

NASCIO AWARD – 2007

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT – GOVERNMENT TO CITIZEN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2007, California unveiled a redesigned portal (www.ca.gov) that provides greater access to the State's online services and information. The portal offers an easy-to-remember name (formerly myca.gov) and an enhanced, accessible design aimed at easing the burden of locating information. The site provides immediate access to major topic areas, news, hundreds of online services, and millions of pages of web content.

The portal is now organized to reflect how the public actually looks for information. Prior to the redesign, the site reflected the organizational structure of the government itself, making it difficult for people to find what they needed. Under this fragmented approach, the portal was not aligned with how the public actually looks for information. There was no clear path – people did not know where to begin.

The redesign is the result of collaboration across multiple agencies, departments, boards, and commissions. California has the largest, most complex government of any state – and collaboration is rare. Historically, most of these agencies developed and maintained their own Web sites, with little guidance or oversight at the State level. It was difficult to keep abreast of policy or direction on development of State internet sites. Additionally, many departments do not have all of the expertise that is necessary to create user-friendly and user-focused web pages.

Presented with these challenges, the State Chief Information Officer created the eServices Office to lead the effort to redesign and refresh the State's web portal pages, coordinate the development of State policies and approved templates, and assist departments in the redesign and refresh of their own web pages. There have been many examples of collaboration and partnership. For example, the Webmaster User Group has quickly grown to more than 350 members. Members attend monthly meetings, share ideas and network online, and receive frequent communication.

Through this coordinated effort, agencies avoid duplication and share a common template. The State developed web-based tools (www.webtools.ca.gov) for departments to draw upon in completing their own web page refresh and redesign. The templates are flexible enough so that agencies can keep their branding/identity along side the State's. The ca.gov design is available in ten different color schemes. The templates have been well received. Hundreds of agencies have until November 2007 to comply with the new design, accessibility, and usability standards. So far, more than 15 have done so.

California's portal was first introduced in 2001. Today, nearly 46,000 people visit the portal each day accounting for 1.4 million hits to the website a month

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The redesign of the State's portal began in 2006 when the State CIO determined that major changes were in order. The design, navigation, and information architecture of California's portal had not been updated since it was implemented in 2001. As a result, the site reflected the organizational structure of the State government itself, making it difficult for people to find what they needed. Knowing that people interact with government because they have to (like going to the dentist), California set out to create a simple, understandable environment to "let them do their business and get out."

A usability study and various public surveys conducted in early 2006 uncovered the following problems with the portal:

- Design standards were too inflexible to meet the needs of different agencies
- Site navigation was hard to understand – people were overwhelmed by too much information on main landing pages
- Visual design was not effective at guiding users towards relevant content
- People with disabilities were not adequately accommodated
- More than 70 percent of the individuals could not find what they were looking for on the site.

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Usability was a primary goal of the clean, uncluttered design. The State underwent a usability study prior to the redesign, and implemented changes to improve navigation and usability. The portal was reviewed for branding, design, layout, task flows, graphics, accessibility, and verbiage. A variety of means for collecting the data were used such as, stakeholder interviews, user surveys, direct observation, and interviews with users. The new design allows the State to triple the amount of data available on the front page of the portal while speeding load times and presenting a less cluttered look.

The search is powered by Google, and has been implemented in more than 43 agencies so far. California was among four other states that implemented Sitemap protocol – a simple and free procedure. This opened up tens of thousands of web pages to major search engines.

In addition, the portal was redesigned with certain graphic elements to be carried throughout the rest of the State departments. The State "template" conveys the State's online brand and allows users to move seamlessly throughout the disparate websites. The prior templates failed to meet the needs of agencies. Many didn't use it or modified it. It wasn't accessible or flexible, it took up too much space, and it relied on old technology.

Under the leadership of the State Chief Information Officer, the Information Organization, Usability, Currency, and Accessibility (IOUCA) Working Group developed recommendations for the State's approach to website accessibility, website usability, and separating content from presentation. These standards are available on WebTools, an online resource that was created to assist agencies as a result of this project.

The State's standards require all sites utilize the ca.gov template and CSS to create sites that separate presentation from content. The templates provide a consistent look-and-feel across all California state government websites while incorporating best practices of standards compliance. The templates increase the value of websites for the citizens and businesses who rely on the State's information provided through them. The design allows for an agency to have complete control over how they present content in the mid section of the page as well as some control over the agency branding in the header. This allows an agency to express its branding needs while ensuring the State's branding.

