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# Commonwealth of Virginia

## Virginia.gov Portal Widgets

Category

Digital Government: Government to Citizen



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**2009 Commonwealth of Virginia NASCIO Award Submission**  
**Category: Digital Government - Government to Citizen**  
**Project: Virginia.gov Portal Widgets**

## **Executive Summary**

As part of its 2008 portal redesign project, staff from the Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) and its public-private partner Virginia Interactive (VI) set the following objectives as part of the project plan:

- Increase usage of government information by citizens
- Utilize new Web technologies
- Provide simple tools accessible by all users, not just technical experts
- Provide a means for Virginia agencies to push real-time, relevant information to interested users – without incurring additional cost
- Expedite information portability
- Engage younger citizens with their government in their native Web environment - without alienating less adventurous users
- Analyze the effectiveness of new tools

To achieve these goals, Virginia chose widget technology – and thus was able to lead the nation in their deployment by government. Widgets are movable, sharable mini-applications used by consumers to craft custom experiences.

From lottery numbers to election results, Virginia.gov's widgets now provide a new means for citizens to obtain real time information from their government. This innovative method of content delivery benefits citizen users, the portal provider and Virginia government entities that employ the technology. Transparency and speed of information delivery are significantly enhanced by enabling portable content.

By allowing users to choose portal content and post it on their own sites, the portal fulfills its mission of government information delivery without insisting upon return visits. Content providers – Virginia government agencies and entities – establish a process once that is updated automatically. They also benefit from cross-pollination of data, as interested persons discover content on sites otherwise unrelated to the state portal site.

Other benefits to the Commonwealth include cost savings, improved information delivery, effective outreach to younger citizens, redundancy and income.

Since launch in June 2008, Virginia has seen impressive usage statistics for portal widgets. The dynamic content contained within these 'wrappers' has been viewed more than 825,000 times from over 2500 placements beyond the state portal Web site. Constituents now are able to obtain real time government information – where they want it, when they want it, how they want it.

## Description of business problem and solution

As part of its 2008 portal redesign project, staff from the Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) and its public-private partner Virginia Interactive (VI) set the following objectives as part of the project plan:

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- Utilize new Web technologies
- Provide simple tools accessible by all users, not just technical experts
- Provide a means for Virginia agencies to push real-time, relevant information to interested users – without incurring additional cost
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A number of strategies to achieve these objectives on [www.virginia.gov](http://www.virginia.gov) were explored. Personalization has been a common approach to encourage loyalty, through options such as color palettes and drag and drop tiles. While successful for customized browser home pages, most users have indicated to Virginia through online surveys that they are not willing to take the time to set up personalized pages or passwords for the portal.

Subscription-based e-mail to encourage visitation and information transfer is employed by both the portal and a number of agencies, but existing usage figures indicate that the increase in spam and filtering technology has brought a corresponding and anticipated further decrease in efficiency of this tactic.

RSS feeds and services such as Twitter were also identified as possible tactics, and both are available to the interested user on the portal. These concepts focus on providing information to users' preferred mediums versus forcing users to frequently visit the information owners' Web sites to obtain updates. However, RSS feeds allow for more automatic information delivery, but remain limited to more technical users. Twitter had early Virginia adopters including the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, but its efficient use was quickly recognized as highly dependent upon agency staff time.

Project planners instead were looking for a method for the portal, representing the enterprise, to easily distribute information for many agencies. Tracking was important, and efficient delivery of dynamic, real-time information from government providers was of particular interest.

To achieve these goals, Virginia instead chose widget technology – and thus was able to lead the nation in their deployment by government.

Widgets are the Web *à la carte*. They're movable, sharable mini-applications used by consumers to craft custom experiences on their desktops, start pages, social network

sites, blogs or mobile phones. These interactive components are swiftly becoming the de facto building block for the personalized Web experience. Private industry widgets include those for weather, games, stock tickers, videos, audio players and quizzes. Though such devices were quickly proving popular on private sites, no government portal had yet adopted the technology. Virginia's decision to offer widgets on its portal was influenced by the following factors:

- Real time, portable information delivery to citizens
- Cross-pollination: users may find interesting Virginia government content on another's personal site without even visiting Virginia.gov
- Appropriate for both Web-savvy youngsters and older users
- Ease of creation by portal staff for agencies – at no cost to agencies
- Customization, personalization and syndication
- Tracking tools embedded in the technology

To create the widget wrappers, VI presented the Clearspring platform to VITA as the best qualified vendor based on its in-depth analysis. Clearspring is noted as the leading provider of widget creation, distribution, tracking and monetization services, used by the world's largest media companies, advertisers, and widget developers. Further, thanks to the portal's self-funded model, VI advised that it could offer the technology at no cost to the Commonwealth.

Due to the functionality, portability and affordability of this tool, project planners agreed on the approach. The first set of widgets launched in June 2008; these were developed in approximately three months by VI staff. Today, Virginia.gov widgets, available from any portal page using an embedded "Get & Share" link, provide citizens with immediate updates on changing content, including:

- Election information
- Traffic reports
- Emergency notifications and alerts
- News
- Government podcasts
- Virginia YouTube videos
- Upcoming tourism events
- State park information
- Lottery numbers
- Virginia trivia facts
- eGovernment online services
- Tourism hotel bookings

Users can quickly and easily add Virginia widgets to blogs, custom homepages (such as iGoogle), social networking sites such as Facebook and even personal Web sites. Analytics embedded within the widgets enable Virginia.gov to track usage and popularity.

