw their Web sites as ancillary to their day-to-day business. Now, greater numbers are beginning to see their Web sites as integral to all they do. As a result, more offices have elevated the priority of their Web sites and made an office-wide commitment to them. In some cases, offices have shifted resources away from other tasks, such as printing and mass mailing, in an effort to move both the office and constituents toward increased electronic communications. Some of the benefits these offices have realized in doing so include: reduced postage costs, reduced reproduction costs, fewer phone requests for documents, more efficient use of staff time, and positive feedback from constituents and stakeholders.

- **Buy-in from Members and Managers.** It used to be that the only people focusing on congressional Web sites were the "techies" in Congress. While this group included a few Senators, Representatives, and senior managers, it was mostly comprised of forward thinking Systems Administrators. Today, however, increasing numbers of Senators, Representatives, and senior managers have realized the importance of their Web sites and are taking a greater role in developing Web strategies. This level of commitment sends a clear message to the entire office that the Web site is a vital tool of the office, which encourages staff to integrate the Web site into their daily thinking. As a result, greater numbers of congressional Web sites have become more rich in information, more regularly updated, and more useful to their audiences.

- **High Expectations of Freshman Members.** The 2000 election brought 53 new Members to Congress—11 Senators and 42 Representatives. Many of these freshman Members placed great emphasis on their Web sites, and some really pushed the envelope of "standard" congressional Web sites. They had come from companies, organizations, and state legislatures in which Web sites were fundamental to doing business, and they translated those practices to Congress. Freshman Members seem to be investing more heavily in their Web sites, and they are making their Web sites more of an office priority than are most veteran Members.

- **Outsourcing of Web Site Development.** In 1999, very few offices were using Web design vendors to help them create or support their Web sites. Most were either doing the Web site development on their own, or they were relying

on leadership or institutional Web site development resources. Now House and Senate offices have a range of vendor options to help them in all phases of the development of their Web sites. Increasing numbers of offices are taking advantage of these options. Vendors provide the technical and design skills that offices often lack. This frees the offices to focus their attention on the most important aspect of Web site design—developing content for the target audiences—rather than on design and programming.

- **Terrorist Attacks and Anthrax.** The events of September 11, 2001 and the closure of congressional office buildings in October 2001 as a result of anthrax contamination had tremendous impact on congressional offices' perspectives of their Web sites, the aftershocks of which are still being felt. During these times of crisis, congressional offices realized—many for the first time—the value of their Web sites for communicating crucial information in a timely and accurate way. As a result, the post-crisis Congress has begun to make Web sites a higher priority.

Since 1999, many congressional offices have come to see their Web sites as critical information resources and service tools, rather than merely as outreach communications tools. Within the coming year, we expect others to follow suit. Perhaps by next year our focus will no longer need to be on whether or not offices are viewing their Web sites as resources for their audiences, but only on how effectively they are accomplishing this.

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates how some congressional offices have used the Internet to significantly change the way they interact with the public. However, it also reveals that the vast majority of Member, committee and leadership offices have not made similar strides. On the whole, Congress has failed thus far to realize the potential that this new medium has to offer. The best Web sites highlighted in this report have done more than just take advantage of a new "tool," they have embraced a new way of thinking. They recognize that Web sites can be a remarkable vehicle for enhancing citizen understanding of Congress and its activities and increasing Member political effectiveness—back home and within Congress. For the rest of Congress to catch up with their colleagues, they must change the way they view Web sites and the Internet—they must undergo a paradigm shift in the way they approach their work.

One of the goals of this report is to demonstrate to congressional offices the benefits of such a shift. The most persuasive benefits are political. The Internet is the fastest growing medium in the world and is rapidly catching up with television as the primary source of news and political information for the public. The Congress Online Project reported last March that the House received 48 million e-mail messages in 2000. That number doubled in 2001 to 100 million, and will continue to grow dramatically. In short, if politicians have something to say, they will have to learn to say it effectively on the Internet or face the reality that their message will be muted. Constituents also are demanding that their elected officials provide valued information and services more quickly and easily through the Internet. Members of Congress who ignore the growing public expectations brought on by this historic change in communications capabilities will soon brand themselves as "old school" and limit their effectiveness.

Members of Congress and staff who doubted the importance of the Internet to American life, the terrorist attacks of September 11th should have probably erased these doubts. When land line phones and cellular technology were overwhelmed, the World Wide Web connected families, kept businesses running, and played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of the American government throughout the day. Similarly, on October 15, when letters laced with anthrax led to the multiple evacuations of both House and Senate office buildings, congressional staff and the American public relied upon e-mail and the Web for critical information and the means to communicate. The terrorist attacks and the resulting disruption they created for the Congress is leading many Hill offices to reevaluate and upgrade their Web sites and their overall electronic communications practices. We applaud these changes and want to encourage more Members of Congress and more office to follow suit.

If Members of Congress capitalize on this new and promising communications medium, it may aide them in building public trust and reducing public cynicism towards its work. While it is hard to imagine that Web sites and the Internet can accomplish this kind of change in public opinion by itself, it is equally hard to imagine that such a change could occur without it.

> If politicians have something to say, they will have to learn to say it effectively on the Internet or face the reality that their message will be muted.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH & FINDINGS

In 1999, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) conducted a study that resulted in a report entitled, *Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use*. In that report, CMF:

- Identified the building blocks for successful congressional Web sites;
- Evaluated all Member, standing committee, and leadership Web sites according to those building blocks;
- Identified the best Web sites on Capitol Hill; and
- Provided guidance for congressional offices wishing to incorporate the best practices into their own Web sites.

