

NASCIO State IT Recognition Award Nomination

Title **Connecting with Citizens Through Google My Business**

Category **Digital Government: Government to Citizens**

State **Iowa**

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Project initiation and end dates **March 2018 – December 2018**

Executive Summary:

92% of all searches worldwide are conducted on Google (February 2019: Statcounter.com). Google has great information, but it's not always accurate. Google relies on local business owners and governments to get location data owned and managed through the Google My Business (GMB) profile. When people search on Google for a business or government office, in addition to being presented with website links and suggested website content they will see a box of information about the location that includes a map to click and get directions, a photo of the building, an indicator if the business is "Open Now," "Closed," or "Closing Soon," a website link, phone number and other information. This box of information (the Google My Business Profile) is generally the first thing you see when you do a mobile search.

People love doing a quick Google search and finding the business or the office phone number. We don't want to go to a website to then search the site for the information. People now rely on social media and they rely on Google. We all appreciate the ease of finding business hours for the store down the street with a quick Google search. We expect that information to be available for government as well.

Please take out your smartphone and search for "Iowa Office of the Chief Information Officer" to see our Google My Business Profile. Now search for the Missouri Information Technology Services Division Office to see how Google presents information for a profile that is not claimed by the State.

Claiming profiles meant updating office names, addresses, phone numbers, website links and other information that was inaccurate. Getting information correct on Google also meant training agencies how to manage and maintain the profiles so information remains accurate and staff would receive notifications of questions or reviews so they can be prepared to respond. Claiming individual profiles requires a somewhat complex and time consuming verification process which requires getting a call or postcard with a verification code.

We believe Iowa is the first State to initiate a bulk verification for all State government offices. Bulk verification saved hundreds of hours of effort and allowed us to quickly claim almost 500 profiles. With Google My Business profiles verified we were then able to quickly claim all Bing for Places profiles with the accurate Google My Business information we had created.

The Office of the Chief Information Officer has started benchmarking citizen experiences through GMB Insights. We now know the volume of searching for offices and the actions people are taking.

We know we are saving Iowans time by presenting correct information in Google and Bing. We are serving citizens where they live - in Google. There is no other inexpensive/cost-effective initiative that a State can take to engage citizens so dramatically and so quickly!

Concept

Citizens find it difficult to find information on State agency websites. Websites have large volumes of information and the most popular content may be hard to find and at a minimum is several clicks away from a Google search. Citizens expect to search Google, get an answer and move on. They don't want to wade through a website to find information. How easy is it to find your office phone number when doing a Google search?

Citizens are engaging through Google My Business by asking questions and submitting reviews. Agencies are responding to questions and placing posts on their profile to highlight information about top repetitive questions. The Department of Transportation is posting information about what is required to get a ReallID. The post includes a link to the correct information on the agency website and Insights tells the agency how often the Post is viewed and how often people click on the link.

Cost

The initial implementation consumed approximately 160 hours from March through May in 2018. The ongoing effort to manage account ownership, train new users, and claim other profiles is about 15 hours per month.

Assessment

Agencies are evaluating the metrics available through Google Insights. Individual agencies are tracking the impact of posts. DOT estimates for every click on their ReallID post they are eliminating a phone call; this represents almost 100 calls per week.

Communications Plans

Google My Business is an organic experience for citizens; everyone knows how to do a Google Search and most of us have clicked the directions button or call button on our phone after looking up a store or government office. No citizen communication was necessary.

OCIO promoted the ownership of Google My Business accounts to agency public information officers and Chief Information Officers. All agencies were invited a kickoff webinar to train staff on how to manage a Google My Business Profile and educate staff of the importance and benefits to managing the profile.

Significance

Stakeholders

Internal Stakeholders include agency Public Information Officers and executive management. Before OCIO spearheaded the effort to claim profiles, agency staff were frustrated by the incorrect information displaying in Google. One agency found Google had listed a service program supervisor as the main contact number. They did not understand how to get the information changed so they disconnected the Google published phone number and gave the supervisor a new phone number. Iowans attempting to call the department received a message “This is not a working number” and then had to dig to find a working number for the department.