## Significance

From lottery numbers to election results, Virginia.gov's widgets provide a new means for citizens to obtain real time information from their government about a diverse range of topics – where and when they want it.

This innovative method of content delivery benefits citizen users, the portal provider and Virginia government entities that employ the technology.

Transparency and speed of information delivery are significantly enhanced by enabling portable content. Instead of visiting the state Web site then clicking on links to download updates, citizen users add widgets to a preferred personalized social network, blog or personal Web site, enabling them to easily view dynamic content including election results, lottery numbers and winery events.

The portal, as the centralized delivery point for Virginia government entities, is able to provide easy access to relevant dynamic content. The approach is unconventional – traditionally, Web providers strived above all to drive traffic to their own Web site. But by allowing users to choose portal content and post it on their own sites, the portal has fulfilled its mission of government information delivery without insisting upon return visits to the 'parent' site.

Content providers – Virginia government agencies and entities – establish a process once and thus allow users to receive updated information automatically. They also benefit from cross-pollination of data, as interested persons discover content on sites otherwise unrelated to the state portal site.

Virginia is the first state in the nation to employ widgets on its portal. This innovation was noted as an important part of Virginia.gov's selection as first in the nation in the Center for Digital Government's 2008 Best of the Web program.

## Benefits of the project

The deployment of the Virginia.gov portal widgets has resulted in numerous benefits.

Analytics embedded in the widgets show placements and views; the chart indicates usage for the first 6 months of operation. Though some users likely may place more than one Virginia widget on their personal pages, it is impressive that Virginia government content was placed on more than 1,200 Web locations other than [www.virginia.gov](http://www.virginia.gov) – and that those placements drew almost as much traffic as a month's traffic to the portal.

Widget Name	July – 08 – December 08	
	Views	Placements
Lottery	17,568	82
Online Services	12,152	81
Traffic	3,622	52
Emergency Services	6,509	57
Podcasts	5,918	67
State Parks	6,255	72
News Feeds	7,076	42
Fun Facts	5,528	32
Wineries	5,846	242
YouTube	6,108	12
Election Widget	686,850	480

TOTAL

763,432 1,219

One specific, high profile example further illustrates these benefits.

*Case Study – Virginia.gov November 2008 Election Widget*

The November 2008 Presidential election was a record breaking voter and media event. The Commonwealth of Virginia was watched around the world as a critical swing state. The Virginia State Board of Elections (SBE) carefully developed contingency plans for all aspects of the election, including election night reporting via the Web. Early creation of an election widget was a chosen strategy, because it allowed users to view constantly updated information without visiting the actual agency Web site.

On election night, SBE's systems were highly taxed by numerous registrars attempting to enter precinct results as quickly as possible. Since many polling places closed at approximately the same time, system access by the many registrars caused excessive load on the SBE Web servers. As voter data was successfully entered by the registrars, an interface on the agency's site provided updated totals, allowing for fairly automatic results, but the heavy demand from the registrars and the many election watchers caused Web pages to load very slowly and occasionally to time out. This occurred as news outlets looked to the Commonwealth as the potential provider of electoral votes to declare the victor.

Fortunately, the Virginia.gov election widget was able to display real time information to citizen and media outlet users without delay or interruption. Over 300 widget installations on domains ranging from Facebook to news sites to Virginia localities provided over 289,000 views on election night alone. For the month of November, the widget continued to be highly used, with a total of 513,680 views. While most users were in North America, analytics reported views from Europe (4,386), Asia (868), Oceania (510), Middle East (324), South America (279), Africa (231) and Central America (36).

Other benefits:

- Cost savings - the approximate market price for the launch of the first widgets in June 2008 would have been more than \$15,000, not including the enhancements, maintenance and additional widgets developed over the past ten months. Using the self-funded model via partnership with Virginia Interactive, widgets have been made available at no cost to the Commonwealth, agencies and citizens.
- Improved information delivery – Through widgets, Virginia government entities are able to provide greater transparency by enabling citizens to track information via their preferred Web locations. Desired information is pushed seamlessly to all widget users, not just to more technically proficient individuals.
- Greater sharing - In addition to being embedded into Web pages, Virginia.gov portal widgets can be “grabbed” by Web site visitors and e-mailed to potential users through more traditional marketing media such as newsletters and agency Web sites. In addition, agencies can share the widgets with the media, satellite offices or localities, providing additional service offerings with no financial and minimal resource expenditures.
- Expanding audiences – Engaging younger citizens has historically been a challenge for many government entities. Use of widgets targets an emerging audience with the potential for improving interactions with government – but doesn’t exclude less technical users.
- Redundancy – Pollination of information via widgets decreases traffic to single source Web sites, creating ad hoc “back-up” internet sources for critical information without additional costs.
- Income – Lottery, online services, state parks and wineries all contribute to the economic well being of the Commonwealth. Increased awareness of and traffic to these areas through deployment of widgets has economic benefits, though they are hard to quantify beyond usage numbers.

Since launch in June 2008, Virginia has seen impressive usage statistics for portal widgets. The dynamic content contained within these ‘wrappers’ has been viewed more than 825,000 times from over 2500 placements beyond the state portal Web site. Constituents now are able to obtain real time government information – where they want it, when they want it, how they want it.