

# Introduction

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In 2014, the World Wide Web hit its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For the past 25 years communications have been moving, changing and evolving at warp speed. Adapting has been a constant challenge for individuals, businesses, and institutions, including Congress. Senators and Representatives have struggled to find footholds in ground that is ever-shifting, and many have found themselves in over their heads. They have adopted technologies and applications simply for the sake of having them, without really knowing how or why to use them. As a result, many have fallen back on comfortable, press release-driven communications practices, even in media that disdain promotional and one-sided messaging.

In the rush to take advantage of new communications tools, many Members of Congress (and staff) are merely applying the old rules to the new century. Websites are simply the new billboards; Facebook, the new delivery system for press releases; and Twitter, an updated version of bumper stickers. Rather than change their styles and practices for the new media, they merely wrap old media methods in new technology. In doing so, many Members are failing to live up to the potential of what the Internet has to offer. In the process, they are missing opportunities to enhance citizen engagement and understanding of Congress.

Congress faces difficult challenges in meeting the expectations of citizens. Perhaps unfairly, legislators are measured by the same yardstick as any other provider of online information and services. Citizens may ask, if Amazon can provide customer support in 10 seconds through instant messaging, why can't Congress? One answer to that question is, of course, that Amazon has billions of dollars and thousands of employees, while the typical House office has one or two staff in their communications department.

Yet, even if Congress had more resources to devote to online communications, one must wonder whether this would change the built-in self-promotional mentality that dominates political organizations. As CMF scans the landscape of congressional social media, it appears very much like that of congressional websites in 2002—dominated by one-way messages promoting a politician or cause. While some legislators are creatively using social media to shine a light on their representational and legislative activities, most are not. Too few are using social media to build trust and understanding of Congress, and too many are employing 1960s-style *Mad Men* advertising strategies—repetitive and simplistic jargon wielded like a hammer to hit citizens on the head ... over and over again.

CMF comes to this conclusion with an historical perspective about Congress' struggle with technology. Since Capitol Hill began using computers in the 1970s, CMF has been providing guidance to congressional offices on using technology to be more efficient and effective. Our first foray into online communications was the 1999 report, "Building Websites Constituents Will Use." Starting in 2001, working with major universities and through grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Science Foundation, CMF created a system for evaluating congressional websites, culminating in the biannual Gold Mouse Awards. It is with that history we now add social media to the evaluations, as these promising communications platforms offer much to enhance public understanding of, and interactions with, Congress.

The Internet has changed immeasurably since CMF first started our research, but one fact remains: the practices that succeed are those that provide the most value to the users, not those that are most promotional. Jay Baer states in his bestselling book *Youtility: Why Smart Marketing is about Help not Hype*, "If you create marketing that people genuinely want, you can dispense with the 'shock,' 'awe,' and 'viral' and focus on solving problems, answering questions, and creating long-lasting customer relationships by doing so." What this means to Congress is that websites and social media need to focus on being the most helpful possible sources of congressional information for constituents and stakeholders. The idea is to serve and, in doing so, to develop lasting online relationships. For Congress, this begins with accountability and transparency.

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That citizens respond more to help than hype was reinforced by CMF's own research. In 2001, as part of CMF's first comprehensive grading of congressional websites, we held a series of focus groups with citizens to learn what they wanted from Congress online. Participants were shown several congressional websites and asked their opinions of each. One was a slick website, filled with photos and focused primarily on extolling the accomplishments of the Member. The focus group participants shrugged and wrote it off as being "like a campaign poster." Then they were shown a "boring" website. It had few photos and a simple, almost amateurish, design, but this Member had information on his public schedule, how he had voted on the issues before Congress, and how constituents could get problems with the executive branch solved. Upon seeing the second legislator's website, participants felt positively toward the Member, and one focus group participant even said, "I'd vote for that guy."

Though so many Members continue to focus primarily on press releases, photos and political messaging, CMF sees, in the winners of the latest Gold Mouse Awards, outstanding examples of Members and committees that strive to inform and engage the public through their online communications. Researchers saw legislators exhibit transparency through clear and honest recitation of their positions on the issues dominating the public debate; explanations of their votes in the House and Senate; and information about who they are meeting with. Some in Congress have also embraced the interactive nature of social media by engaging in robust and uncensored dialogues with

citizens. In doing these things, these legislators not only improve their own standing with their constituents, they benefit the entire Congress by acting as admirable examples of the true spirit of public service. The winners of the CMF Gold Mouse Awards are to be congratulated by their constituents, applauded by advocates of good government, and emulated by congressional colleagues.

Using online communications tools to demonstrate transparency and accountability isn't just good policy, it's good politics. Americans are yearning for, and need, a responsive Congress online—one that recognizes that it must “compete” with the private sector in providing legislative information and congressional services. Rightly or wrongly, citizens want their elected officials to be accessible in all media: answering their questions; responding to their needs; and reflecting the values of representative democracy. CMF recognizes this is a tall order to fill, but the Members of Congress lauded in this report demonstrate it can be done. And the result is more than a few points in a higher approval rating for one legislator. The ultimate benefits are an enhanced democratic dialogue, a greater appreciation of public service, and a better functioning Congress.

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