In the fall of 2000, CMF, in partnership with The George Washington University, received a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts for the Congress Online Project. The goal of the Project is to build on the findings of the research performed for *Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use*. Through more extensive research into best Web site and online communications practices for congressional offices, we are providing even more extensive guidance to help congressional offices wishing to improve their Web sites and electronic communications.

Through our research, we have identified a range of Web site standard practices, best practices, and innovations, both on and off Capitol Hill. These can be effectively applied to congressional Member, standing committee, and leadership office Web sites to improve communications with constituents and other congressional stakeholders. Through our research, we also identified the five building blocks for effective congressional Web sites and developed clear, supportable, consistent, and fair criteria by which to evaluate them.

Most of the evaluations and analyses of congressional and parliamentary Web sites conducted, to date, have been quite narrow in focus, and have thus provided an incomplete perspective of visitors' experiences with them. Most studies have focused on:

- Qualitative impressions of the "look and feel" of the Web sites;
- Quantitative checklists of features on the Web sites, such as postal and e-mail addresses, Member biography, online polls, etc.; or
- Evaluations of institutional Web sites (http://www.senate.gov and http://www.house.gov), rather than those of individual Member, committee, and leadership offices.

Because they have focused narrowly, however, most studies conducted to date have failed to assess the overall effectiveness of congressional Web sites. Although the design and features of congressional and institutional Web sites are factors in the overall experience a visitor will have with them, we determined that the experience cannot be measured by these factors alone.

As a result, we set out to identify both qualitative and quantitative criteria that would allow more complete evaluation of these Web sites. To do this, we sought the perspectives of: constituents; activists; staff in congressional Member, committee, and leadership offices; reporters; advocacy groups; and experts in a variety of

Constituent Focus
  Groups

Interviews with
  Congressional
  Staff

Industry Research

Survey of Political
  Reporters

Survey of
  Advocacy
  Groups

Reviews of Non-
  Congressional
  Web Sites

Review of Previous
  Analysis of
  Congressional
  Web Sites

Web industry sectors. Through one year of extensive research, we identified the needs, goals, and objectives that each of these groups have for congressional Web sites. This research took the form of:

- Focus groups with citizens nationwide;
- Interviews with congressional management, legislative, technical, administrative, and support staff;
- Research into a wide variety of Web industries;
- Research into the views and needs of political reporters;
- Research into the views and needs of advocacy groups;
- Reviews of non-congressional Web sites that provide congressional information; and
- Reviews of previous evaluations of congressional Web sites.

The research and findings of each of these steps are described more fully below.

Constituent Focus Groups

Rosita Thomas of Thomas Opinion Research conducted eight focus groups nationwide in order to determine what constituents expect on and off line from their Members of Congress. The focus groups were held in Washington, DC; Richmond, VA; Philadelphia, PA; and Phoenix, AZ. Dr. Thomas conducted two focus groups in each of these locations to determine whether or not there were differences in the attitudes of engaged and non-engaged citizens. We defined engaged citizens as people who had at some time written to their legislators, attended town hall meetings, kept up with public affairs on television or through newspapers, or had contributed to, or volunteered for, a political campaign. The non-engaged citizens were people who were not too interested in public policy or legislative issues and did not follow public affairs or politics.

At each session, participants were asked to share their general impressions of: 1) Congress and Members of Congress; 2) their experiences with communications with and from Members of Congress on and off line; and 3) four actual congressional Member Web sites that represented the range of current Member office Web practices. These sessions provided a vivid account of what constituents want and expect from Members of Congress and Member Web sites. More specifically, constituents stated that they consider the following to be critical elements of congressional Web sites:

- **Accountability.** Constituents are looking for indications that a Member of Congress feels accountable to his or her constituents. They would, thus, like Member Web sites to include:
  - ☑ *The Member's voting record and reasons* for his or her vote on important issues. Constituents want to understand the rationale for a Member's vote on a particular bill. More importantly, they want to know that there was a rationale that went beyond party lines.
  - ☑ *The Member's schedule,* especially while the Member is in the district or state. Constituents want to know when local town hall meetings and events are being held, mostly as reassurance that the Member is meeting

with, and listening to, constituents. They also want information about committee hearings and other legislative business in which the Member will be participating on Capitol Hill. Constituents wanted to know where the Member is and what issues he or she is working on.

☑ *The Member's stance on key legislative issues* that will impact the district or state. Constituents want to be assured that the Member is working for them.

☑ *The Member's bill sponsorships* and co-sponsorships in the current Congress.

- **Neutrality.** Participants in our focus groups reacted strongly to Member Web sites that they felt were too political or self-promoting. Constituents had no use for "slick," campaign-like sites, especially when they failed to provide the content constituents wanted. People felt that these sites made the Member appear to be running for re-election, not serving in Congress. They felt, essentially, that these Members were campaigning using taxpayer funds.

