



Best Practices in Online Communications on Capitol Hill

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Congressional Management Foundation
710 E Street SE
Washington, D.C. 20003
202-546-0100
CongressFoundation.org
@CongressFdn

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Introduction

In 2014, the World Wide Web hit its 25th 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.

"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."

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 benefit 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.

“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.”

Executive Summary

The 113th 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.

113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards

FOR BEST CONGRESSIONAL WEBSITES

SENATE MEMBERS

HOUSE MEMBERS

COMMITTEES

GOLD

Bob Casey (D-PA)
Martin Heinrich (D-NM)
Carl Levin (D-MI)
Mark Udall (D-CO)

Karen Bass (D-CA)
Judy Chu (D-CA)
Mike Honda (D-CA)
Jim Langevin (D-RI)
Rick Larsen (D-WA)
Sandy Levin (D-MI)
Alan Lowenthal (D-CA)
Carolyn Maloney (D-NY)
Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)
Paul Ryan (R-WI)
John Tierney (D-MA)
Fred Upton (R-MI)

House Natural Resources
Doc Hastings (R-WA)
House Rules
Pete Sessions (R-TX)
House Education and the
Workforce
John Kline (R-MN)

SILVER

Mark Begich (D-AK)
Tom Carper (D-DE)
Mike Crapo (R-ID)
Tim Johnson (D-SD)
Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
Patty Murray (D-WA)
Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)

Henry Cuellar (D-TX)
John Dingell (D-MI)
Bob Goodlatte (R-VA)
Ralph Hall (R-TX)
Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX)
Duncan D. Hunter (R-CA)
Buck McKeon (R-CA)
Dennis Ross (R-FL)
Mike Simpson (R-ID)
Steve Stivers (R-OH)
Mike Thompson (D-CA)

House Energy and Commerce
Fred Upton (R-MI)

BRONZE

John Boozman (R-AR)
Ben Cardin (D-MD)
John Cornyn (R-TX)
Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)
Mary Landrieu (D-LA)
Jack Reed (D-RI)
Harry Reid (D-NV)
Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH)
Mark Warner (D-VA)

Ron Barber (D-AZ)
Earl Blumenauer (D-OR)
Michael Burgess (R-TX)
Lois Capps (D-CA)
John Carter (R-TX)
Jim Cooper (D-TN)
Ted Deutch (D-FL)
Stephen Fincher (R-TN)
Gene Green (D-TX)
Jim Himes (D-CT)
Lynn Jenkins (R-KS)
Barbara Lee (D-CA)
Jim Matheson (D-UT)
George Miller (D-CA)
Frank Pallone (D-NJ)
Jared Polis (D-CO)
Reid Ribble (R-WI)
Hal Rogers (R-KY)
Bobby Scott (D-VA)
Mac Thornberry (R-TX)
Tim Walberg (R-MI)

House Small Business
Sam Graves (R-MO)
Joint Taxation
*Dave Camp (R-MI) and
Max Baucus (D-MT)*

113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards

FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

SENATE MEMBERS

Tammy Baldwin (D-WI)	Compilations of social media discussions into "stories."	Twitter and Storify
Richard Blumenthal (D-CT)	Issue-based listicle.	BuzzFeed
Bob Casey (D-PA)	Location-based legislative information.	Foursquare
Mark Kirk (R-IL)	Sharing personal journey that led to legislative action.	Several, including YouTube, Scribd, and Flickr
Patrick Leahy (D-VT)	Hashtag for updates during markup of a key bill.	Twitter
Jerry Moran (R-KS)	Outreach on an issue before Congress.	Reddit
Bernie Sanders (I-VT)	Integration across platforms without redundancy.	Several, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google+

HOUSE MEMBERS

Stephen Fincher (R-TN)	Making Congress approachable.	Several, including Tumblr, Vine, and Instagram
Tim Griffin (R-AR)	Responsiveness and engagement via social media.	Several, including Facebook, CrowdHall, and Pinterest
Mike Honda (D-CA)	Constituent-focused social media efforts.	Several, including Change.org, Eventbrite, and Scribd
Darrell Issa (R-CA)	Connecting past and present using social media.	Facebook and Twitter
Barbara Lee (D-CA)	Using social media to "caucus" with other Members.	Facebook and Twitter
Thomas Massie (R-KY)	Accountability and transparency through social media.	Facebook and Twitter
Jim McGovern (D-MA)	Sustained, issue-based, cross-platform integration.	Several, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit
Patrick Murphy (D-FL)	Photo contest with a legislative purpose.	Facebook
Erik Paulsen (R-MN)	Weekly videos with updates and answers to constituent questions.	YouTube
Mark Takano (D-CA)	Using popular culture as tie-ins to congressional activity.	Several, including Tumblr, YouTube, and Vine

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. You need to know who your audience is, what they are expecting of you, and how to craft your message in a way they can easily use and understand. CMF's website evaluations have been rooted in these principles from the beginning, and we have conveyed them in the past as the building blocks for effective congressional websites.

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?

Below we provide guidance to help congressional offices answer these questions for their website and social media strategies.

1. Who is your audience?

The key to any effective communications strategy is a clear and strategic understanding of your audiences. In the past, congressional offices have considered much of their communications to be targeted messaging. They were accustomed to being able to choose their audiences and target their messages through one-way communications, such as mass mail, newsletters, press releases, speeches, op-eds, interviews, and public appearances.

However, the nature of online communications requires Member offices and committees to think differently about their audiences. Anyone can access their websites, social media, apps, and other online content, and they do so for their own reasons and usually on their

own initiative. They also can quickly and easily share their views about Members' and committees' content, so the audiences for congressional communications can extend well beyond an office's original target audience. While there is a temptation to target a narrowly-focused audience, the best congressional website and social media practices will meet the needs of a broader audience, as well. The official online communications and services provided by Members and committees should meet the needs of the general public, as well as target the specific stakeholders with whom they want to build relationships.

To be most effective, all of the content a congressional office produces must be governed by an overall strategic communications plan—but in thinking about online content, one must define audiences broadly. Online audiences include those whom the office wishes to proactively attract, as well as those who will seek information, whether occasionally or regularly.

Those who will seek out your online content include constituents, the general public, reporters, subject matter experts on the Member's or committee's key issues, members of interest groups, students, and educators. These are the people who come to committees and Members of their own volition to satisfy their own information and service needs. Offices' electronic content—especially their websites—must meet these needs. For the most part, online visitors are looking for the same information and services the office provides offline, but they prefer to interact with the office electronically.

“To proactively attract certain stakeholders, an office must clearly define who it wants to target, carefully consider what will bring them to its content, and what will keep them returning.”

To proactively attract certain stakeholders, an office must clearly define who it wants to target, carefully consider what will bring them to its content, and what will keep them returning. These are the people you are trying to develop relationships with so you must be creative about providing features and tools that foster those relationships. Social media can be helpful in doing this, especially through integrated efforts that work with the office's website.

2. What content does your audience want and need?

Content is inextricably linked with audience. If you fail to clearly identify your audiences, it will be nearly impossible to develop and provide the content that meets their needs and encourages them to return. Knowing who your audiences are will enable you to create timely and targeted content that will:

- Provide excellent information and services;
- Support the goals and objectives of the committee or personal office;
- Attract and retain visitors and followers;
- Build strong online relationships with users and followers;
- Provide answers to frequently asked questions;
- Strengthen the public's understanding of the Congress; and
- Foster the public's trust in the democratic process.

You can do all of this on your website by being an online conduit for the same high-quality information and services you provide offline. Your office is the best judge of what your audiences seek from you, but some examples of content that will meet the needs of many congressional audiences include the following.

For Member offices:

- Legislative information;
- Issue information;
- Demonstrations of accountability;
- Educational information about Congress;
- Constituent services;
- References to constituents and the district or state;
- Contact information and interactivity;
- Contacts and resources for reporters;
- Information about the Senator or Representative;
- Views and background about current and national issues; and
- Links to relevant congressional, district/state, and federal resources.

For committees:

- Legislative and hearing information (including witness lists, transcripts, and streaming video of hearings);
- Reports, publications and correspondence;
- Information about what the committee does;
- Jurisdiction, subcommittees and membership;
- Historical information;
- Guidance on interacting with the committee;
- Contacts and resources for reporters;
- Educational information about the committee; and
- Links to and information about relevant federal agencies.

3. How does your audience want to interact with you?

The Internet provides a wide range of options for facilitating interaction between citizens and Members of Congress, some more productive than others. Increasingly, there is an expectation among Internet-users—particularly users of social media—for extensive interactivity. Fostering online interactivity can help a committee or Member office keep their audiences informed; create ongoing relationships that foster loyalty; further the committee's or Member's goals and legislative priorities; and foster a more robust democracy. However, it can also become a drain on already-stretched staff resources.

The key to interactivity is to manage the expectations of those you invite to interact with you. You can do this by being clear about your strategy and limitations before

you launch an interactive tool. Before you go live you should know: what expectations you will be creating; what resources you are able to devote; and what processes you will use to respond. You should also develop and frequently communicate guidelines for the interactions so those who communicate with you understand what they can expect in return. Keep in mind that some applications come with inherent expectations for interactivity that can be difficult—and sometimes embarrassing—to ignore. Many Senators and Representatives found this when they disabled blog comments or failed to respond, even occasionally, to comments and threads on social media applications.

Member offices can use their websites to facilitate basic offline interaction by providing mobile office schedules, telephone town hall information, postal addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, media contact information, and other contact information. Members can also offer tools that can produce quality interaction—and even dialogue—between legislators and constituents without that interaction having to take place in person or in real time, such as:

- E-mail newsletters;
- Online surveys and polls;
- Blogs;
- RSS feeds;
- Feedback and comment forms;
- Scheduling forms; and
- Staff contact information or forms.

Committees can also use their websites to foster productive online and offline interactivity. CMF recognizes that the committee system is not designed for robust interactivity between committees and the public at large, but there are some interactions—such as those surrounding hearings—that a committee’s website can support. A committee can help ensure interaction is as productive as possible by providing: phone numbers, contact and feedback forms, information on hearing locations and how to attend hearings, guidance on submitting testimony, and opportunities to weigh in on specific issues or legislation the committee is considering. Committees can also use websites to solicit interaction from and respond to experts and other key stakeholders, enhancing both the user experience and the input committee members receive on relevant legislation.