As we worked to claim profiles we discovered that Google had marked the private homes of some employees that worked from home as a business. Even more frustrating was the fact they had left employment with the State but their home was still listed as a government office. Owning the profiles allowed us to mark them as permanently closed so they disappeared from search.

External Stakeholders are citizens. The greatest impact is citizens can now get answers to their questions. People viewing a Google profile often think the information is provided by the agency (or business) and they can ask a question and get an answer. The challenge is when the profile is not owned and managed, the agency is not notified there a question to answer. The question remains in oblivion. When questions are not answered, people think government is not helpful or does not care about them, resulting in frustration and distrust. Questions for most agencies are now being responded to.

Incorrect information is a risk for government agencies. Some questions were being answered by random people (Google Local Guides). Anyone can answer a question on Google My Business. The Attorney General of Iowa’s profile has questions being answered by Troy Hendrickson. No one in the Attorney General’s Office knows who Troy is. If an agency doesn’t own their GMB profile they don’t know what citizens are asking or what others may be answering on their behalf.

Citizens benefit by getting basic information quickly and agencies save time when they don’t have to answer the phone call question “How late are you open?” for the 100th time. We learned most agencies (including ours) do not post our hours of operation. Citizens don’t realize most offices close at 4:30 so it’s frustrating to them when they are rushing in to request a copy of a birth certificate or to pay a court fine that they find the doors locked at 4:30. We know we have reduced the chance this will happen by getting our hours updated on Google My Business.

The Center for Digital Government recognized this project with a Government Experience Award in September of 2018. We feel so strongly about the benefits to our agencies and citizens that we would like to share our experience with other States by offering to hold a webinar on how to claim and manage profiles and the process to establish bulk verification.

Impact

Up-to-the-minute accurate information on office hours, location, and phone numbers.

Because the State owned all of our Google My Business Profiles we were able to update contact information the day after a tornado damaged four offices in Marshalltown, Iowa. We were able to mark offices closed and change the phone number to a working phone number so citizens could still get help. We know the Marshalltown office for the Department of Human Services had 108 people call from the GMB profile during the 30 days following the tornado. If we had not owned the profiles and made the changes, citizens would have been calling a phone number with no service.

Citizens can ask their Google Home smart speaker or their Google Assistant on their phone for the phone number for a department and get the correct information. In fact, users can say “OK Google, call the Iowa Office of the Chief Information Officer” and the Google Assistant will place the call. We did an audit of the offices for all Governors and found only 15 states where Google had the correct information to provide a phone number or place the call. In 15 states Google could not provide the phone number or place the call and in 20 states Google could only do one of the two actions. Owning the profile and ensuring information is accurate provides a better and more direct experience for citizens.

The result of claiming almost 500 agency office profiles is that by owning all our profiles we now know how many times someone is directly searching for an office location and how often they click for directions, navigate to the website, or click the call button on their phone from Google My Business. We know that in April 93,000 phone calls came into agencies because of Google My Business. At an enterprise level we know which sites get the most calls, which sites get more physical visitors due to requests for directions, and we can see that the link off to websites is lower than the action to call the office. This information helps us understand where we need to make staffing or process improvement investments.

Harvesting citizen questions from Google My Business helped us create appropriate search responses for our Iowa.gov portal, AI-based chatbot, and our smart speaker skill “Ask the State of Iowa” for Google Home and Amazon Alexa. Our content strategy is to provide omni-channel access to information.

Everything old is new again and one of our innovations has been to get back to basics to improve signage for office locations. As part of the verification process with GMB we were asked to confirm office locations by providing a photo of the building signage. This effort uncovered

offices with poor signage or directory information. Building signage improvement requests were directed to the Department of Administrative Services to improve access for citizens.

The commitment to improving citizen experience in the native environment of GMB is strong. The project has positive agency enthusiasm for owning the accounts and getting good information to citizens. We helped the Judicial Branch claim their profiles and have had local libraries call for help getting ownership of Google My Business Profiles.

The impact of Google My Business (GMB) can be demonstrated by Insights from April 2019:

1,123,188 people searched Google for Iowa government agencies

93,466 people called state agencies using the Google My Business phone link

58,501 people navigated to Google Map directions

79,702 people navigated to agency websites