- **Useful Information.** Constituents want to find information that matters to them—not to the Member—on congressional Web sites. Overwhelmingly, the focus group participants praised Web sites that provided lots of clear, succinct, non-promotional issue information, congressional services, and access to helpful resources. They understood the need to convey the Member's views, but the participants wanted Member Web sites to be, first and foremost, the conduit for legislative and issue information, not the filters of that information. They want easy access to information on issues that are important to them, the Member's stance on issues, and guidance on how to get casework assistance and how to use the resources of other government Web sites. Constituents especially stressed their desire for information that would enable them to make informed decisions on the issues that are important to them. They felt that the information most commonly being provided to them by congressional offices is slanted, rather than objective.

- **Educational Information.** Another consistent theme in our focus groups was the need for an educational element on Member Web sites, containing basic information about the responsibilities of a Member of Congress and how the legislative process works. For example, constituents requested answers to questions such as:
    ☑ What does a Member do during the day?
    ☑ What type of meetings does he or she attend?
    ☑ What are committee schedules like?
    ☑ What do each of the chambers of Congress do?
    ☑ How does a bill become a law?

- **Interactivity.** Focus group participants had very negative opinions of how Member offices communicate with constituents. Constituents want to participate, but for the most part they do not feel that they are engaged in the process. They feel that Members only communicate with them when an election is coming up or when "they need something."

Also, there was a very strong feeling that their opinions do not matter to their Members. They assume that any messages that they send are routinely ignored or not considered in more than a cursory manner by congressional offices.

The focus group facilitator drew out what the constituents were looking for in their communications with congressional offices. Among the ideas that the participants discussed were the following:

☑ *They want to be able to register their opinions.* Constituents in our focus groups indicated that they liked the idea of being able to register their opinions with the office online in a quick and easy way. They were especially interested in being able to respond to online surveys and being able to jot off quick messages on the issues that mattered to them.

☑ *They want to feel that their opinions are being acknowledged and considered.* When they send their opinions to the office, they want to receive timely feedback indicating that the message was received and describing how it was being processed. For example, they appreciated Web sites that provided them with aggregate survey results when they submitted their views, and they liked Web sites and e-mail responses that explained how their views would be used in the office.

☑ *They want the office to respond to their communication in kind.* Constituents do not want paper letters sent in response to their e-mail messages or phone calls. They want the office to respect their choice of communications method and respond to their messages in kind.

☑ *They want to receive information from the office on the issues that matter to them.* Constituents were interested in being able to subscribe to e-mail newsletters and issue updates from congressional offices. They felt that these would provide them with an easy way to keep informed about their Member's work and about legislative activity on issues that interest them.

The results of these focus groups are described in greater detail in the Congress Online Project Online Issue Brief entitled, *Constituents and Your Web Site: What Citizens Want to See on Congressional Web Sites.* For a copy of this report, visit http://www.congressonlineproject.org/focusgroups.html.

Interviews with Congressional Staff

In the last year, we have conducted interviews with scores of management, legislative, administrative, support, and technical staff from both the House and the Senate to identify their perspectives on congressional Web sites. The staff we interviewed represented a cross section of individual Member offices, House and Senate standing and joint committees, and leadership offices. This research was designed to identify congressional offices' Web strategies and the obstacles they face with online communication.

During this research, it became very clear to us that the different congressional organizations have very different goals and audiences that need to be reflected in our evaluation process. Our research produced the following findings:

• **Standing Committees**. We found that there were fundamental differences in the types of audiences that were attracted by the different committees. The audience of a committee will have a great impact on the types of information and services the committee must provide on its Web site. From our research, we identified three distinct audiences served by congressional committees.

The audiences can be described as follows:

☑ *Internal congressional audience.* Committees such as the Committee on House Administration or the Senate Rules Committee primarily serve the administrative and organizational needs of Member Offices and committees. As a result, there is seldom reason for the general public to seek information from these Web sites, so these sites must primarily be concerned with providing the information the internal congressional audience will seek. In many cases, committees that have primarily internal audiences will focus their Web efforts on their intranet Web sites, rather than their public Web sites. For this reason, these committees often maintain fairly basic public Web sites.

☑ *External, non-professional audience.* Some committees have sizeable audiences that are both external to Capitol Hill and comparable to Member office constituencies. These audiences are usually composed of individuals and groups that have a strong personal, not professional, interest in the issues the committees handle. A good example of such a committee is the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. Veterans form a very active, non-professional constituency with a vested personal interest in the legislation and oversight responsibilities of this committee because the committee's actions often affect their daily lives. The Veterans Affairs Committee and other committees whose audiences fall into this category must focus their attention on providing answers to frequently asked questions and access to frequently requested information and services to individuals and small groups, much as Member office Web sites must.

☑ *External, professional audience.* Some committees have largely professional audiences of lobbyists and advocates who have a high degree of familiarity with the committees' issues and inner workings. An example of this type of committee is the House Ways and Means Committee. This committee regularly interacts with an audience whose professional duty is to follow the committee's business. The audience is well informed about the issues the committee handles, the way the committee operates, and the way Congress operates. As a result, the Web site strategy must attempt to meet the fairly sophisticated demands of this audience. Committees whose audiences primarily fall into this category must concern themselves with providing timely and detailed legislative information and access to committee documents that this demanding audience needs, especially since the audience will get the information it needs one way or another, whether it be online or from a committee staffer.

Each committee in the House and Senate must be responsive to a combination of these audiences on their Web sites. However, each must also identify its primary audience and expend the greater percentage of their Web resources on meeting its needs.