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media applications are also increasingly important elements of congressional interactions with citizens. These can be powerful tools for engaging citizens in the Member’s or committee’s work and the work of Congress through real-time, town-hall-meeting-like interactions; by inviting input into issues and legislation; by informing people of legislation and activities that directly impact them; and in myriad other ways. The key to interacting via social media is to ensure the interactions are appropriate to the platform; sustained and two-way; and beneficial to the participants as well as the committee or Member.

“The key to interacting via social media is to ensure the interactions are appropriate to the platform; sustained and two-way; and beneficial to the participants as well as the committee or Member.”

4. How can you make your content easy for your audience to use?

The ease with which visitors can access and use a website can significantly affect its success. Research shows that Internet users will put up with a difficult-to-use website if the content is very good, but if they have to work too hard or wait too long to find the information they came for, they are less likely to come back. Poor usability also means people are less likely to find what they are looking for or to see the information your office wants them to see.

Usability is a critical factor for any website, but it is particularly important for a government website. Government websites, including those of committees and Members of Congress, should be easy for all Americans to use, no matter how they access the Internet. The audience of a public website spans a wide range of technical knowledge and physical ability, and visitors will access the website using a variety of hardware, software, bandwidth, and devices. Elements of usability that are especially important are:

- **Accessibility.** The term accessibility generally is used to refer to making electronic content, including websites, usable for people with disabilities. However, given the proliferation of devices and applications used to access content, accessibility now affects just about everyone. Websites should be designed to be easy for visitors to use, regardless of device, platform, educational attainment, disability, or age. Information about the laws that pertain to accessibility of online content, and guidelines for creating accessible online content, can be found at Section508.gov.
- **Readability.** Given that online content is still primarily text-driven, the content posted needs to be easy to read. Factors that improve readability include: simplicity of language and writing; absence of acronyms and technical jargon; brevity of sentences and paragraphs; scannability of text through headlines, sections, bullets, highlights, links, etc.; standard or adjustable font sizes; high contrast between font and background colors; links that use standard colors (blue for unvisited links and purple for visited); and absence of distracting unsolicited movement (video, animations, etc.).
- **Timeliness.** The content on a website must be current and clearly dated, so visitors can tell if the information on which they are relying is from 2014 or 2009. The website also must be responsive to the important issues and concerns of the day. If an issue on Capitol Hill is generating a lot of national media, all Senators' and Representatives' websites should prominently address the issue or risk appearing outdated or out-of-touch. Committee websites must also reflect the high-profile issues and legislation within their jurisdictions, while keeping legislative and hearing content completely up-to-date.
- **Organization.** Easy-to-use websites organize information in a way that is logical to their audiences. This means grouping information in an intuitive way so visitors can easily access all of the relevant information on the topic they came looking for. If visitors need to look in more than one place for related

information, there is a good chance they will miss important content. The information architecture of a website must be well-conceived for the content to be truly useful to visitors.

- **Navigation.** Websites must enable visitors to move smoothly throughout by providing clear navigation bars, menus, and links. This includes using constituent-focused language for menu options (e.g., “Helping You,” which a constituent would understand, versus “Casework,” which is a term-of-art in Congress) and links which cross-reference information visitors may need to access from different sections of the website. It also means using established navigation standards so visitors do not have to learn how to use your website while they are trying to find information they need. If your website behaves as other websites on the Internet, users intuitively know how to move through it.
- **Appearance.** How a website looks and the tone the design and graphics convey can have a significant impact on the usability of a website. Too many bright colors and moving objects can be very distracting. Non-standard layouts can be confusing. And too many graphics and photos can leave little room on a page for the content visitors are seeking. Careful attention to layout, graphics design, color and other factors will ensure the website is user-friendly and also contribute to a professional and inviting design.

On social media platforms, offices have little control over most elements of usability, but they should be mindful—both in the platforms they choose and the content they post—of how to make their information as usable as possible to all citizens.

5. How can you make your content more interesting and valuable to your audience?

Previous CMF reports referred to inventive features on congressional websites as “innovations.” These were the content and applications that enhanced visitors’ experience by making congressional information especially interesting, valuable or easy to use. We described these as the icing on the cake; the features that make a good website even better. We still frame innovations this way, whether they are on websites or via social media applications. They are not necessarily the products of cutting-edge technology or the latest mobile app, they do not compensate for a content-weak website or social media presence, and they are not necessarily unique to a single committee or Member office. The best innovations are products of creative and strategic thinking about what features, information, and tools will enhance a visitor’s or follower’s experience with congressional information. After a committee or Member office has done the hard work of creating a rich, robust and helpful experience for visitors and followers, they can focus on how to make it even better through innovations.

“The best innovations are products of creative and strategic thinking about what features, information, and tools will enhance a visitor’s or follower’s experience with congressional information.”

Some of the best innovations we saw on Member and committee websites included:

- Bill trackers that show, at a glance, the status of a Member's sponsored bills or the bills assigned to a committee;
- Clear descriptions of important legislative processes (e.g., how a bill becomes a law, the appropriations process) or legislation (e.g., farm bill, social security, Americans with Disabilities Act);
- A chart with brief information about how a Member voted on key bills, why, and how the bill would impact constituents;
- Rapid posting of committee-generated transcripts and recorded votes;
- Committee websites that integrate majority and minority content on one website;
- Prominent icons in issue sections that invite visitors to share their views on the issue;
- Committee information organized by issue, rather than document type;
- Service sections that clearly and thoroughly explain what casework is; how the Senator or Representative can help; what the common issues are with federal agencies; what the casework process is; answers to frequently asked questions; and links to, and information about, resources available for constituents to self-serve when there is not a need to initiate a casework request;
- Witness directories to enhance visitor access to witness testimony in committee;
- An interactive map with locations the Member had visited in the district/state and brief information about the visit; and
- Social media content that is integrated with and enhances the website content.

When considering how to make their websites more innovative, Member offices and committees must be cautious about features that appear "cutting edge" without actually enhancing the content visitors want and need. Features designed to impress visitors with promotional content or technical savvy, while serving no other discernible educational or communication purpose, tend to frustrate users and discourage them from continuing to use the website. They can also cause users to feel more negatively about the Senator, Representative, or committee because they appear out-of-place or out-of-touch.

The same is true of social media applications. Starting a presence on a social network just for the sake of having a presence defeats the purpose of the medium. A Member does not appear to be cutting edge or in touch if they are not using the app as its users do. On most networks, that means staying away from self-promotion and hype and focusing on the congressional information that is relevant to the users of that app. The CMF Gold Mouse Awards demonstrate how Senators and Representatives are using social media in innovative ways that are in-keeping with the standards for the apps and that focus on congressional information relevant to users.

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.

Although the majority of Member websites did not provide enough substantive or advanced information about national issues and assistance with federal agencies, increasing numbers of Member websites are providing basic links and information in these areas. In some cases, Member websites have shown dramatic improvement over previous years. CMF believes this improvement is largely attributable to the website templates available to House and Senate offices, which include much of this information as standard content.

In regards to Members providing basic legislative links and information on their websites (Figure 1):

- More than three-quarters (79%) of websites link to or provide the Member's voting record, compared to just 56% who did in 2011.
- Many more websites provide information or a link on how to read or understand the Member's voting record, with 87% of websites including this information in 2013, compared to just 41% in 2011.
- Though there was not much of an increase in the percentage of Member websites providing links to sponsorships and co-sponsorships (84% in 2013 vs. 80% in 2011), more offices are making sure they link to information from the current Congress (75% in 2013 vs. 60% in 2011).

Related to Member websites offering basic content and links providing assistance with federal agencies (Figure 2):

- Most (93%) Member websites provide casework or privacy release forms, a slight increase from 88% in 2011.
- Most (93%) also provide links to federal agency websites, up from 76% in 2011—an increase of 17 percentage points.
- Just over two-thirds (64%) of Member websites include information about local state and government resources for casework assistance, up from 53% in 2011.

