Trending: Digital Branding in Government

Think digital branding strategies are only for marketers at commercial businesses? Not anymore. Progressive state and local governments are creating official digital identities to engage and better serve citizens.

✓ **To thrive in an environment of continuous change, leading companies are rethinking their branding strategies as they modernize internal operations to become increasingly agile, scalable and sustainable.**

✓ **Now, a growing number of state and local governments are realizing the public sector faces similar challenges and opportunities when it comes to delivering citizen services and understanding constituents' future needs.**

✓ **To accommodate this, agency leaders are implementing modern development and content management platforms based on open source technology and the cloud to improve citizen services and operational efficiencies.**

This white paper details how government leaders can create a roadmap for digital transformation, promote cultural change and ultimately create a foundation for continuous improvements as innovations reshape the digital landscape in the months and years ahead.

Understanding the Challenge, Realizing the Opportunity

Commercial enterprises in all types of industries are grappling with the disruptions of digital innovations. To thrive in an environment of continuous change, leading companies are rethinking their branding strategies as they modernize internal operations to become increasingly agile, scalable and sustainable. Now, a growing number of state and local governments — from Georgia to California — are realizing the public sector faces similar challenges and opportunities when it comes to delivering citizen services and understanding constituents' future needs.

At the heart of these efforts is citizen trust. "With thousands of sites and many malicious entities floating around the Web, it is critical for governments to develop an official brand to establish recognition and user trust," says Nikhil Deshpande, director of GeorgiaGov Interactive, which manages the state's Web, mobile and social media operations. "So Georgia launched a cohesive digital platform that creates a digital brand across agencies and Web properties."[1]

To succeed in efforts like these, progressive government leaders such as Deshpande are implementing modern development and content management platforms based on open source technology and the cloud to improve information delivery, provide citizen services and increase operational efficiency.

Quick Tip:

To successfully transform and retool for the digital future, agencies must focus even more of their attention on human considerations — the cultural shifts required for sustainable change.

But effective digital brands and citizen engagement can't be accomplished with technology alone. To successfully transform and retool for the digital future, agencies must focus even more of their attention on human considerations — the cultural shifts required for sustainable change.

This white paper details how government leaders can create a roadmap for digital transformation, promote cultural change and ultimately create a foundation for continuous improvements as innovations reshape the digital landscape in the months and years ahead.

Digital Branding for Government: Why Now is the Time

The rise of tech-savvy consumers is placing new pressures on state and local governments to improve citizen engagement and offer enhanced services. Eighty-seven percent of U.S. adults carry a mobile phone and 71 percent of these devices are Internet-enabled smartphones.[2] These on-the-move consumers are also putting digital resources to work. Thirty-nine percent of adults with both mobile phones and bank accounts reported using mobile banking.[3] Additionally, 72 percent of U.S. citizens shop online at least once a month, while 58 percent like getting offers via their mobile phones.[4]

These preferences extend to citizens' interactions with government. Thirty-four percent of Americans say they've used the Internet or a mobile app to get data or information about state government, according to the Pew Research Center.[5] Another 32 percent do the same for local government information. Finally, 64 percent of U.S. residents who participated in a recent Governing Institute survey say they would like to conduct more government transactions online.[6]

Strong Digital Brands, Improved Citizen Satisfaction

Against this backdrop, it's no surprise forward-thinking government IT managers are stepping up efforts to serve digitally sophisticated citizens. For example, the city of Los Angeles launched a series of digital initiatives that use the latest ideas about branding and on-demand services to forge closer ties with its residents. The overall strategy takes cues from the commercial industry, with some significant differences. "When the motive is profits, good ideas prevail and bad ones die, so we watch the private sector for good strategies to engage with consumers," says Ted Ross, general manager and CIO of the city's Information Technology Agency. "We're a very large and complex city with more than 38 departments that provide a wide variety of services. Our digital presence is critical to how the average resident is going to communicate, engage and simply know us."[7]

One important highlight of these initiatives is MyLA311 Mobile, a digital offering that helps the city deliver services to almost 4 million residents spread across 469 square miles. When citizens see a problem, such as graffiti or a pothole, they can report it in real time by calling a traditional support

center or by sending a message via the city's mobile app. Increasingly, the app is becoming the medium of choice. "We now receive more than 104,000 app submissions each year," Ross says. "In many cases, our residents find it easier to use an app than make a phone call."

This is particularly true when incidents arise outside of normal business hours, or, in the case of graffiti, a photo and geolocation sent along with a message helps the city find and remediate a problem quickly. "For many services, citizens can also submit their email addresses to get notifications of when the issue has been addressed."

But a mobile app alone, even one as capable as MyLA311 Mobile, isn't the entire answer for citizen engagement today. Constituents also want a choice of communications channels, which is why modern agencies are developing a social media presence and relaunching websites backed by new content management platforms to help citizens find information. For instance, Los Angeles' fire department, police department and public library use social media to create a dialogue between the city and its residents. The city of Los Angeles also recently modernized its flagship website, LACity.org, using the open source Drupal platform, gaining 60 percent better performance and 100 percent mobile responsiveness while complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. This update resulted in a 26 percent increase in Web traffic, including a 64 percent increase in traffic from mobile devices. As another example, in 2012, Georgia transitioned from a proprietary Web platform to one based on the open source Drupal standard and delivered by a commercial cloud provider.