- **Leadership Offices.** Every leadership office has unique objectives and audiences that are dictated by the roles and responsibilities of the leadership position, the goals of the Leader, and the agenda of the party. Not all leadership positions lend themselves to the conducting business via a public Web site, since their responsibilities are largely confined to organizing their party in the House or Senate and providing Member offices with important party information. Some leadership positions, however,

have responsibilities that require communicating with the public and the media. These leadership positions can be well served by their Web sites, which have the potential to become resources for anyone interested in the views and activities of the party in Congress. For this reason, among others, the public Web sites of congressional leadership offices vary widely, and evaluating leadership Web sites required that we know the goals, objectives, purpose, and responsibilities of each leadership office. To identify these factors, we depended on our interviews with the leadership staff, research into the background and role of each leadership office, and the information on each leadership Web site.

- **Member Offices.** Member office staff in both the House and Senate tend to see their Web sites as a means to communicate their messages, promote their bosses, and announce their accomplishments. By and large, Member offices are using their Web sites to support their communications strategies, their legislative outreach, and other promotional activities. Most Member offices also tend to apply the rules and practices of the off line media with which they are accustomed—such as press releases, newsletters, and mass mailings—to the content on their Web sites. Additionally, these offices tend to view their Web sites as a one-time project that is constructed and completed, similar to a newsletter, rather than an on-going effort, so most Member office Web sites are updated only sporadically, if at all. As a result of all of these factors, most Member offices are not maximizing the potential of their Web sites to communicate with their key audiences.

Industry Research

The Project Team consulted a variety of respected sources in a range of Web-related fields to identify Internet industry standards and best practices. The team then analyzed how these could best be applied to the unique needs, goals, interests, and stakeholders of congressional Member, committee, and leadership offices. The standards and best practices that we determined most critical to the current congressional Internet environment are:

- **Credibility & Accountability**. According to a July 2001 report released by the Markle Foundation entitled, *Toward a Framework for Internet Accountability*, 45% of Americans feel that the Internet is a "source of worry," and 70% believe that "you have to question most things you read on the Internet." Because the Internet is still basically uncharted and unregulated territory, credibility and accountability are critical components of any Web site. The best practices for fostering a Web site's credibility and accountability include: posting and following clear policies (privacy, security, communication, etc.); providing reliable information from reliable sources; ensuring that information is current and accurate; protecting personal information; and not sending unsolicited e-mail.

- **Press Relations**. The Internet can be a powerful resource for journalists. According to a study conducted by the Nielsen/Norman Group entitled, *Designing Websites to Maximize Press Relations*, the top-five reasons journalists gave for visiting a company's Web site were to: find a PR contact (name and telephone number); check basic facts about the company (spelling of an executive's name, his/her age, headquarters location, etc.); discover the company's own spin

on events; check financial information; and download images to use as illustrations in stories. Additionally, the study found that 60% of the time, journalists cannot find the basic information they seek on corporate Web sites. These findings and others regarding press relations on the Web can be extrapolated to provide congressional offices with guidance on how journalists may be using their Web sites to conduct research.

- **Usability.** Usability refers to the ease with which a visitor can access and use a Web site. Usability industry standards reflect best practices in usable information architecture, graphics design, layout, and accessibility for the disabled. Usability is a critical component of any Web site, but it is particularly important for a public or government Web site. Government Web sites, including those of Members of Congress, should be easy for all Americans to access and use. The audience of a public Web site will span a wide range of knowledge and ability, and the members of the audience will access the Web site with a variety of hardware, software, bandwidth, and access devices. As a result, a government Web site must be designed with the lowest possible denominator in mind in order to be usable by its entire audience. Based on the published research and analysis of usability experts such as Jakob Nielsen (www.useit.com), Bruce Tognazzini (www.asktog.com), and Keith Instone (www.useableweb.com), the team identified a range of usability standards and best practices to apply to congressional Web sites.

- **Interactivity.** Since the inception of the Internet, industry experts have lauded its ability to provide new ways for people to interact with one another, with government, and with corporations. Since new tools, technologies, and applications to foster Internet interactivity are constantly being developed, the industry standards and best practices for interactivity are constantly changing. However, congressional offices have been slower to integrate interactive technologies than has the private sector. As a result, interactive features—such as surveys, order forms, chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc.—that are regularly found on private sector Web sites are still rare on congressional Web sites.

- **E-mail.** The Web industry has found that e-mail is the "killer app"—the Internet application that is most responsible for the growth of e-commerce and idea exchange. A Web site is no longer enough to communicate effectively with customers. Truly effective, growth-oriented companies will also have internal and external "blogs" (Web logs, or collections of links and information targeted toward the interests of a particular person or group), e-mail newsletters, and e-mail marketing tactics. These ideas can be extended to the congressional environment, especially since congressional offices are at least as interested in effective communications, public relations, and public "buy-in" as are corporations.

- **E-government.** The concept of e-government—providing government information and services online—is receiving a great deal of attention at the local, state, and international levels. Because this concept is rapidly reaching the mainstream, Congress will feel increasing pressure from constituents to adopt best practices of e-government. Encompassed under the rubric of e-government is the concept of e-democracy, or the ability of citizens to participate electronically in the legislative and rulemaking process. To determine the implications e-government will have to Congress, we consulted a variety of studies and resources. Most notable are recent studies by the Council for Excellence in Government, Brown University,

Accenture, the IBM Institute for Electronic Government, and *Federal Computer Week*, which provide various visions of e-government and e-democracy, as well as analysis of current e-government and e-democracy efforts in the U.S. and abroad.