FIGURE 1. FREQUENCY OF PROVIDING BASIC LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION BY YEAR

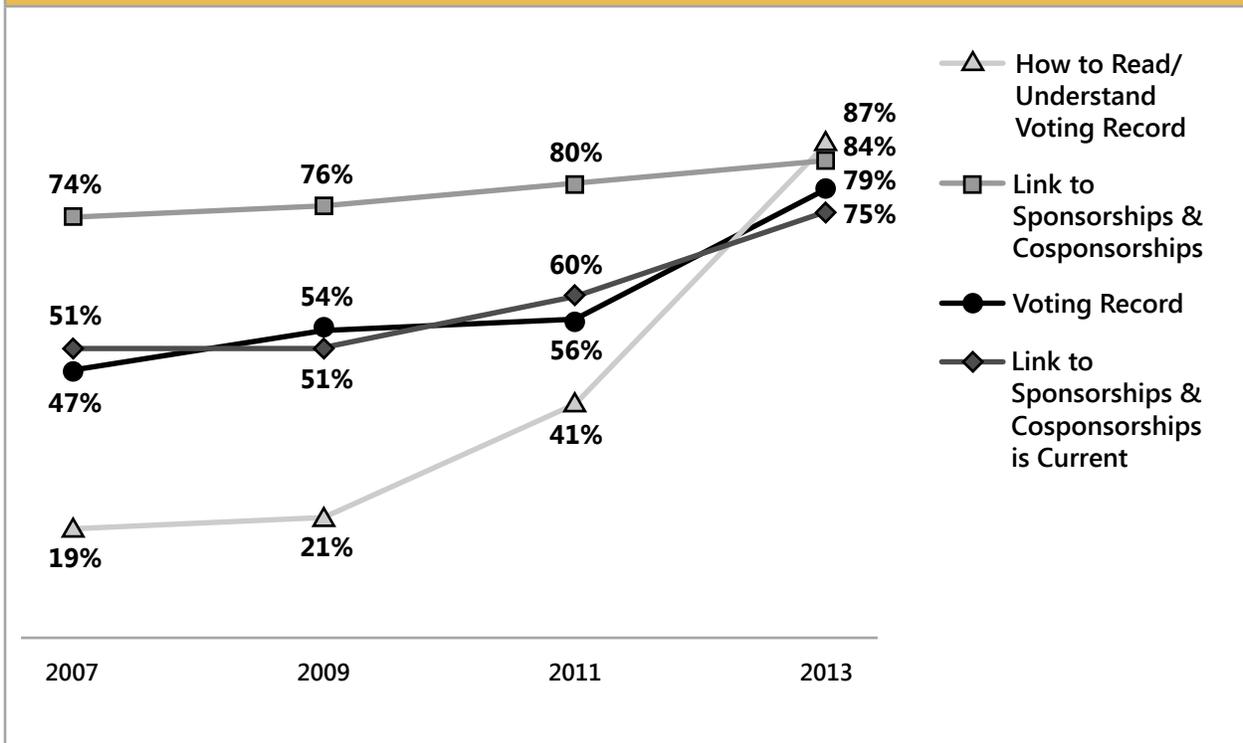
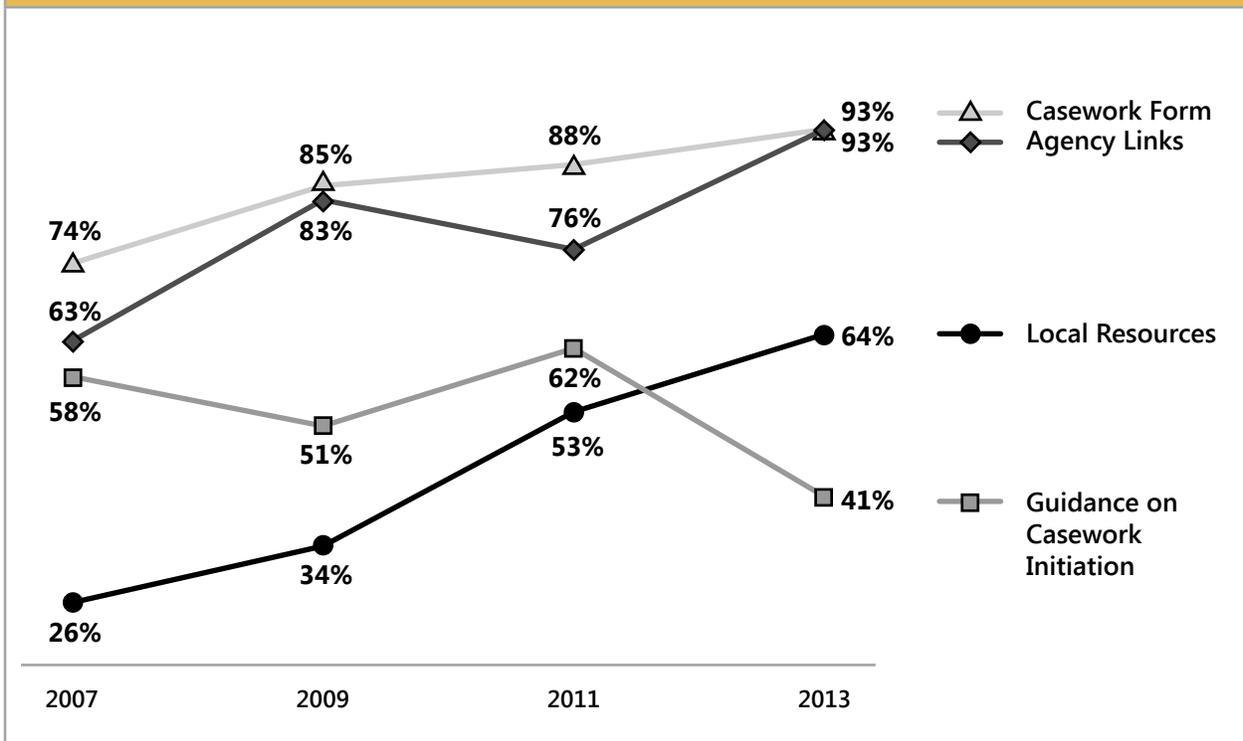


FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF PROVIDING BASIC INFORMATION ON FEDERAL AGENCY ASSISTANCE BY YEAR



One area in which Member websites have not improved is in providing guidance on initiating cases with the office. In 2013, less than half of Member websites (41%) provided information on how to request assistance with federal agency issues, down from 62% in 2011 (Figure 2). One reason that this criterion does not follow the upwards trend line of the others is that, while the other legislative and casework information we've discussed can be provided through simple links and documents, providing guidance on casework initiation requires more customized context and information. However, this information is not difficult for offices to provide, nor does it need to be updated often once it is created. Congressional offices should be able to clearly explain how the office can help a constituent with their questions about and problems with federal agencies, as well as how to open a case with the office if their problem is within the office's jurisdiction.

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

As noted in the Methodology, CMF employed a tiered system for reviewing personal and committee office websites of the 113th Congress. To move to the next review round, websites were required to meet minimal standards for furthering accountability and transparency. For Member personal office websites, this translates into the degree to which constituents visiting the websites can determine where the Members stand on the issues, how they voted on key pieces of legislation, and what they're doing in Congress on constituents' behalf. It also includes the most critical constituent service: assistance with federal agencies, known as casework. Specifically, Member offices needed to provide above-average information in their casework section or in their national issues section, and not perform below average in either one. Unfortunately, a majority of Member websites (58%) were eliminated from contention for awards because they did not excel in either area, or because they provided less substantive information than their peers.

For most committees, accountability and transparency comes down to providing thorough and timely access to hearings, legislation, markups, and votes. Committee websites needed to provide either a complete list of bills assigned to the committee for the current Congress or hearing transcripts within one month of the hearing date. (If the committee did not consider legislation and/or conduct hearings, they were not subject to these criteria and advanced automatically.) Of the 43 committee websites¹ evaluated for the 113th Congress, only 15 (35%) advanced past the first round.

The poor performance of congressional websites in providing substantive accountability and transparency information resulted in a relatively small number of websites winning awards, including the fewest award-winning committee websites compared to previous years.

¹ CMF did not evaluate minority committee websites for the 113th Congress, primarily due to this award year's greater emphasis on rewarding websites that further accountability and transparency. Since the minority committee leadership is not required to produce specific official documents (e.g., transcripts, testimony), it would be unfair to apply the same criteria to majority and minority websites. More information on the evaluation and scoring of committee websites can be found in the Methodology on page 76.

- Only 70 websites (12% of the 580 Member and committee websites that were eligible for our awards) were recognized with Mouse Awards, including 19 Gold, 19 Silver, and 32 Bronze Mouse Awards (Figure 3).
- Proportionally, Senate Member websites earned the most awards, with 20% of eligible websites receiving recognition, compared to 10% of House Member websites and 14% of committee websites (Figure 4).
- Just six committee websites received Mouse Awards: three Gold, one Silver, and two Bronze (Figure 3). This is the fewest committee websites CMF has recognized through the Gold Mouse evaluations (Figure 5).

FIGURE 3. AWARDS BY CATEGORY AND LEVEL				
	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
House Members	12	11	21	44
Senate Members	4	7	9	20
Committees	3	1	2	6
TOTAL	19	19	32	70

FIGURE 4. AWARD WINNERS COMPARED TO ELIGIBLE WEBSITES			
	Eligible Websites	Award Winners (n)	Award Winners (%)
House Members	437	44	10%
Senate Members	100	20	20%
Committees	43	6	14%
TOTAL	580	70	12%

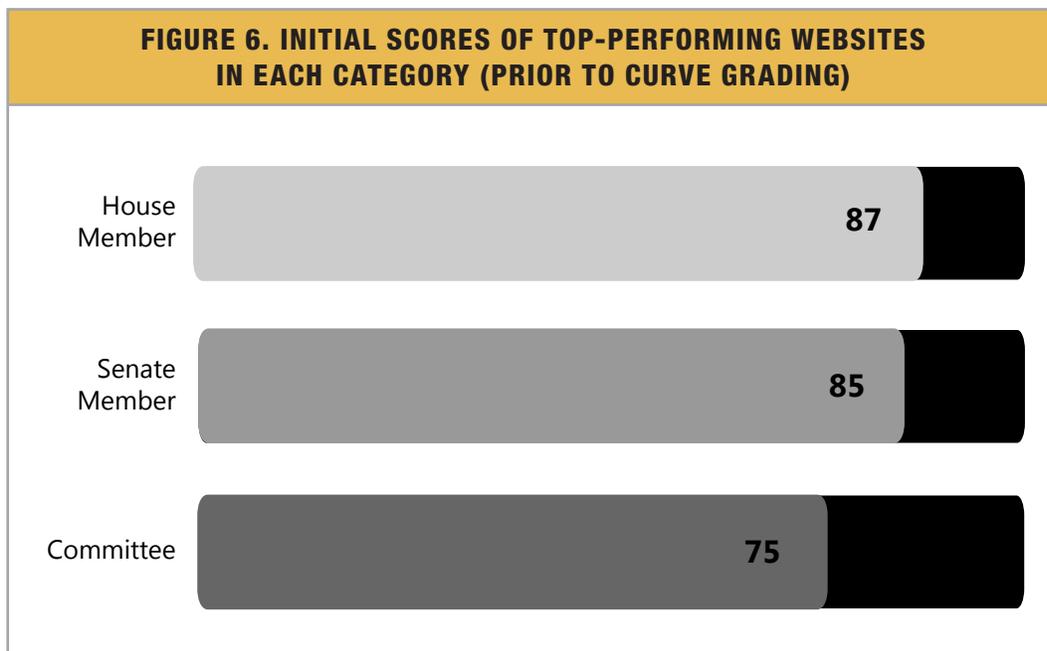
Note: There were four vacancies in the House of Representatives at the time of our evaluations, and CMF did not evaluate the minority websites of committees.