Other government entities are adopting a similar open source approach to promote digital branding. New York overhauled the NY.gov website in 2014 with modern capabilities that included better support for mobile users, which represent approximately 25 percent of the site's traffic. The site also provides translations for about 70 languages and meets ADA requirements.[8]

The payoff for efforts like these is a mix of quantifiable and subjective measures. Quantifiable benefits include costs savings due to reduced demand on call centers and fewer in-person visits to government offices. Eliminating or reducing paper-based processes also cuts expenses. "The more you can digitize services and information, the better you'll be at decreasing traffic to call centers and physical locations," Ross says. "This both improves public satisfaction and opens city

The Digital Demands of Citizens

34% of Americans say they've used the Internet or a mobile app to get data or information about state government.

32% do the same for local government information.

64% of citizens say they would like to conduct more government transactions online.

services to populations that avoid traditional methods. We aim to be a data-driven city and the metrics are compelling."

Savings can add up quickly. Deshpande estimates Georgia realized approximately $4.7 million in cost reductions over the last 5 years of heightened digital activities.

But perhaps the most important measure is user satisfaction. Government leaders keep a close eye on website traffic, with increasing volumes indicating citizens are pleased with their online experience. "The fact that we had a 26 percent increase in overall Web traffic shows us that our Web portal is delivering much more additional value to our consumers," says Ross.

Georgia is also seeing significant growth. In 2014, the state logged 76 million page views and 17 million unique visitors. In the first 5 months of 2015, it recorded 44 million page views and mobile visitors comprised 43 percent of traffic across the platform. In New York, the NY.gov modernization helped boost monthly visitor rates from about 65,000 to nearly 245,000 in the first month after the upgrade, while mobile traffic more than doubled.[9]

A Multi-Step Strategy for Success

Creating engaging citizen services across multiple channels with a cohesive brand is an important goal for modern agencies, but achieving success is anything but a turnkey operation. IT managers must join forces with a

diverse group of stakeholders, including administrators, department heads and elected officials. "Technology teams spend much of their time working on the technology, while our elected officials are out meeting with citizens and businesses," Ross says. "For digital strategies to really work, we must have their involvement." The following additional steps will help agencies achieve success.

Develop recognition. The overall strategy starts with creating a recognizable government brand. Many municipalities display their logo across all destinations on their websites and social media, so no matter which venue, office or department citizens visit, they always see it's an official government site. In addition, IT leaders may establish a standard domain policy by requesting all agencies and departments adopt ".gov," for example, rather than confusing citizens when they see an ".org" or ".net" label.

Test solutions. Next, understand one size doesn't fit all when it comes to communications channels. Because of this, leading agencies often field surveys or commission focus groups to better understand how constituents navigate websites and use digital services. "Visitors may want information about city government; they may be looking for a job; or they may be looking for city services," Ross points out. "So knowing our audience

is extremely important to provide them a quality user experience. If not, they will not be able to get what they need electronically, which means more strain on call centers, or even worse, their needs are never met."

Respond to user needs. When creating mobile experiences, the focus should be on empowering citizens to access city services and representatives while on the move. "Georgia is doing its best to make sure constituents have a seamless experience," Deshpande says. "When mobile reached 20 percent of our traffic, we started a huge project to make the enterprise code base responsive so all of our Web properties adjust to any citizen device. When users don't have to pinch, zoom and swipe to read content, their experience improves and they are more likely to revisit us online rather than making a phone call."

Create a dialogue. Interactive communications are key for success in social channels. That means more than merely using Facebook or Twitter as an alternative publishing platform to push out information. Agencies should also monitor communications and have processes in place to proactively submit a service request if complaints crop up about a broken street light, for example. "Social media is about us trying to create a back-and-forth dialogue to learn about problems or perhaps steer citizens toward certain services the city makes available. It's about engaging citizens on their platform of choice," says Ross.

Set a friendly tone. Design and functionality aren't the only considerations when creating a brand image. Organizations should also strive for a consistent voice by setting a welcoming tone in the content on websites and in interactions with citizens in online chats and social media posts. Related to this is having workflow processes in place so if the initial agency contact can't address a constituent need, he or she can quickly connect the citizen to someone who can. "We have seen that as long as users feel like they are moving closer to the answer, they will be patient," Deshpande explains.