Survey of Political Reporters

The Project Team developed a questionnaire to identify the information political reporters want from congressional Web sites, the frequency with which they use congressional Web sites, and their impressions of current congressional Web sites. The questionnaire was distributed via e-mail to reporters who cover politics and Congress for national and local news organizations. We received 31 responses, most from individuals who have been reporters for more than five years and have worked with a range of media outlets, mostly in Washington, D.C. Because of the small sample size, the results of the questionnaire should not be considered statistically representative of the entire population of political reporters. We sought to gather their perspectives and impressions, much like those collected through our focus groups with constituents. The results of the questionnaire indicated that:

- **The respondents are using congressional Web sites.** Only one of the respondents indicated that he had not used a congressional Web site at all within the last year. Most had used them more than 20 times, and 35% had used congressional Web sites more than one hundred times in the last year. Additionally, many indicated they were either very likely or somewhat likely to visit a Member office, committee, or leadership Web site when reporting on a Member of Congress or on issues before Congress.

- **Congressional Web sites are not the only electronic resources the respondents use to find information about Congress.** Most of the respondents indicated that they use non-congressional Web sites, such as Project Vote Smart and the Federal Elections Commission, media Web sites, Internet search engines, and paid research services, such as Lexis-Nexis, when reporting on a Member of Congress or on issues before Congress.

- **Web sites have not replaced interview research.** All of the reporters indicated they were very likely or somewhat likely to contact a Member's Press Secretary, and all but one indicated that they were very or somewhat likely to conduct personal interviews when reporting on a Member of Congress or on issues before Congress.

- **The respondents were generally dissatisfied with the information they found on congressional Web sites.** About half (45%) indicated that they were somewhat or strongly dissatisfied with the information they have found on congressional Web sites. None of the respondents strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the information found on congressional Web sites. Additionally, more than half of the respondents indicated that they somewhat or strongly disagreed that they easily found what they were looking for from a congressional Web site. Fifty-five percent of the reporters indicated that they somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that congressional Web sites were good resources for researching information about legislation, and 65% indicated that congressional Web sites were good resources for information about individual Members of Congress.

We also asked the reporters to indicate how important it was for them, as reporters, to be able to find certain features on Members' Web sites. Table 1 describes the results of their responses. Not surprisingly, they overwhelmingly indicated that it was very important for them to be able to find recent and archived press releases. More surprising, however, is the fact that photos, video and audio clips, and information about Members' accomplishments were not very important to them.

Table 1: Importance to Reporters of Certain Features on Congressional Web Sites

Feature	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not at All Important
Recent press releases and speeches	74.2%	22.6%	3.2%	0
Archived press releases and speeches	64.5%	29.0%	6.5%	0
Photos and biographical information	54.8%	29%	16.1%	0
Member's rationale for key votes	51.6%	35.5%	12.9%	0
Complete voting record	51.6%	25.8%	16.1%	6.5%
Member's daily schedule	32.3%	22.6%	32.3%	12.9%
Summaries of important national legislative issues in Congress	29.0%	41.9%	35.5%	6.5%
Information about the Member's legislative accomplishments	16.1%	41.9%	35.5%	6.5%
Links to relevant information about the Member or issues	12.9%	67.7%	12.9%	6.5%
Recent video or audio clips of the Member's speeches	6.5%	6.5%	35.5%	58.1%
Information about the legislative process	0	16.1%	35.5%	48.4%
Photos of recent events	0	0	39.0%	71.0%

Survey of Advocacy Groups

The Project Team developed a questionnaire to determine how advocacy groups were using, and would like to use, congressional Web sites, as well as to collect their impressions of current congressional Web sites. The survey was posted on the Internet through the generous assistance of e-Advocates, a company that provides tools and resources to enable corporations, associations, and media organizations that use the Web to conduct electronic grassroots advocacy. e-Advocates' 900 clients were asked

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**Table 2: Importance to Advocates of
Certain Features on Congressional Web Sites**

Feature	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not at All Important
Ability to express their views to individual Members of Congress	94.7%	5.3%	0	0
Ability to express their views to committees	85.7%	10.7%	3.6%	0
Ability to track legislation online	85.7%	7.1%	7.1%	0
Members' views of important national legislative issues in Congress	82.1%	16.1%	0	1.8%
Summaries of specific legislation before Congress	76.8%	10.7%	12.5%	0
Ability to receive e-mail updates from committees about the status of specific legislation	73.2%	21.4%	5.4%	0
Summaries of important national legislative issues in Congress	67.9%	19.6%	10.7%	1.8%
Members' rationale for voting a particular way on select legislation	66.1%	26.8%	7.1%	0
Recent press releases and speeches	60.7%	28.6%	10.6%	0
Members' complete voting records	50.0%	32.1%	17.9%	0
Opportunities to interact with congressional Members and/or staff online (chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc.)	48.2%	28.6%	17.9%	5.4%
Ability to download formatted information from Congress for use on advocate Web sites	48.2%	25.0%	21.4%	5.4%
Photo and biographical information	41.1%	39.3%	17.1%	1.8%
Ability to subscribe to receive regular issue-based e-mail updates from individual Members of Congress	28.6%	39.3%	17.9%	1.8%

(cont.)