FIGURE 5. AWARDS AS PERCENTAGE OF ELIGIBLE WEBSITES							
	2002	2003	2006	2007	2009	2011	2013
House Members	3%	7%	12%	15%	17%	13%	10%
Senate Members	10%	24%	19%	24%	34%	22%	20%
Committees	19%	28%	16%	18%	31%	24%	14%

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

Through the CMF evaluation process, websites can score a maximum of 100, but even the best websites did not score higher than an 87 before we applied a curve. The top House Member website scored 87, the top Senate Member website 85, and the top committee website 75 through the initial scoring², showing definite room for improvement (Figure 6).

Areas in which Member websites can improve include usability—particularly readability and timeliness—and in providing targeted content by demographic or geographic area/region. Additionally, Senate websites should provide more information and links related to the legislative process and floor proceedings. Committee websites can improve their scores by including more information on communicating with and learning about the committee, such as guidance on submitting testimony and on attending hearings.



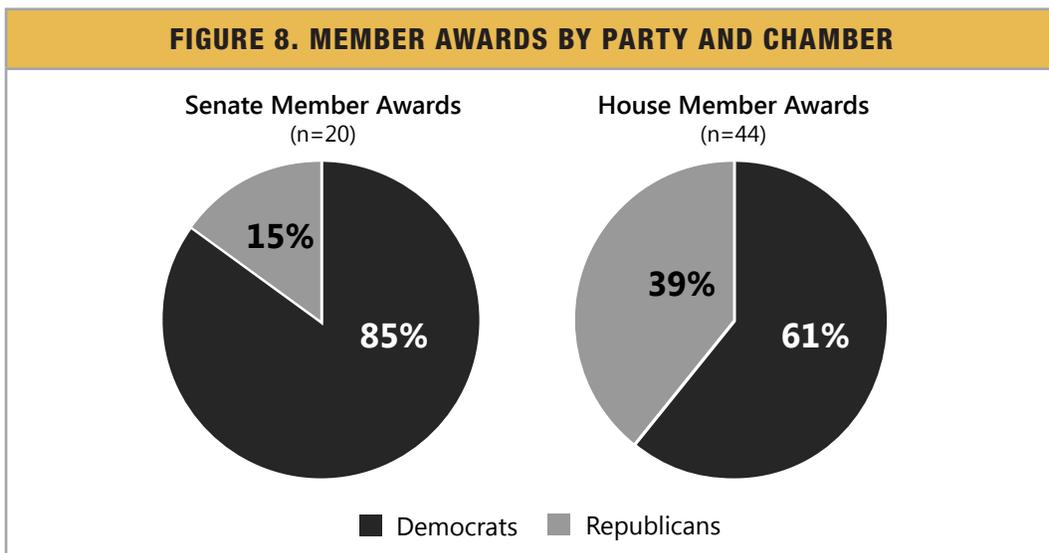
4. Democratic Member personal office websites earned twice as many awards as Republicans.

Of the 64 awards for the 113th Congress given to Member personal office websites, 44 (69%) were won by Democratic Members, while 20 (31%) were won by Republicans (Figure 7). This party divide is particularly pronounced in the Senate, where Democrats won 17 (85%) of the 20 awards given (Figure 8). It is important to note that this divide

² After these initial scores are calculated, final scoring is adjusted so that the websites are graded on a curve relative to each other. This means that the top performer's initial score is adjusted to 100, with all the subsequent scores being adjusted the same amount to determine the final scores and cut-off for awards. This process is outlined in more detail in the Methodology on page 77.

relates specifically to award winners. It should not be generalized as indicative of the broader performance of the parties in each chamber overall, given that CMF did not conduct comprehensive, “graded” evaluations of all websites.

FIGURE 7. MEMBER AWARDS BY PARTY		
	Award Winners (n)	Award Winners (%)
Democrats	44	69%
Republicans	20	31%
TOTAL	64	100%



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

Of the six Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards given to committees, five were won by House committees managed by Republicans (Figure 9). The sixth award went to a joint committee.³ No Senate committee websites won an award in the 113th Congress. (CMF did not evaluate minority committee websites for this Congress, making the minority committee websites managed by House Democrats and Senate Republicans ineligible for awards.)

CMF researchers recorded a trend in the Senate towards bipartisan committee websites, representing the views of both the Chair and Ranking Member on the same website, rather than hosting separate websites for the majority and minority views. In the 113th Congress, 19 of the 20 Senate committees maintained bipartisan websites.

³ The Joint Committee on Taxation is jointly managed by Democratic and Republican committee staff and won a Bronze Mouse Award. The committee has rotating chairs, led by the House Ways & Means Committee chair during the first session of a Congress and the Senate Finance Committee chair during the second session. At the time of our evaluations, these positions were held by Rep. Dave Camp (R-MI) and Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), who has since resigned his seat in the Senate.

Though Senate committee websites did not win awards, it is not the bipartisan nature and combined content of these websites that affected reviewers' analysis. To the contrary, the scoring of every website took into account their structure, and CMF researchers were generally pleased with the bipartisan nature of these websites, finding the presentation of content from both parties to be useful for multiple audiences. However, the Senate committee websites were less likely than House committee websites to include accountability information such as complete lists of bills assigned to the committee, committee votes, and hearing transcripts within one month of the hearing. Overall, while CMF applauds the increasingly bipartisan approach to Senate committee websites, in general the best Senate committee websites were inferior to the best House committee websites.

FIGURE 9. COMMITTEE AWARDS BY CHAMBER		
	Award Winners (n)	Award Winners (%)
Senate	0	0%
House	5	83%
Joint	1	17%
TOTAL	6	100%

Note: CMF did not evaluate the minority websites of committees.

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 in the 113th Congress won them for the first time. The other 18 (90%) had won in the past (Figure 10), and 12 have won awards three or more times (Figure 11).

An analysis of House Member data tells a different story, where 20 (45%) of the 44 award winners are first-time winners (Figure 10). In the House, the evaluations suggest that having won an award before is not a predictor of future performance. Of the 24 (55%) Representatives who have won a previous award, nine have won three or more times (Figure 11).

Figure 11 also shows that only two (3%) of the total 64 Member website award winners were in their first year of office. And, with more than half (66%) of this year's award winners having won awards in the past, it suggests that veteran Members have an advantage over freshmen Members. Comparing the tenure of Members who won awards to those who did not also contributes to this claim. Award-winning House Members averaged 16 years in office compared to 9 years for non-winning House Members, while Senate Member award winners averaged 14 years in office compared to 10 years for non-award winners (Figure 12).

FIGURE 10. FIRST-TIME VERSUS REPEAT WINNERS BY CHAMBER

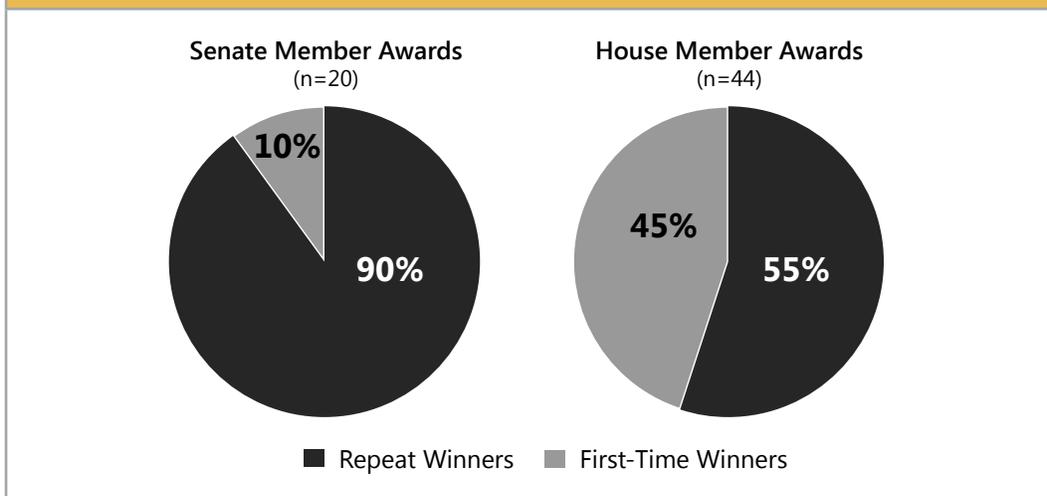
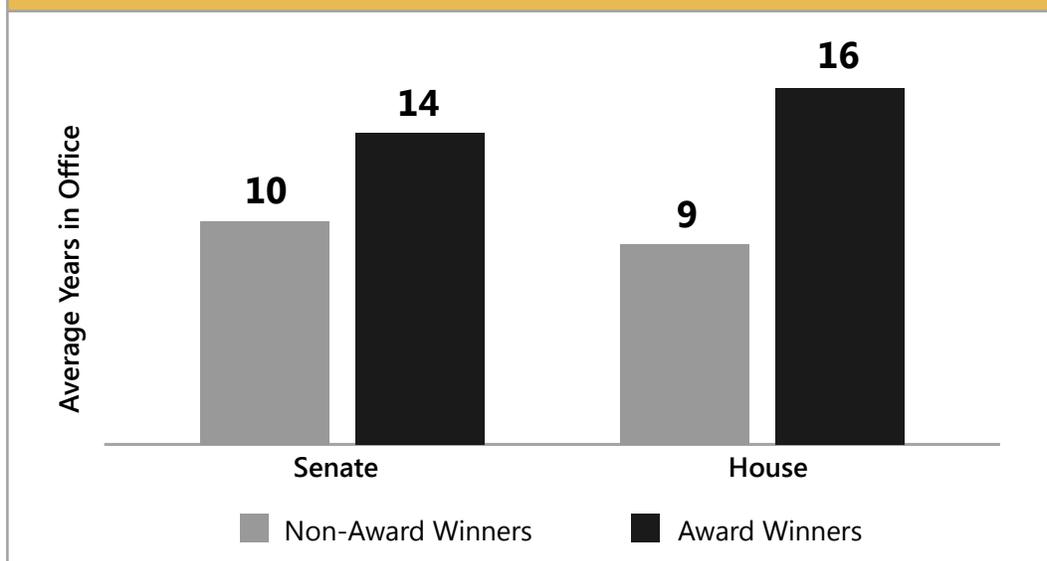


FIGURE 11. MEMBER AWARD WINNER STATISTICS

Members who won in previous years	42 (18 Senate, 24 House)	66%
Members who won for the first time	22 (2 Senate, 20 House)	34%
Members who have won 3 or more times	21 (12 Senate, 9 House)	33%
Members who won in their first year	2 (1 Senate, 1 House)	3%
Members who won for personal and committee websites	1 (House)	1%

Note: Percentages do not total 100% because multiple statistics are being reported.

