

# Executive Summary

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The 113<sup>th</sup> Congress Gold Mouse Awards mark the seventh time since 2002 the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) has evaluated and recognized the best congressional websites. The purpose of this project is to provide guidance to Members of Congress on using the Internet to enhance communication and promote citizen engagement by identifying best practices that can serve as models.

This year, Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards went to 70 websites (20 Senators, 44 Representatives, and 6 committees). For the first time, CMF also is recognizing social media practices. Gold Mouse Awards were given to 17 Members (7 Senators, 10 Representatives) for their efforts in using these tools to further transparency, accountability, and constituent service.

## Principles for Strategic Communication

Websites and social media are only components of an overall communication strategy. The principles for effective communication are the same, no matter the medium being used. For offices to develop communications efforts that are as focused, productive and effective as possible, they must begin by thoughtfully and strategically answering the following questions:

1. Who is your audience?
2. What content does your audience want and need?
3. How does your audience want to interact with you?
4. How can you make your content easy for your audience to use?
5. How can you make your content more interesting and valuable to your audience?

## Analysis of Congressional Websites

- 1. While still weak, Member websites have shown signs of improvement, with an increasing number providing *basic* legislative and casework information and links.**

- More than three-quarters (79%) provide the Member's voting record, compared to 56% in 2011. Many more now provide information on how to understand a voting record, with 87% including this in 2013, compared to 41% in 2011.
- There was a small increase in the percentage providing links to sponsorships and co-sponsorships (84% in 2013 vs. 80% in 2011), but more now link to information from the current Congress (75% in 2013 vs. 60% in 2011).
- Most (93%) provide casework privacy release forms, up from 88% in 2011. Most (93%) also provide links to federal agencies, up from 76% in 2011. Just over two-thirds (64%) include local and state government resources, up from 53% in 2011.
- Less than half (41%) provide information on how to request assistance with federal agency issues, down from 62% in 2011.

## **2. A majority of congressional websites lack *substantive* elements of accountability and transparency.**

- Only 70 websites (12% of the 580 eligible) received Mouse Awards: 19 Gold, 19 Silver, and 32 Bronze.
- Proportionally, Senate Member websites earned the most awards, with 20% receiving recognition, compared to 10% of House Member and 14% of committee websites.
- Just six committee websites received awards: three Gold, one Silver, and two Bronze.

## **3. Even the best congressional websites have room for improvement.**

- Websites can score a maximum of 100, but none earned higher than a score of 87 before we applied a curve. The top House Member website scored 87, the top Senate Member 85, and the top committee 75.
- Member websites should improve usability and expand content targeted by demographic or geographic area. Senate websites should provide more legislative information. Committee websites should include more educational information and guidance on interacting with the committee.

## **4. Democratic Member personal office websites earned twice as many awards as Republicans.**

- Of the 64 awards to Member websites, 44 (69%) were won by Democrats. This party divide is greatest in the Senate, where Democrats won 17 (85%) of the 20 awards given.
- This divide relates *specifically* to award winners and is not indicative of the overall performance of the parties in each chamber.

## **5. House committees, managed by Republicans, won five of the six best website awards given to committee websites.**

- Of the six awards to committees, five were won by House committees managed by Republicans. The sixth award went to a joint committee with rotating chairs.

**6. Many award-winning Senate personal office websites had received awards before, while House award winners are more evenly split between first-time and repeat winners.**

- Only two (10%) of the 20 Senators who received awards won for the first time. The other 18 (90%) had won in the past, and 12 have won three or more times.
- Among House Member award winners, 20 (45%) of the 44 are first-time winners. Of the 24 (55%) who have won previously, nine have won three or more times.
- Two (3%) of the total 64 Member website winners were in their first year of office.

## **Characteristics of Effective Member Websites**

- 1. Informs Constituents of Legislative Positions and Actions.** The best websites display the Member's position on a full range of issue areas, actions they are currently taking, past accomplishments, and information about how issues impact their districts and states.
- 2. Demonstrates Accountability and Transparency.** Member websites should provide information on all roll call votes, including how the Member voted and the outcome of the vote. The best websites highlight key votes and provide explanations for why Members voted the way they did.
- 3. Follows Best Practices for Usability.** The best websites are easy to navigate, easy to read, well-organized, professional-looking, and employ current website usability standards.
- 4. Provides Timely Content and Updated Links.** The information on Member websites should be current and reflect the issues and events on constituents' minds—and in their news sources—at a given time. This includes making sure links to sponsorships and voting records are from the current Congress.
- 5. Helps Constituents Resolve Problems with Federal Agencies.** Every Member website should answer constituent questions about how the office can assist with problems with federal agencies.
- 6. Provides Easy Access and Guidance on Other Constituent Services.** Member websites should include information on all of the basic services that congressional offices provide, such as internships, flag requests, and tours.
- 7. Focuses on District/State Needs and Interests.** Member websites can demonstrate that serving constituents is a top priority by anticipating the needs of specific demographics (e.g., seniors or veterans), or of citizens in a particular region, as well as by highlighting constituent photos and accomplishments and tying legislative activity back to the district/state.
- 8. Explains Congress and the Legislative Process.** Congressional websites should help citizens understand the legislative process, congressional action, and the roles and responsibilities of a Member of Congress.