(cont.) Feature	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not at All Important
Information about the Members' legislative accomplishments	26.8%	46.4%	23.2%	3.6%
Educational information on the legislative process	26.8%	25.0%	35.7%	12.5%
Video or audio of speeches, hearings, etc.	19.6%	41.1%	26.8%	12.5%
Members' daily schedules	19.6%	39.3%	30.4%	10.7%
Photos of recent events Members attended	7.1%	14.3%	41.1%	37.5%

to participate in the survey using e-mail and other means. We received 56 responses, the majority of which came from individuals involved in the public policy or grassroots areas of their organizations. Most of the responding organizations represent over 1000 members. Because of the small and narrow sample, the results of the questionnaire should not be considered statistically representative of the entire population of advocacy groups. We sought to gather their perspectives and impressions, much like those collected through our focus groups with constituents and our survey of reporters. The results of the survey indicated that:

- **Respondents are using committee Web sites.** Half of our respondents had visited committee Web sites in the previous week, compared with 32% who had visited Member and leadership Web sites in the previous week. However, more than 90% of the respondents had visited committee and Member office Web sites in the last six months, and 80% had visited leadership Web sites in the last six months.

- **Respondents were generally dissatisfied with the information they found on congressional Web sites.** More than half indicated that they were not satisfied with the information they found on congressional Web sites. Only one person strongly agreed that he found the information they were looking for, and another strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the information.

- **Respondents are using institutional congressional Web sites for legislative information.** Ninety-eight percent of the respondents used other online congressional resources, such as Thomas and the Clerk of the House Web sites, for legislative information.

- **Respondents want to lobby online.** All respondents indicated that it was important to them that their members be able to express their views to Members of Congress online: 97% of the respondents also felt it was very or somewhat important for their members to express their views to congressional committees. Many respondents also wanted some kind of dialogue: almost half of those responding said it was very important that their members have the opportunity to interact with congressional offices online.

We also asked advocacy groups to indicate how important it was for them to find certain features on Members' Web sites. Table 2 describes their responses. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents indicated that tracking legislation online was very important to them. And 95% of respondents felt it was very important or somewhat important to be able to receive e-mail updates from committees on legislative matters. Interestingly, almost half of the respondents said it was very important to have the ability to download formatted information from Congress that they could provide to their members from their own Web sites.

Reviews of Non-Congressional Web Sites

We examined a range of public, private, and non-profit sector Web sites that provide access to information about Congress and Members of Congress and/or foster interaction with Members of Congress. Our goal was to determine what information and features they offer to the public and how they compare with what congressional Web sites provide. Following are examples of the types of features and information that are available on non-congressional Web sites, and the names of sites which offer them.

- **Voting Records.** The House and the Senate both provide timely access to roll call votes. Organizations like Project Vote Smart (http://www.vote-smart.org) and Congress.org (http://www.congress.org) take these lists and organize them in ways that make it easy for citizens to find the voting records of their Senators and Representative.

- **Issue Information.** Many organizations and corporations are using their Web sites to inform their members, employees, and the public about issues and legislation in Congress. Some of them, such as Public Citizen's Congress Watch (http://www.citizen.org/congress/index.cfm) and the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action (http://www.nraila.org/), advocate on behalf of their own issues. Others, such as Capitol Advantage's Congress.org (http://www.congress.org) attempt to provide unbiased information on a range of issues.

- **Information on How Congress Works.** A range of educational, non-profit, and other organizations are providing easy-to-understand information about how Congress works and what Congress does. The Web site of the Center on Congress at Indiana University (http://congress.indiana.edu/) and YourCongress.com (http://www.yourcongress.com) are just two examples of sites that provide practical information and background on Congress presented in language that is understandable and accessible to folks outside the Beltway.

- **Legislative Tracking Capabilities.** A range of organizations provide Web sites that enable citizens to track legislation on issues that are important to them, or track the votes of their Senators and Representative. YourCongress.com, the AOL Government Guide, and Congress.org are examples of such sites. YourCongress.com's "YourCongress.Watch" (http://www.yourcongress.com/viewarticle.asp?article_ID=303) and the AOL Government Guide's "Vote Note" (http://votenote.aol.com/) allow visitors to subscribe to receive e-mail updates of the votes of individuals' Senators and Representative. Congress.org provides users with access to the status of legislation, organized by issue, and opportunities to express their opinions and to learn more about the issues.

- **Citizen Action Capabilities.** Hundreds of associations, corporations, and interest groups are using their Web sites to help citizens to become grassroots advocates on the issues they care about. Many enable constituents to send their views to their Members of Congress. The "Take Action" section of the Sierra Club's Web site (http://whistler.sierraclub.org/action/actionindex.jspf) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's "GAIN Online Action Center" (http://www.uschamber.policy.net/) are just two examples of interest groups that facilitate citizen action. And Vote.com (http://www.vote.com), which claimed responsibility for sending 45 million e-mail messages to Congress in 2000, is an example of a Web site designed for the sole purpose of giving "Internet users a voice on important public issues and other topics."

The success of these and many other third-party providers of legislative, issue, and advocacy information has shown that citizens are very interested in learning about legislative issues and participating in the legislative process. They want to follow legislation that is important to them. They want to communicate their views to their Members of Congress. Citizens that cannot conduct these tasks easily on congressional Web sites seek out other ways to accomplish them.