FIGURE 12. TENURE OF MEMBER OFFICE AWARD WINNERS COMPARED TO NON-AWARD WINNERS



Member Office Websites

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MEMBER WEBSITES

Building and maintaining an award-winning congressional website can seem like a monumental task. To assist congressional offices, CMF has identified best practices that contribute to more effective websites on Capitol Hill—presented below as the 10 characteristics of effective Member websites.

1. Informs Constituents of Legislative Positions and Actions
2. Demonstrates Accountability and Transparency
3. Follows Best Practices for Usability
4. Provides Timely Content and Updated Links
5. Helps Constituents Resolve Problems with Federal Agencies
6. Provides Easy Access and Guidance on Other Constituent Services
7. Focuses on District/State Needs and Interests
8. Explains Congress and the Legislative Process
9. Maintains Diverse Communications Channels
10. Offers Diverse Communications Content

The following descriptions of each characteristic includes specific information on the qualitative and quantitative criteria that CMF coded for in our comprehensive evaluation of Member office websites—74 criteria in total.

CHARACTERISTIC #1: Informs Constituents of Legislative Positions and Actions

It is a primary responsibility of Members to keep their constituents informed about their legislative positions and actions. Since most citizens think of legislation in terms of

broad issues, rather than specific bills, congressional websites should include information on national, local, and current issues. There are many ways to present this information, but the best websites display the Member’s position for every broad issue area, any action they are currently taking (such as cosponsoring a bill, or sending letters to the executive branch), and any past accomplishments. The best websites not only provide comprehensive issue information, they also tie the issues back to their districts and states, or help constituents understand how the issues directly affect them.

CMF has encountered Members and staff who have suggested that offering any level of detail on a Member position, vote, or priority is politically disadvantageous—that, in essence, the office is offering up “opposition research” that could be used against the Member in a political campaign. Ironically, the opposite is true. Members who display a degree of transparency and accountability not only better serve their constituents, they benefit politically by applying a degree of honesty and clarity to their work. Moreover, in an Internet-dominated political age, if a Member does take a controversial position on an issue, it is reasonable to assume that a political opponent could easily access it, whether or not it is posted on the Member’s website.

“Members who display a degree of transparency and accountability not only better serve their constituents, they benefit politically by applying a degree of honesty and clarity to their work.”

Questions to ask:

- Does the website reflect the key issues and current topics before Congress?
- Does the Member tout specific priorities (such as in the biography) and are these priorities discussed on the website?
- What issues are important to the district/state?
- What is being done in Congress and what action has been taken by the Member on these issues?
- How easy is it to determine where the Member stands on various issues?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Details on the Member’s position on national issues and any action taken on these issues.
- Whether the personality, interests, and priorities of the Member and the district or state are represented on the website.
- The depth and quality of the information provided on each issue.
- Write-ups, videos or other communications on the Member’s priorities that offer some degree of detail about the impact of their proposals on the district, state, or nation.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO), Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI), and Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID)

CHARACTERISTIC #2: Demonstrates Accountability and Transparency

A fundamental tenet of representative democracy is that elected officials should be accountable to their constituents. To increase 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.

Questions to ask:

- What is the Member doing legislatively in Congress? What actions have been taken on key issues?
- Does the website link to the Member's voting record or include access to all of the Member's votes?
- Does the website highlight key votes and explain why the Member voted that way?
- Does the website link to or discuss the Member's sponsorships and co-sponsorships for the current Congress?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- The Member's voting record, particularly those with an easy-to-read format that lists every roll call vote, how the Member voted, and the outcome of each vote.
- Explanation of how to read a roll call vote.
- Explanations of key votes on high-profile legislation and where the rationales for these votes are located on the website.
- A list of (or a link to) the legislation the Member has sponsored and co-sponsored.
- The Member's specific accomplishments.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK) and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI)

CHARACTERISTIC #3: Follows Best Practices for Usability

While it may seem obvious, poor usability can greatly frustrate constituents and prevent them from finding the information or assistance they seek. With this in mind, the elements of usability that CMF evaluated include navigation, look and feel, readability, organization, and timeliness.

Note that *timeliness* is a critical factor for usability. Therefore, a website's overall timeliness score is included in the usability category. However, our evaluations also measured timeliness through several specific criteria, including the presence of updated links and updated text in several sections of the website. Because of its importance to congressional websites, timeliness is also scored as a separate category, which is detailed in the following section.

Questions to ask:

- Can users navigate the Member's website and find what interests them even if they have never used the website before?
- Can they quickly move through the website using the navigation tools, menu options, and links provided? Is the experience hassle-free?
- How well is the website organized? Is the information arranged logically? Is content located where users would expect it?
- Are sections of the website labeled in ways that are intuitive for users so that it is clear what content they will find?
- How easy is it to read the content of the website? Is it written for the Web?
- Is the content up-to-date? Are any links broken or outdated?
- How would you describe the look and feel/design of the website?
- Does the website make effective use of colors and graphics?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Overall, how easy/difficult it is to move about the website and whether you can tell where you are within the website and where you can go.
- Whether the website is effectively and logically organized, and to what extent the content is cross-referenced.
- Overall, the extent to which the information on the website is current.
- Overall, how easy/difficult it is to read the website's content, including:
 - Use of consistent fonts, headers, and text;
 - Degree of contrast between the font color and the background color;
 - Consistent layout of pages, especially within each section of the website;
 - Easy identification of links through colors and formatting;
 - Use of bullets, headers, and short paragraphs, rather than lengthy paragraphs that are hard to scan and require lots of scrolling; and
 - Proper use of PDFs.
- Tools that contribute to a very usable website, such as:
 - A functional search engine;
 - A site map;
 - A privacy statement;
 - Clear menus and sub-menus;
 - Scannable and hyperlinked content; and
 - "Breadcrumbs" that indicate what specific section of the website the user is in and how they got there.

- The impression the look and feel of the website leaves with the user, such as whether it is off-putting or uninviting, or whether it is inviting, professional, and in line with what users expect from current commercial websites.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO) and Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX)

CHARACTERISTIC #4: Provides Timely Content and Updated Links

Providing rich content for your audiences while also keeping this content timely can be a difficult balancing act for congressional offices. Displaying comprehensive issues and legislative information increases the Member's accountability and transparency with constituents, though providing too much detail can cause problems, both for the staff and for users. If the website is so detailed that staff cannot keep the website current, it results in frustrated constituents and makes the legislator look out-of-touch. The same occurs when the site includes outdated links to sponsorships and co-sponsorships and voting records, as CMF reviewers sometimes saw during our evaluations. (Websites such as Congress.gov and other repositories of congressional information create new links to specific information for each Congress.)

If users feel they cannot trust in the information provided because it is outdated, it lessens the credibility of the website and, more importantly, the Member of Congress. CMF is not encouraging Congress to provide less content, but to think critically about the content provided online, in what format, and how best to keep it from becoming outdated. The best offices have done this strategic thinking, and have integrated their online communications into their regular office processes to make updating and maintaining their website more manageable.

Questions to ask:

- How current is the issue information on the Member's website? Does the amount of information posted in the issues section detract from its usability?
- How generic is the text/narrative of the issues section? Can a user easily determine if the information is current?
- Do the issues pages refer to legislation/bills introduced in a previous Congress?
- How current is the information and media in the press section?
- Have the links throughout the website been updated for the current Congress, including sponsorships, votes, etc.?
- When the website refers to legislative accomplishments or activity, is it apparent what Congress this information is from?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- The extent to which the overall website content is current.
- Whether the home page has been updated recently, and/or whether it reflects current events or hot topics.

- Whether the issues section of the website includes the hot topics or high-profile legislation of the current Congress.
- Whether the issues section avoids vague and generic statements with no reference to recent actions or actual positions, such as “I support a quality education” (which could mean anything to anyone).
- Whether the Member’s priority issues are from the current session of Congress and up to date.
- Whether the Member’s accomplishments are from the current Congress and up to date.
- Whether links and information on the Member’s voting record, sponsorships and co-sponsorships, and legislative activity are updated for the current Congress.
- The extent to which the website relies on press releases to provide updates on issues and legislative activity.
- How recently the website has posted information outside of press releases, such as videos, Op-eds, district/state events, etc.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)

CHARACTERISTIC #5: Helps Constituents Resolve Problems with Federal Agencies

Citizens access congressional websites for a reason: they are looking for information and assistance online, not offline. Every Member website should answer constituent questions about how the office can assist them with specific federal agency issues, known as casework. Fortunately, most of the drafting of this content need only be done just once, and should not require major updating unless office policies change.

“Citizens access congressional websites for a reason: they are looking for information and assistance online, not offline.”

Questions to ask:

- Does your website explain what is and is not considered casework? Does it explain which matters are handled by state or local authorities, or which are out of your jurisdiction?
- Does your website walk constituents through the process of understanding how the office can assist them and how to open a case with the office?
- If your office is unable to assist with a constituent’s problem, does the website direct them to the appropriate place/resource?
- To what extent can constituents find answers to their questions? Must they contact your office (via webform or telephone) or visit third party websites rather than find the information on your website?
- Does your website link to the main websites of federal agencies?
- Does your website link to specific answers on agency websites?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- The extent to which the website provides answers and solutions to the most common problems that constituents experience with federal agencies.
- How many different types of casework are addressed on the Member’s website.
- The extent to which the website helps constituents understand what assistance the office can provide, and how constituents can obtain this assistance.
- Explanations of forms, including what they are for, and what users should do with them.
- Whether the website links to main federal agency websites only, or whether it directly links to answers on specific agency pages embedded deeper in the agency’s website.
- Whether the website provides any context for its links to federal agencies.
- Whether the website includes information about local resources for assistance, and whether this information includes links to specific local and state agencies.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID), Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI), and Rep. Rick Larsen (D-WA)

CHARACTERISTIC #6: Provides Easy Access and Guidance on Other Constituent Services

In addition to federal agency assistance, Member websites should include information on all of the basic services that congressional offices provide, such as internships, flag requests, and tours. Having a constituent services section that merely directs users to “please contact the office” (presumably by phone or mail) does not meet the needs or wishes of a modern constituency which expects online service. Because constituents do not always know what they can ask of their Member of Congress, it is just as important to describe how or why a constituent can use a service as it is to supply the service itself.