9. **Maintains Diverse Communications Channels.** Websites should facilitate online and offline interaction by serving as hubs for the range of constituent interactions, such as: social media, e-newsletters, online surveys and polls, and events constituents can attend.
10. **Offers Diverse Communications Content.** Congressional offices produce a variety of communications content—from press releases to op-eds to videos—all of which should be provided online in easy-to-access formats.

## Characteristics of Effective Committee Websites

1. **Demonstrates Accountability through Legislative and Hearing Information.** Committees are not as directly accountable to citizens as individual Members, but their websites can and should demonstrate accountability. For most, this means providing easy, transparent, and timely access to its activities, especially legislation and hearings.
2. **Communicates What the Committee Does and How it Works.** Given that no two congressional committees have identical jurisdictions or activities, a basic component of a committee website should be easy-to-understand information about the committee's purpose, jurisdiction, history, and procedures.
3. **Provides Content Targeted to the Committee's Audiences.** Committee audiences consist primarily of four general groups: congressional staffers, subject matter experts off Capitol Hill, the media, and the general public. Committees should provide for all of these, but different committees will need to emphasize some over others, based on their roles and jurisdictions.
4. **Follows Best Practices for Usability.** The best websites are easy to navigate, easy to read, well-organized, timely, professional-looking, and they employ current website usability standards.
5. **Facilitates Basic Interaction.** Committees do not need to be interactive in the same way Members must, but their websites should support basic interactions by providing mailing addresses, hearing room locations, and phone numbers, as well as guidance on submitting testimony and attending hearings, if the committee holds hearings.
6. **Maintains Diverse Communications Channels.** Increasingly, websites are hubs for a host of communications channels, including social media. Committees must think strategically about how to integrate them all to engage and interact with their audiences.

## Characteristics of Effective Social Media

1. **Follows Platform Conventions.** The users of each social media platform have expectations for how it will be used. Offices that fail to follow platform conventions miss opportunities for more robust relationships with constituents and risk looking out-of-touch.

2. **Conveys Authenticity and the Member's Personality.** Members should strive to be authentic on social media. The Member need not be personally responsible for every post, but there must be clarity about: the content and tone appropriate for social media; who is responsible for posting; and how to convey posts by the Member and those by staff.
3. **Maintains a Congressional Persona.** Using strongly partisan or campaign-style rhetoric in official communications risks alienating some people. By conveying a more authoritative, congressional persona a Member can better provide assistance and demonstrate accountability to all the people in their district/state.
4. **Integrates Communications Platforms.** Members' many online communications platforms must be integrated with one another, and with offline communications. This does not mean posting identical content on all platforms, but there should be enough cross-references that important information is shared without being redundant.
5. **Encourages Interactivity.** On social media, Members must be prepared for interaction. A response to every comment is unnecessary, but it is important to monitor the reach and play of posts and participate strategically. Members should also engage in the social aspects of social media to advance key discussions, even when they are not the originators.

## Methodology

**Website Awards** | CMF used 74 criteria in 10 categories for Member websites, and up to 61 criteria in six categories for committee websites. These criteria were organized into rounds that prioritized the most critical content, with the first round of evaluation placing a greater emphasis on transparency and accountability. Websites that met the criteria for the first round advanced to the next round, until the evaluations were complete and ready for scoring. Awards were given to websites with a final score of 80 or higher.

Member office websites were reviewed September-December 2013, and committee websites were reviewed January-February 2014. Leadership and minority committee websites were not reviewed. Evaluations were conducted in random order by nonpartisan CMF staff who are trained extensively on the criteria, grading standards, and how to objectively evaluate sites.

**Social Media Awards** | With dozens of social media platforms available, and the volume of content Members are creating, it is nearly impossible to assess practices in a comprehensive manner. Therefore, CMF invited Member personal offices to nominate themselves for social media recognition. Nominations were accepted from October-December 2013. CMF staff reviewed 85 submissions and sent the 35 most innovative and congressionally-focused practices to an expert panel comprised of former Democratic and Republican congressional staff and academics with expertise in social media and technology. CMF used the ratings and input from the expert panelists to determine which finalists should receive awards for their efforts, focusing on Members whose practices: demonstrate an effort to be transparent and accountable; focus on constituents and constituent service; and attempt to keep constituents informed of, and engaged, in the work of the Members and of Congress.