Review of Previous Analysis of Congressional Web Sites

There have been several analyses of congressional Web sites published over the last few years. The Congress Online Project identified many of them and reviewed their methodologies and findings, as well as their impact on Capitol Hill, to determine how they might best be incorporated into our research. The following studies were included in our review:

- *State and Federal E-Government in the United States* (2000, 2001). Darrell West. Taubman Center for Public Policy, Brown University.

- *Online on the Hill: A Survey of Congressional Use of the Internet* (2001). Tom Uniack. The Advocacy Group, Inc.

- *Surfing the Senate: Senate Websites Offer Less Charm than House Counterparts* (2001). E-vote.com (http://www.evote.com/features/2001-03/senatewebsites2k1.asp).

- *Surfing the House: House Websites Reflect the Real Power in the House* (2001). E-vote.com (http://www.evote.com/features/2001-01/housewebsites2k1.asp).

- *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Web Sites* (2000). Approved by the Inter-Parliamentary Council at its 166th session.

- *Building Web Sites Constituents Will Use* (1999). Katherine Bainbridge. Congressional Management Foundation.

- *Net Gains: The 106th Congress on the World Wide Web Survey* (1999). James Thurber. The American University Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies and Bonner & Associates.

- *The Net Effect: How Cyberadvocacy is Changing the Political Landscape* (1999). Daniel Bennett and Pam Fielding. e-Advocates.

- *The Hill on the Net: Congress Enters the Information Age* (1996). Chris Casey. Technology and Communications Committee, Senate Democratic Policy Committee.

APPENDIX B:
EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

To identify which current congressional Member, committee, and leadership Web sites have incorporated the building blocks we identified through our research, we conducted evaluations of all 605 of these Web sites. We devised an evaluation methodology that we determined would be as fair and objective as possible, without being so objective that the evaluation was based solely on quantitative factors. A visitor's experience on a Web site is based more on qualitative factors such as the quality and tone of the information, the usability and navigability of the site, the look and feel, and the degree to which the information meets his or her needs. As a result, a purely quantitative, checklist-based evaluation does not begin to measure actual user experience. For this reason, we devised a multi-step evaluation process. The process we used to do this is described below.

Process

The Congress Online Project used the following four steps in its effort to conduct unbiased, supportable, and well-vetted evaluations of congressional Web sites:

- **Step 1: Rough Sort of Congressional Web Sites.** Three evaluation instruments were developed—one for Member Web sites, another for committee Web sites, and the third for leadership Web sites—and seven members of the Project team were trained in the evaluation process. At this point, the Project did not apply a rigorous evaluation standard. Instead, the Team reviewed each Web site for basic, subjective factors that enabled us to assign letter grades to each one. Sites that were assigned grades of D and lower were eliminated from further consideration. Sites that were assigned grades of B and higher were moved ahead for further review. Sites assigned a grade of C were reviewed by a second member of the Project Team to determine whether they should move ahead or be eliminated from the process. This evaluation promoted 253 congressional Web sites to the next level of review, or more than a third of congressional sites.

- **Step 2: Fine Sort of Congressional Web Sites.** At this point the three subject matter experts on the Project Team applied a much more rigorous evaluation that measured for both quantitative, checklist-oriented elements, as well as qualitative, subjective elements under each of the five building blocks. Each site was reviewed and assigned a numeric score of one to five (one being highest; five being lowest) for each key factor. An overall rating, which weighted the ratings for audience, content, and interactivity more heavily than those for usability and innovations, was then calculated. Sites that received a rating of four or five were eliminated. Sites that received a one or two were sent on for further review. Sites that received a three were evaluated by a second member of the team to determine whether they should move ahead or be eliminated. A total of 60 Web sites progressed to the next step in the evaluation process.

- **Step 3: Expert Panel Review.** Early in its research, the Congress Online Project recruited five practitioners in a range of fields related to the use of Web sites in government and politics to serve as the Expert Panel. The members of

the Expert Panel were actively involved in the creation of the evaluation criteria and methodology, and each independently reviewed 32 of the remaining 60 sites. They were given general guidance about how to incorporate the building blocks into their reviews of the Web sites, but they were primarily asked to apply their unique perspectives to the sites. Each member of the Expert Panel divided his or her sites into three tiers, and the Project Team reviewed the results to determine where there was agreement and disagreement in order to determine which sites would be discussed in Step 4.

- **Step 4: Roundtable to Identify Model Congressional Web Sites.** After the members of the Expert Panel had completed their reviews, they met with the members of the Project Team for a four hour facilitated discussion of the results of their evaluations of congressional Web sites. The discussion centered on sites for which there were glaring discrepancies among the members of the Expert Panel or between the members of the Expert Panel and the Project Team.

- **Step 5: Identification of the Best Practices on Capitol Hill.** Using the results of the facilitated discussion, the findings at each step of the evaluation process, and feedback from the members of the Expert Panel, the Project Team calculated the overall results and made the final determinations about which sites would receive Congress Online Golden and Silver Mouse Awards.

Key Questions

The Project Team devised key questions for each of the five building blocks to ensure consistency throughout the evaluation process. The questions were reflected in different ways, but they were represented at every step. The evaluation instruments used at each step can be found on the Congress Online Project Web site at http://www.congressonlineproject.org/instruments.html.