Questions to ask:

- What services can the Member provide?
- Are the processes available to constituents through the office explained clearly?
- In addition to explaining how to use a given service, does the website also explain why?
- Are explanations provided alongside any forms?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- To what extent constituents can meet their own needs, or whether they must contact the office for answers.
- Explanations of forms, what they are for, and what users should do with them.
- Tour information and request forms.

- Flag ordering information and request forms, and explanations of why someone would fly a flag over the U.S. Capitol.
- Internship application and instructions.
- Service Academy Nomination applications and instructions.
- Grant information.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) and Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-CA)

CHARACTERISTIC #7: Focuses on District/State Needs and Interests

Legislators can build relationships with constituents by considering their audiences and providing them content that meets their specific interests and needs. Anticipating the needs and requests of a prominent or unique demographic, or of citizens in a particular region, demonstrates that serving constituents is a Member’s top priority. In addition to providing targeted content, other ways to focus on constituents include: highlighting specific accomplishments of people from the district or state; photos of constituents; and tying legislative activity back to the district/state.

“Anticipating the needs and requests of a prominent or unique demographic, or of citizens in a particular region, demonstrates that serving constituents is a Member’s top priority.”

Questions to ask:

- Is there information specifically for and about the residents of the district or state (not tourist information, but relevant resources)?
- Is the district/state and/or constituents highlighted in a positive light?
- Does the website offer content by region?
- Does the website offer content by specific demographic (not including kids or student pages)?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Information about, or of concern to, the part of the country the Member represents (as it relates to the activities, actions and accomplishments of the Member and of Congress).
- Important and interesting features or key characteristics of the district/state.
- Whether any content is segmented by area, such as by county or by region.
- Whether the website provides resources by specific demographics, such as veterans, seniors, nurses, etc.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA)

CHARACTERISTIC #8: Explains Congress and the Legislative Process

Most citizens are not familiar with how Congress works. Congressional websites can serve as a valuable resource to learn more about the legislative process, congressional action, and the roles and responsibilities of a Member of Congress. Helping constituents understand the complexities of government also might help them better appreciate the challenges Members of Congress face in wrestling with difficult issues.

The most current legislative information does not need to be created and maintained by the office. Linking to, or incorporating information from, the Library of Congress, the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate, and leadership offices can ensure the usefulness of a website without overloading the office, as long as staff remembers to update links for each Congress.

“Helping constituents understand the complexities of government also might help them better appreciate the challenges Members of Congress face in wrestling with difficult issues.”

Questions to ask:

- Does the website serve to increase constituents’ understanding of the legislative process?
- Does the website include information about what Members do and how they fulfill their role in Congress?
- Are basic questions about Congress answered on your website?
- Does the website link to what is currently happening on the floor of the House or Senate?
- Does the website link to the chamber’s upcoming weekly schedule or monthly calendar?
- Does the website allow users to search the *Congressional Record*?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Basic and readily-available educational information about how a bill becomes a law.
- Detailed descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of a Member of Congress.
- An FAQ section including general explanations of how Congress operates, ranging from topics such as how bills are introduced, what purpose committees serve, and how the House and Senate interact.
- The chamber schedule or calendar.
- Current floor proceedings in your chamber.
- Links to the *Congressional Record*.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY)

CHARACTERISTIC #9: Maintains Diverse Communications Channels

Constituents want to communicate with their elected officials through a variety of methods, in ways that are convenient and comfortable for them, both online and offline. Websites can facilitate this interaction by providing clear and easy access to the diverse channels that the Member and staff use to communicate and engage with constituents. This interaction can be online, through social media, e-newsletters, or online surveys and polls, or offline, through meetings and events that constituents can attend in the district/state or in Washington, D.C.

Questions to ask:

- Can users interact and connect with the Member's office through diverse communications channels, such as through social media platforms, online polls, and e-newsletters?
- In addition to online channels, can constituents find ways to interact with the Member or staff offline, such as through events and meetings?
- How easy is it for constituents to find information on ways they can connect with the Member or staff?
- Does the website offer users guidance on how best to communicate with the office?
- Does the website link to the Member's presence on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Communications channels that allow users a variety of ways to interact with the office or a variety of ways to receive content. These channels can include, but are not limited to:
 - Facebook;
 - Twitter;
 - YouTube;
 - Other types of social media platforms such as Flickr, Tumblr, and Instagram;
 - Social bookmarking;
 - RSS feeds;
 - Online polls or surveys; and
 - Email newsletters.
- Whether the website includes information on ways that constituents can interact with the Member or staff live, including online and offline options such as:
 - The Member's schedule in D.C. or the district/state;

- Member or staff events in D.C. or the district/state;
 - Mobile office hours in the district/state;
 - Constituent breakfasts/coffees in D.C.; and
 - Telephone town hall meetings and in-person town hall meetings.
- Whether the website includes the office hours for both the D.C. and the district/state offices.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) and Rep. Sandy Levin (D-MI)

CHARACTERISTIC #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. These communications can be used to keep constituents up-to-date with the Member’s most recent activities, actions and accomplishments, and are most helpful and relevant for all users when they are presented by topic as well as by date.

Questions to ask:

- Can users access a diverse array of communications content created by the office?
- Are press releases organized by date only?
- Are press releases and other content organized by topic?
- Does the website include archival copies of videos or past pieces by the Member?
- Is it clear whom reporters should contact for interviews and information requests?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Press releases.
- Contact information for the communications director/press secretary.
- Floor speeches.
- Op-eds, articles, or columns by the Member.
- Videos.
- Whether content is organized by topic.
- In addition to recent content, whether archives of content are available.
- Guidance on communicating with the office, such as how to register an opinion or what the office’s response policies are.
- Guidance on requesting a meeting with the Member or staff.

Award-Winning Examples: Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE) and Rep. Steve Stivers (R-OH)

GOLD MOUSE AWARD WINNERS: MEMBER WEBSITES

The winners of CMF's Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards exemplify the best of online communications in Congress. Websites that won these awards embodied most, if not all, of the 10 characteristics of effective Member websites. This section highlights the Gold Mouse Award winners (in alphabetical order by chamber) as the best of the best, and includes comments our researchers made during the evaluations of these websites. For congressional offices seeking to improve their websites, CMF encourages you to browse all of these websites, as well as the Silver and Bronze Winners, for best practices and inspiration. (For more information on our evaluation process and how these winners were selected, please see the Methodology on page 74.)

SENATE

Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA)

<http://casey.senate.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"This is an amazing website and there are lots of innovations when it comes to navigation."

"Really like his voting record page—the description of the votes in the Senate is the clearest I've read yet."

"His casework section is very detailed and very well-organized."

"This is a very impressive website—almost perfect!"

Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM)

<http://heinrich.senate.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"The casework form is easy-to-follow and creates a PDF onsite with the push of a button."

"Very New Mexico-centered. You get a clear sense of where the Senator stands on the issues and how his positions tie to the state. I also liked the integration of photos from meetings with New Mexicans throughout the issues areas."

"The website is effectively, efficiently and logically organized. It is also extensively cross-referenced."

ROBERT P. CASEY JR.

UNITED STATES SENATOR for PENNSYLVANIA

ABOUT ISSUES GET HELP MAKE A REQUEST NEWSROOM CONTACT



Casey Joins Senate Leaders to Advance Universal Pre-K Bill

Connect     

GET THE NEWSLETTER

First Name Last Name
Email Address
Zip

Get Help

Federal Assistance for individuals and help for businesses

Make A Request

Tours of D.C., Internships, Flags, Service Academies...



Senator Bob Casey [@SenBobCasey](#)
Best wishes to Scranton's [@McGloinQB11](#) on his first start for [@Raiders](#).
[Expand](#)

23h

BOB'S FEED



Fall Photo Contest



Casey Statement on Iran Sanctions



Casey Announces Bipartisan Bill to

HELPING YOU ABOUT MARTIN NEWSROOM PRIORITIES NEW MEXICO CONTACT



MARTIN HEINRICH

UNITED STATES SENATOR for NEW MEXICO



0:00 / 2:37

Heinrich Continues Effort To Reduce Veterans Disability Claims Backlog

During a Senate Committee On Veterans' Affairs hearing, U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) continued his effort to reduce the veterans disability claims backlog.

ACTION CENTER

-  Help with a Federal Agency
-  Write Martin
- 

NEWS

More News

Heinrich Staff To Hold Mobile Office Hours In Mora And Las Vegas (11/12/13)
In an ongoing effort to provide top-notch constituent service, U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich's (D-N.M.) staff will hold Mobile Office Hours i...

Heinrich Statement On Veterans Day (11/11/13)
U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) issued the following statement in honor of Veterans Day. He will be commemorating the day in Gall...