Influence agency culture. Seeing digital engagement through the eyes of constituents is a cornerstone of successful digital branding strategies, but the external audience isn't the only segment that must be considered during

Georgia's Digital Brand by the Numbers

After adopting a new Web platform and enhancing its digital brand, Georgia experienced:

Approximately

$4.7 million
in cost reductions over 5 years

43% **increase in mobile traffic**

76 million page views and 17 million unique visitors
in just 1 year

digital transformation projects. Navigating internal cultural change is also vital for department heads and IT managers. This became clear in a Governing Institute survey where one-third of respondents cited cultural resistance as a challenge in implementing digital government strategies.[10] The message: Digital transformation requires training, retooling and process improvement. Start by helping internal staff transition to new ways of working. Valuable training resources are available from vendors that offer support for Drupal platforms. When evaluating potential partners, assess what instruction is available and whether it provides a hands-on experience in launching a Drupal site, architecting an enterprise-class Drupal infrastructure and customizing the system for the requirements of the municipality. The best training programs also help organizations address specific industry initiatives, such as the Open Government Initiative.[11]

Essential Technologies for Branding Success

With a plan in place for addressing the needs of internal staff and citizens, state and local leaders can focus on technology needs. Digital branding veterans cite important building blocks that have helped them move closer to their goals.

For digital flexibility and close constituent engagement, organizations need a versatile content management system, preferably one based on open industry standards. A reliable content management foundation is essential because it enables individual departments to create and distribute information themselves rather than needing the IT department or Web developers to load content on the various communications channels. Instead, self-service options allow departments to communicate quickly and frequently with constituents, while technology staff develops new applications and services.

When the city of Los Angeles replaced its old content management system with a cloud-delivered, Drupal-based platform, it fundamentally changed its communications strategy. "Our former approach to Web content, unfortunately, was, 'We'll put information out there and if you're interested, come and get it,'" Ross concedes. "We didn't have a mature approach to our digital presence in the past."

He credits the Drupal platform for being cost effective, easy to use and flexible. "Instead of having a traditional, proprietary content management solution, we wanted something that would evolve as the Web evolves," Ross

says. "In addition, we chose a hosted solution for disaster resilience. In this day and age, people expect our websites will be up, no matter what. This is critical for communicating to the public during an emergency or providing information to their loved ones around the world."

LACity.org now has a 99.995 percent uptime versus only about 98 percent in the past, Ross reports. "It's much more available, much more reliable and much more effective."

In addition to supporting on-demand content publishing and the ability to quickly incorporate new technology, content management platforms should help agencies meet security requirements. Georgia's system helps it adhere to Federal Information Security Management Act (FISMA) standards, for example.

As commercial businesses use social media, location-aware mobile apps and other modern tools to tailor sales and marketing efforts to individual shoppers, these consumers expect similar treatment from state and local governments. As a result, personalization is an essential element for digital branding. The state of New York creates user-centric experiences by recognizing individuals' locations when they enter a ZIP code. The state then sends relevant traffic alerts, emergency notifications or notices about upcoming events to citizens. In addition, individuals can save information about state services, such as DMV locations and attractions, to their computers or mobile devices for ready access in the future.

Conclusion: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

There's a host of new technologies available to progressive IT leaders, but the key to digital brands and the infrastructures that support them is less about hardware and software and more about constituent needs. "Focus first on the problems you're trying to solve, not on what technologies are popular," advises Deshpande.

From there, a solid digital branding strategy, close ongoing engagement with citizens, and flexible content management and development platforms that grow over time will pave the way to modern digital government.

Quick Tip:

Organizations should **strive for a consistent voice by setting a welcoming tone** in the content on websites and in interactions with citizens in online chats and social media posts.

Endnotes

1. All quotes and information from an interview with Nikhil Deshpande conducted via email on July 20, 2015.
2. www.cbsnews.com/news/smart-phones-are-revolutionizing-consumer-banking-habits/
3. Ibid.
4. www.pwc.com/gx/en/retail-consumer/retail-consumer-publications/global-multi-channel-consumer-survey/survey-highlights.jhtml
5. www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/21/connecting-with-government-or-government-data/
6. Governing Institute e-Government vs. e-Commerce Survey, May 2015
7. All quotes and information from an interview with Ted Ross conducted on July 8, 2015.
8. www.govtech.com/internet/3-Lessons-from-New-Yorks-Website-Redesign.html
9. Ibid.
10. Governing Institute Digital Government Strategy Survey, 2014
11. www.whitehouse.gov/open

CENTER FOR DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

The Center for Digital Government, a division of e.Republic, is a national research and advisory institute on information technology policies and best practices in state and local government. Through its diverse and dynamic programs and services, the Center provides public and private sector leaders with decision support, knowledge and opportunities to help them effectively incorporate new technologies in the 21st century.
www.centerdigitalgov.com

Underwritten by:

ACQUIA®
THINK AHEAD

Acquia helps agencies build, deliver and optimize solutions on our open digital cloud platform. Built on a Gartner Magic Quadrant Leading Web Content Management System, our platform enables agencies to foster greater digital engagement with citizens and securely deliver mission essential information and services with greater speed, agility and resiliency. Acquia is committed to helping agencies understand how digital technologies and transformation can help them save time and money, provide better customer service to citizens, and utilize personnel and resources more efficiently.