Audience
- What does the Web site do to acknowledge its audiences, including constituents, stakeholders, the press, and activists?
- Do the topics addressed and issues discussed reflect the interests and concerns of the site's visitors?
- What elements of this Web site indicate that it is targeted to its particular audience, rather than to a generic audience?
- Who is the site trying to attract? What does the Web site do to attract new visitors?

Content
- How easily can a visitor with a reasonable question about a topic or service that falls under the purview or jurisdiction of the Member, committee, or leadership office find an answer without contacting the office?
- How easily can a visitor with a reasonable question about the target issues of a Member, committee, or leadership office find an answer without contacting the office?
- How easily can an average Internet-user link to useful information on and off the site?

- To what degree does the site provide the tools, information, and services that constituents and experts reasonably expect to find on a congressional Web site?

Interactivity

- What does the Web site do to encourage communication on and off line between its audience and the office?
- Does the Web site foster communication among constituents?

Usability

- How easy is it to browse through the Web site?
- How easy is it to locate specific information on the Web site?
- What elements enhance the usability of the Web site?
- How easily can an Internet user accessing the Web site with standard hardware, software, and bandwidth, access and use the site?

Innovations

- How well do the innovations, if there are any, enhance the site's design and content and the visitor's experience on the site?

APPENDIX C: CONGRESS ONLINE PROJECT EXPERT PANEL BIOGRAPHIES

Graeme Browning

Graeme is the Associate Editor of *Federal Computer Week* magazine (www.fcw.com), and the former Editorial Director of the Internet Policy Institute. She has covered technology policy for the *National Journal*, and has been a business reporter for the *Washington Post*, *The Sun*, the *Chicago Sun-Times* and United Press International, a member of the editorial board of *The Tennessean*, and legal affairs reporter for WKRN. She is the author of two books, *If Everyone Bought One Shore: American Capitalism in Communist China* (1988) and *Electronic Democracy: Using the Internet to Transform American Politics* (1st ed., 1996; 2nd edition to be published Nov. 2001). She is a member of the Tennessee bar.

Janet Caldow

Janet is Director of IBM's Institute for Electronic Government (www.ieg.ibm.com). Located in Washington, DC, the Institute is a global leadership resource in governance, economic development, citizen services, technology, education, and healthcare for the digital society. Janet directs a robust research agenda with renowned academic and practitioner partners. In the Center's cybercast studio, she oversees a variety of TV programs delivered over the Web. Formerly the Director of Strategic Management for the County of Fairfax, Virginia, her innovations in government won national recognition at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Janet serves on the Harvard Policy Group, the Advisory Board for the Global Development Gateway, The World Bank, and Governor Gilmore's e-Communities Task Force. An author, researcher, frequent speaker and Lacrosse mom, she holds an MBA, and a BA in sociology. Ms. Caldow resides in Vienna, Virginia, and Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Max Fose

Max is a Partner with the firm Integrated Web Strategy (www.iwsnow.com), an Internet consulting and development company specializing in helping campaigns, non-profits, and corporations integrate the Internet into their overall strategy. During the 2000 election cycle he was the Internet Manager and Treasurer for the McCain 2000 presidential campaign, and the American Association of Political Consultants recognized his work by awarding him the top Pollie Awards for "Best Overall Internet Campaign" and "Special Award: Best Use of the Internet." Prior to his work on the McCain 2000 campaign, Max was the Vice President of the Campaign Division for the Arizona political consulting firm HighGround, Inc. and the Arizona Field Coordinator for Phil Gramm's presidential campaign. He has also worked for the Arizona Republican Party, the National Republican Congressional Committee, and McCain for Senate '98.

Kathy McShea

Kathy is the former Director of Consumer Information at the U.S. Department of Energy, where she led an agency-wide overhaul of the agency's Web site and toll-free phone system to ensure that popular information products and services are easy for consumers to find and use. The resulting energy.gov Web portal was recognized by *Government Executive* magazine in 2000 as one of ten "Best Feds on the Web," and by the Association for Federal Resource Information Managers presented her with a "Leadership Award" for the project. Prior to her service at DOE, Kathy was Media Director of the DC Office of Consumers Union, the publisher of *Consumer Reports*, and chief spokesperson for U.S. Senator Carl Levin. Kathy is now applying her 15 years of experience as a public affairs counselor to Emerald Strategies, Inc. (www.emeraldstrategies.net), her boutique online public affairs practice, designing custom information architecture and Web governance solutions for Web managers that leverage the power of Web sites to make public service organizations stronger. She speaks frequently about technology and politics at professional gatherings and conferences and also teaches graduate studies in political communication as a member of the adjunct faculty at American University and George Washington University.

Joiwind Ronen

Joiwind is the Director of the Intergovernmental Technology Leadership Consortium of the Council for Excellence in Government (www.excelgov.org/techcon). In this capacity, she helps harness the power of technology to make local, state, tribal, federal and international governments more results-oriented and relevant to their citizens. She has played a key role in building the Consortium into the premiere coalition of expert business, government, nonprofit, and research leaders championing the use of technology as a resource for leaders in government. Joiwind has spoken extensively on e-government and e-democracy throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, and the Middle East. She brings to this work wide-ranging experience in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. In Washington, D.C. she has worked with and for government at the Department of Justice, the Advocacy Institute, and Capital Insights Group. She has also consulted with InterNap Network Services on corporate community involvement specific to the high tech industry.

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