TRANSLATE BY Google ENGLISH 

HELPING YOU ABOUT MARTIN NEWSROOM PRIORITIES NEW MEXICO CONTACT

Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI)

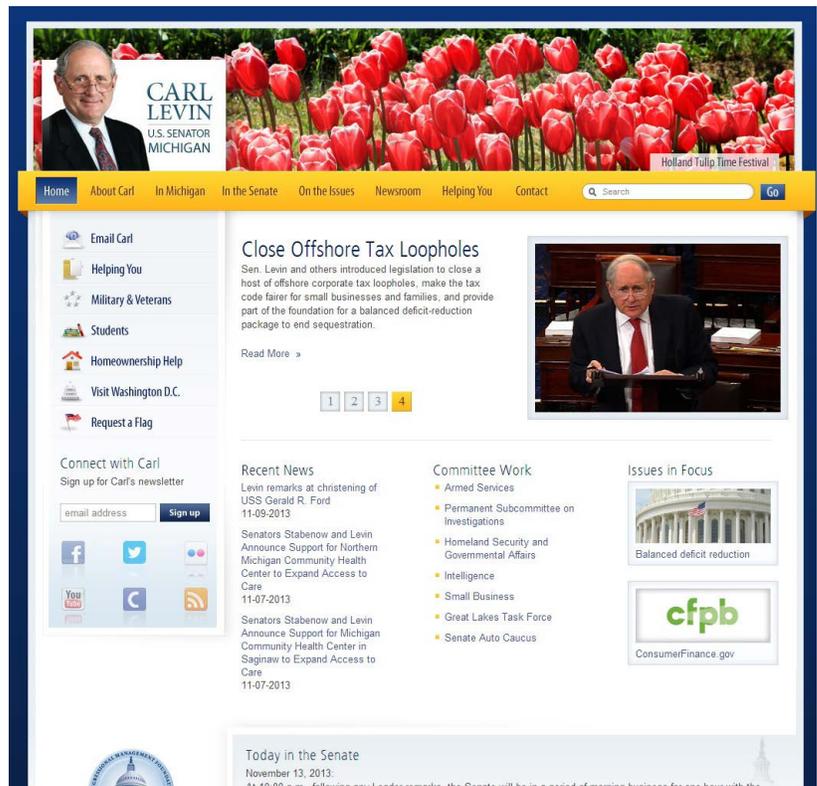
<http://levin.senate.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Amazing casework section!!!”

“I really like how his issue pages are filled with short, substantive paragraphs. Also included is a bulleted list labelled “Michigan Agenda,” that makes it very clear how the positions he holds are related to statewide priorities.”

“Overall really great website!”



Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO)

<http://markudall.senate.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Issues and casework were VERY thorough. The issues break out “Where I Stand” and “What I’m Working On” for many, many topics. You can also sign up for newsletters by issue area.”

“Clearly being updated constantly. There are updates, blog posts, videos, releases ... he seems to be doing a lot and putting it all online.”

“Thoughtfully-crafted. It provides a ton of information, yet you can easily navigate through the content and not get lost. It’s organized well.”



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA)

<http://bass.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Homepage is filled with current information on votes, press releases, upcoming meetings, and social media updates.”

“Good colors and use of space. The site looks clean and inviting.”

“Really strong website overall.”



Rep. Judy Chu (D-CA)

<http://chu.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Overall, it’s an attractive website chock-full of information.”

“Great use of district-specific photos that help the user easily grasp the impact federal issues have on the district.”

“This website is a pleasure to navigate. Bread crumbs are used appropriately, and links within the text abound. There are also page-specific boxes on the right-hand side that provide additional resources and help with navigation.”



Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)

<http://honda.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"I like that his issues section includes his legislation, voting record and accomplishments. These pages are extremely detailed and many have sections and subsections."

"Remarkably up to date for such an extensive amount of information!"

"You can check the status of your flag order or tour request online using a tracking number, and has section called "social media: my approach" that is very helpful."

The screenshot shows the homepage of Congressman Mike Honda's website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Meet Mike', '17th District', 'Services', 'Priorities', 'News', and 'Contact'. A search bar is located on the right. Below the navigation is a large banner featuring a portrait of Mike Honda and the text 'CONGRESSMAN MIKE HONDA 17th CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT'. To the right of the banner is a 'DISTRICT NEWS' section with a form for 'First Name', 'Last Name', and 'your@email.com', and a 'Submit' button. Below the banner are several featured articles and sections: 'Covered California' with a logo and text about health care law; 'Government Shutdown' with a sub-header 'Learn more about the impact on tech and Silicon Valley'; 'My Promise: Equity in Education' with a sub-header 'Read my priorities for making it in America'; and 'Learn more about California's Health Exchange'. A 'THE LATEST' section features a 'Blog' entry for 'Immigration Rally with President Obama' and a 'Press Release' for 'Rep. Honda Leads Effort to Protect Fee-Based Agencies from Automatic Spending Cuts'. An 'UPCOMING EVENTS' section lists 'Alameda Labor Affiliation Rally' and 'Telephone Town Hall'. A 'WELCOME' section is also visible at the bottom right.

Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI)

<http://langevin.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"I love the entire website, but the statements on key votes (on the voting record page) is probably my favorite thing."

"Almost every single issue contained links to legislation, news, press releases, and additional information with the overwhelming majority being current."

"Written for the Web, with short paragraphs, bulleted lists, links within text to further info, not cluttered or overwhelming. It was easy to find what I was looking for."

The screenshot shows the homepage of Congressman Jim Langevin's website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'ABOUT', 'SERVING YOU', 'MEDIA', 'ISSUES', '2ND DISTRICT', 'RESOURCES', 'CONTACT ME', and 'ESPAÑOL'. A search bar is located on the right. Below the navigation is a large banner featuring a portrait of Jim Langevin and the text 'CONGRESSMAN JIM LANGEVIN Representing Rhode Island's 2nd Congressional District'. Below the banner is a 'TOP STORY' section with a link to 'Langevin Hits the Rhode'. To the right are social media feeds for 'twitter' and 'facebook'. Below these are sections for 'Latest News' and 'Events', featuring articles like 'Langevin and Cicilline Congratulate Green Ribbon Schools' and 'Langevin Office Accepting Applications for Interns'. An 'Issues' section lists 'JOBS AND THE ECONOMY', 'EDUCATION', and 'SMALL BUSINESS'. At the bottom, there are video thumbnails for 'Nuala Pell Laid to Rest in Newport' and 'Rep. Jim Langevin (RI-02)'s Photostream'.

Rep. Rick Larsen (D-WA)

<http://larsen.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"His casework is extensive. Links at the top of every page answer your question immediately. The FAQ for each type of casework goes into some important details. It's arranged well and stocked with helpful information."

"Thumbnails, images, and photos do not obstruct, are integrated seamlessly, and are of great resolution. Font and color schemes are timeless and help make the site look elegant and fresh."

"Awesome website!"



Rep. Sandy Levin (D-MI)

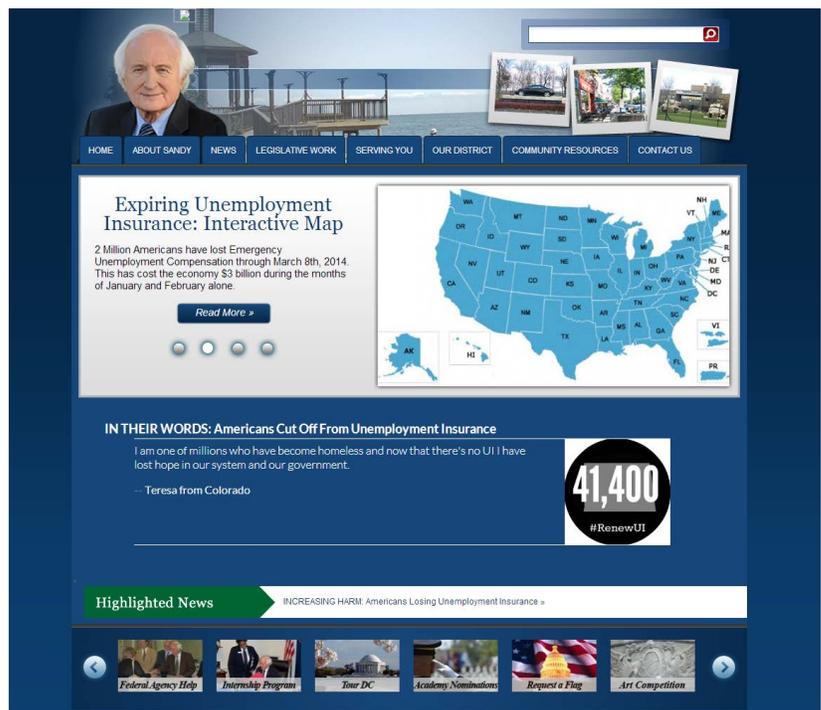
<http://levin.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"It's amazing that with as much content as the website has (hint: A LOT) it's actually up-to-date!"

"First Member I've seen with a separate section for vote rationale and a list of all his staff, including their general duties. Also included is a financial disclosures link in his "about me" section."

"Definitely an outstanding website."



Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-CA)
<http://lowenthal.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Content is consistent and clearly written for the web. There are a lot of links and headers that make it easy to pick out what information is relevant.”

“The issue sections are quite informative. Each starts with a mission statement/overview in the Congressman’s voice, which is a nice touch.”

“His innovative use of video on the homepage is a great portal to an all-around strong website.”

DATE	ROLL	BILL	VOTE
12/4	622	H R 1105	NO
12/4	621	H R 1105	AYE
12/4	620	H R 1105	YEA

Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY)
<http://maloney.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Her issue information is exhaustive, with a lot that is NY and/or district-specific. I can imagine that this would be very useful for her constituents!”

“The site utilizes advanced navigational tools well. That is helpful, as there is so much information on the website.”

“I appreciated the transparency evident throughout this website.”

Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)

<http://pelosi.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"Her issues page has very extensive information and links to even more detailed pages."

"Her casework pages answer many questions on several topics."

"For her seniors and women section, she links to documents on how Health Care reform works for those groups in particular."

CONGRESSWOMAN
NANCY PELOSI
Serving CALIFORNIA'S 12TH DISTRICT

Home Biography Contact Me How Can I Help You? Our District News Youth & Kids Issues Resources

Congresswoman Pelosi attends the UC Hastings Women's Law Journal 25th Annual Symposium
Congresswoman Pelosi joins community leaders at the UC Hastings Women's Law Journal 25th Annual Symposium and highlights the roles of the women's economic agenda – equal pay, the Family Medical Leave Act, and child care – as key for breaking down the barriers that women continue to face in the workplace.