The State has gone through extensive work to ensure accessibility. All State websites must be accessible to people with disabilities in accordance with the checkpoints in the State policy. We believe that the ca.gov website and template satisfy all priority 1, 2, and 3 guidelines for AAA compliance of the W3C, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0. In addition, the portal satisfies Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. To continue to adhere to accessibility standards and guidelines, the IOUCA continues to meet and discuss the standards, policies, and new technologies to make the portal ever more accessible to people with disabilities.

SIGNIFICANCE TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE OPERATION OF GOVERNMENT

Through this coordinated effort, agencies avoid duplication of effort and share a common template. The templates eliminate the guesswork out of making State sites compliant with look-and-feel, accessibility, and usability standards.

- **Operational efficiencies.** Webtools centralizes important resources to improve collaboration statewide. Having a standardized template eliminates the need for agencies to develop and create one on their own. State webmasters can build and support websites more efficiently through the use of the templates, shared resources, and cooperation. WebTools provides detailed explanations and links to information pertinent to the agency standardization of websites including standards and policies, templates, workshops, and resources. The template package can be downloaded, as well as extras like breadcrumbs, modules, and containers. Webmasters meet monthly, as well as share information through an online forum.
- **Reduction in cycle time.** The use of CSS makes it very easy to change the style of a website. This makes future changes to the template simpler for webmasters and reduces the cycle time to launch new sites and/or pages.

- **Increased communication.** Through the leadership of the eServices Office, agencies get access to resources such as guest speakers, low or no-cost training, and other resources. Webmasters get constant communication through e-mails, a monthly Webmaster User Group, and online forum. Prior to this effort, individuals involved in the development of web pages had very little communication. As a result, training was often done in silos and information was not communicated very effectively.
- **Savings in software/equipment.** The State did not procure any new software or hardware for this effort, with the exception of a Google box. The Google site license allows it to be used on all California websites. So far, 43 State websites are using the site search, which costs the State \$210,000 every two years. If each of these agencies procured their own Google box, it would have cost \$30,000 every two years for each agency. This is a two-year savings to the State of nearly \$1.1 million dollars to date.

The templates take advantage of CSS, and the template works well in all browsers. Agencies do not have to incur software/hardware expenses to convert their pages. The templates were created by in-house, State staff.

Public Value of the Project

With the current design, functionality is not based upon an application-based transaction, but merely on the effective information-based transaction that the public experiences when using the site. Information is easy to find and even in times when a user is having difficulty, the information is easily located through the use of the skillfully implemented Google search engine. The usability is exceptional and was a primary goal of the clean, uncluttered design. The design allows the State to triple the amount of data available on the front page of the portal while speeding load times and presenting a less cluttered look. The site is highly accessible while providing excellent visual feedback for the majority of end users.

- **Improved customer service and satisfaction levels.** Prior to the redesign, the site reflected the organizational structure of the government itself, making it difficult for people to find what they needed. The new site is designed with the user in mind. The most frequently accessed information is on the homepage. Visitors to California's site regularly provide valuable feedback on what is working well and on how to improve the services provided. The majority of the comments have been very positive.
- **Consistency among State websites** enables visitors to recognize key features and navigate the pages efficiently. This includes consistent look-and-feel, tabbed navigation, and a standardized color palette.
- **Improved access to services.** The State increased the amount of information that could be found through Google and other major search engines by incorporating sitemap protocol into the website. Prior to this, the information was

“hidden” from search engines. With zero financial investment (with the exception of minimal staff time), the State made more than 100,000 pages of information visible to search engines. Under the leadership of the eServices Office, many State agencies have also incorporated sitemaps into their websites.

Realized Return on Investment, Short-Term/Long-Term Payback

Since each department maintains its own Internet infrastructure and manages its own website, it is difficult to put a dollar amount on the return of investment for this phase of the portal effort. However, the biggest benefits are the savings of staff time and improvements in customer service and satisfaction. For example:

- The effort did not require new staffing or resources. All of the work was done in-house with current staff. The new portal was designed by current State employees, including the graphics and the templates. The eServices Office is staffed by three individuals on loan from other departments. The IOUCA Working Group, who monitors the accessibility and usability standards and guidelines, is made up of a group of volunteers from many different agencies.
- Although we have not performed any ROI studies, implementing the new design, Google search engine, and the sitemap protocol has no doubt reduced the number of calls to the State’s call centers. Additionally, sitemap protocol – a simple and free procedure - opened up tens of thousands of web pages to major search engines.
- And, as noted above, the State did not procure any new software or hardware for this effort, with the exception of a Google box. The Google site license allows it to be used on all California websites. So far, 43 State websites are using the site search, which costs the State \$210,000 every two years. If each of these agencies procured their own Google box, it would have cost \$30,000 every two years for each agency. This is a two-year savings to the State of nearly \$1.1 million dollars to date.