

Title of Nomination: Business Entity Search - Online Service

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CATEGORY: Digital_Government_G_to_B

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Category: Digital Government: Government to Business (G to B)

Business Entity Search

Executive Summary

The Business Entity Search was launched on August 2, 2001. This online service is the creation of DiscoveringMontana.com, the official state website, in conjunction with the Montana Secretary of State's Office. The Business Entity Search is two services in one. The first service is a free service allowing customers to search and view information on the status of a business registered in Montana. The second part allows users to produce certificates for a business in real time or order certificates, all of which are paid for online. Before the Business Entity Search was available, the Secretary of State's Office would receive thousands of requests for business certificates a month. Now, citizens can search business information and purchase certificates 24 hours a day, seven days a week with this new online service, reducing the number of calls and requests to the Secretary of State's Office by 1/3. The release of the Business Entity Search has given Montana citizens greater access to their government at their convenience and has allowed for this government agency to re-direct personnel to critical government services.

The Business Entity Search is convenient and easy to use. The service is Internet based and so citizens, businesses and other governmental agencies do not have to purchase or maintain new software. This online service is fast. Customers previously waited up to 10 days to receive the information they requested on a business. Now, citizens can turn on the computer and go. The free search service allows customers to query the corporations database at Secretary of State's office which returns details on the status of any business registered in Montana. From here, if customers choose to get printed information on that business, they just follow three easy steps to receive a certificate. Customers can produce Certificates of Existence and Certificates of Authorization for a business in real time. Certificates of Fact also can be ordered and paid for online. Certificates can be paid for using a credit card, or charges can be billed to customers that are registered users of DiscoveringMontana.com.

Streamlining services offered by state government in order to help Montana citizens efficiently access their government is DiscoveringMontana.com's main focus. Customers are responding:

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," raved Sol Lovas, a Billings attorney. "As an attorney who does a lot of incorporations, LLCs and partnerships, I will no longer need to tie my personnel and yours up on a long-distance call just to check on the availability of a business name!"

Business Entity Search

A. Description of project

The Business Entity Search (BES) is two services in one. First, the intuitive interface allows customers to query the corporations database at Secretary of State's office which returns details on the status of any business registered in Montana. This service is free to the public.

Second, the BES allows a user to produce Certificates of Existence and Certificates of Authorization for a business in real time. Certificates of Fact also can be ordered and paid for online. Certificates can be paid for using a credit card, or charges can be billed to customers that are registered users of DiscoveringMontana.com

DiscoveringMontana.com, the official state website, developed the Business Entity Search in conjunction with the Montana Secretary of State's Office. The Business Entity Search has been operational for 11 months having been launched on August 2, 2001.

Before BES was launched, information on the status of Montana businesses and corporations was available only by telephone, or by stopping by the Secretary of State's office in the Capitol city of Helena. Certificates could be ordered by phone, but could take up to ten days to be delivered to the requestor by mail. Since the implementation of the BES, banks and attorneys that need a certificate can print one from their desks in approximately two minutes. Both citizens and businesses benefit from the opportunity to access this information after traditional business hours and on weekends.

B. Significance to the improvement of the operation of government

Innovative marketing resulted in fast adoption of this service by Montana businesses. The Secretary of State's office mailed 4,000 post cards to existing Secretary of State customers announcing free certificates of Authorization, Existence, and Fact for the entire month of January 2002. That January, 3672 certificates were produced online compared to the previous average of 150. Subsequently, February produced 15.8% more online certificates than average, and March saw a 41.5% increase.

Early adoption resulted in reaping the benefits of the application, in terms of efficiency and economy, almost immediately. Since launching BES, the Business Services Division of the Secretary of State's office has seen a significant decrease in phone calls and certificate requests. A year after implementation, 50% of certificate requests are now handled online. They also have benefited from a 1/3 reduction in calls per month to the division.

C. Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state

The Business Entity Search is completely free of charge to users. A convenience fee of \$2 is accessed for printed certificates.

Prior to implementation of the Business Entity Search, the prototype was delivered to end users to assess ease of navigation and to solicit feedback intended to improve the service.

As Secretary of State Bob Brown travels throughout rural Montana, small-town bankers, lawyers, and business people stop him to congratulate him for implementing the service. In a state where communities are often hundreds of miles apart, the ability to do business via the Internet is invaluable.

Some comments from customers:

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” raved Sol Lovas, a Billings attorney. “As an attorney who does a lot of incorporations, LLCs and partnerships, I will no longer need to tie my personnel and yours up on a long-distance call just to check on the availability of a business name!”

“This site will nearly eliminate the sometimes lengthy process of getting critical business entity information needed to issue workers’ compensation policies for our insurance agency business partners,” said Jim McCormick, market development leader for the Montana State Fund.

We relied on the participation of end users, including banks and law firms to help us create the best, most usable service. A feedback mechanism is also included with this application that allows us to constantly improve the service. Considerable enhancements to this service have been implemented recently to respond directly to customer feedback. For example, users can now view all records that contain a key search word instead of just returning the first 50 records that matched their request.

D. Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback

By not paying development costs for the service, the Secretary of State’s office saved \$58,750. Maintenance and enhancements to the service are also provided with no charge.

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The Business Entity Search was developed and maintained without the use of tax dollars or a general fund appropriation. This is possible through a public/private alliance between the state of Montana and DiscoveringMontana.com. In just the first three months of offering the service, the Secretary of State’s Office saved the taxpayers close to \$60,000.