Sign Up for the Pelosi Update
Get e-mail updates
your@email.com

12th District Map

Latest News
Pelosi Statement on Implementation of Historic Mental Health Parity Law
Pelosi Statement on October Jobs Report
Pelosi Statement on Veterans Day
Pelosi Statement on Senate Passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act
Pelosi Applauds Grants to California Community Health Centers to Expand Access to Health Care

Tweets
Nancy Pelosi (@NancyPelosi) 18h
Thanks to @AFLCIO and the women's organizations that are helping to keep the momentum going. When #womensucceed, America succeeds. #fawomen Expand
Nancy Pelosi (@NancyPelosi) 18h
House Dems #womensucceed agenda will ensure affordable child care, paid leave, equal pay—keys to unleashing the power of women. #fawomen Expand
Nancy Pelosi (@NancyPelosi) 23h
Tweet to @NancyPelosi

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI)

<http://paulryan.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"Casework information is extensive. It does a very good job at providing answers and examples of common casework issues, also provides links to federal and local agencies."

"Has separate section addressing vote rationales! Also provides vote rationales in issues sections and press releases."

"I am very impressed. Very impressed!"

U.S. CONGRESSMAN
PAUL RYAN
Serving Wisconsin's 1st District

HOME HOW CAN PAUL HELP? LEGISLATION ABOUT PAUL CONTACT PAUL

EMAIL PAUL
InstantNews **UPDATES**
Get the latest news & issue updates emailed directly to your inbox!

Issues in Depth
Constituent Services
Newsroom
1st District
Government Links
Students & Kids Page
Visiting Washington, DC

PRIVACY ACT RELEASE

Latest News
October 30, 2013
Ryan Opening Statement: Budget-Conference Committee
Before I recognize Chairman Murray, I want to share a few thoughts. You'll notice there are three senators for every con...
October 29, 2013
CNBC: Ryan on Obamacare's rocky rollout and the budget-conference committee
Earlier this week at the Jack Kemp Foundation Dinner in Washington, D.C., Wisconsin's First District Congressman Paul Ry...
October 28, 2013
Ryan discusses Obamacare's rollout and the budget conference
Earlier today, First District Congressman Paul Ryan spoke with WJLP's Bill Lawrence about the upcoming budget-conference...
October 23, 2013
Ryan: Americans Deserve Answers on Obamacare
WASHINGTON—The Health and Human Services Department has yet to respond to repeated requests from the House Budget Commi...
October 16, 2013
Ryan on Washington's Missed Opportunity
House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin issued the following statement on tonight's vote: "Today's legisl...
View More News

Video Player: Ryan: "Seize the Moment" At a House Budget Committee hearing, Chairman Ryan argues for bipartisan debt reduction.

Top 5: A Responsible, Balanced Budget

Voting Record

DATE	ROLL	BILL	VOTE
11/12	572	H R 2922	YEA
11/12	571	H R 2871	YEA
10/30	570	H J RES 99	YEA

Rep. John Tierney (D-MA)

<http://tierney.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"His issues page has subsections on most pages. Every page details at least a few programs or pieces of legislation he supports."

"His casework pages were logically arranged, with information easy-to-find for various groups of individuals (e.g., seniors, teachers or veterans)."

"Any visitor to the site would get the very real sense that this is an office that cares about constituent services."



Rep. Fred Upton (R-MI)

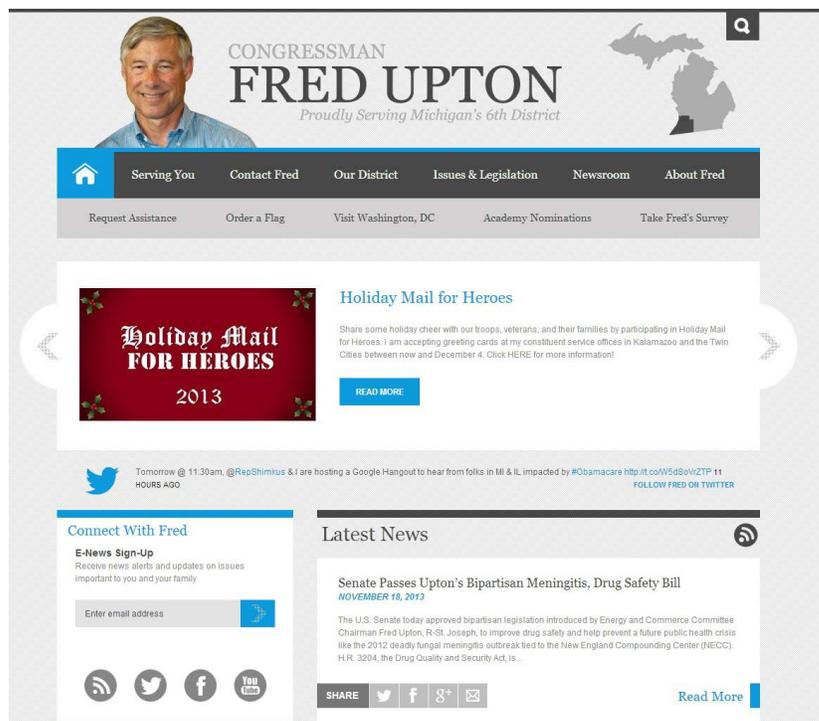
<http://upton.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"It's a very nice-looking and modern website, with updated content that is clearly adapted for the Web."

"This website impressively integrates social media throughout."

"The personal and informal tone in the issues' sections draws the user in and provides an easy portal for constituents to understand the Congressman's positions."



Committee Office Websites

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMITTEE WEBSITES

An overlap exists between the characteristics of award-winning *Member* websites and those of award-winning *committee* websites, primarily in the areas of timeliness and usability. Otherwise, there is little commonality. Because committees have distinct jurisdictions and different audiences, not all of CMF's criteria apply to all committees. CMF tried to construct formulas that take this into account without creating vastly different criteria and formulas for each committee, as discussed in the Methodology on page 77.

Effective websites must be very strategic. In addition to considering the general advice below, each committee must conduct a strategic examination of its jurisdiction, activities, goals, priorities, audiences, and stakeholders to define which specific audiences and stakeholders to target, how to tailor content to meet their audiences' needs, and how to make available online all of the resources and information provided by the committee offline.

The CMF evaluation of committee websites includes a minimum of 41 and a maximum of 61 criteria, depending on whether a committee considers legislation, conducts hearings, and incorporates minority information into a bipartisan website. The criteria are grouped into the following six characteristics:

1. Demonstrates Accountability through Legislative and Hearing Information
2. Communicates What the Committee Does and How it Works
3. Provides Content Targeted to the Committee's Audiences
4. Follows Best Practices for Usability
5. Facilitates Basic Interaction
6. Maintains Diverse Communications Channels

“Each committee must conduct a strategic examination of its jurisdiction, activities, goals, priorities, audiences, and stakeholders.”

CHARACTERISTIC #1: Demonstrates Accountability through Legislative and Hearing Information

Though committees are not as directly accountable to constituents as individual Senators and Representatives are, their websites can and should demonstrate a degree of accountability, even those whose business is primarily for internal congressional audiences. For most committees, accountability boils down to providing easy, transparent, and timely access to its activities, especially legislation and hearings.

This category of criteria varied the most among committees because it includes criteria related to legislation, hearings, oversight, and information from the minority. Not all committees consider legislation, conduct hearings, oversee federal agencies, or include minority views on the main committee website. For this reason, CMF only applied accountability criteria that were relevant to a given committee.

“Though committees are not as directly accountable to constituents as individual Senators and Representatives are, their websites can and should demonstrate a degree of accountability.”

Questions to ask:

- Can website visitors follow open hearings and access related documents during and after the hearing?
- Can visitors easily access the full list and status of bills assigned to the committee?
- Are votes in open session quickly and easily available?
- Does the website provide access or links to public committee documents?
- Does the website provide online access to documents and activities at the same time they are available in-person?
- What information and services do citizens need in order to follow the work of the committee in a timely fashion online?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Legislative information, including a complete list of the bills assigned to the committee and votes (for committees that consider legislation);
- Hearing information, including schedule, live and archived video, witness testimony, and transcripts (for committees that conduct hearings);
- The rules that govern the committee;
- Reports, publications, and correspondence, as applicable;
- Links to relevant agencies and Congress.gov, as applicable; and
- Content about and from the minority, as applicable.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Rules

CHARACTERISTIC #2: Communicates What the Committee Does and How it Works

Given that no two congressional committees have identical jurisdictions or activities, a very basic component of a committee website should be information about what the committee does and how it works. The criteria in this category seek plain-language information about who is on the committee; what the committee and subcommittees, if any, do; how the committee conducts its business; the history of the committee; and what the committee has done recently. This information can be developed by carefully considering what likely audiences need to understand about the purpose and general operations of the committee, and providing that information in clear, easy-to-understand language.

Questions to ask:

- What are the Chairman's goals for the committee and how can they be reflected on the website?
- What do our audiences—including the general public—need to know to truly understand the committee?
- What is the current framework for how the committee operates?
- What are some of the most frequently-asked questions about the committee?
- What might visitors want to know about the committee's members and subcommittees?
- What are the historical underpinnings for the committee, as it exists today?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Information—more detailed than just a link to their personal office websites—about both the Chairman and Ranking Member (or Vice Chairman).
- The membership of the committee.
- The committee's jurisdiction.
- Membership and jurisdictions of subcommittees, if there are any.
- A plain-language overview of how the committee works.
- Historical information about the committee.
- Statements by the committee Chairman.
- Press releases organized by topic.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Small Business

CHARACTERISTIC #3: Provides Content Targeted to the Committee's Audiences

The different audiences and stakeholders for committees can be roughly broken down into four general groups: congressional staffers, subject matter experts off Capitol

Hill, the media, and the general public. As much as possible, committees should provide information and resources for all of these groups, but different committees will need to emphasize some over others, based on their roles and jurisdictions. CMF applied different weights to the criteria in this category to reflect the differences in committee audiences. For any committee, however, defining their primary audiences and stakeholders and determining how best to meet their needs is the first step in building a strategic, and award-winning, website.

Questions to ask:

- Who are the most frequent visitors to the website and what are they seeking?
- Who does the committee most often interact with offline and what content can be provided for them online?
- What are the Chairman’s goals for the committee and who must be engaged online—and how—in order to accomplish them?
- What do reporters need and what does the committee want to provide them?
- What do subject matter experts, both on and off Capitol Hill, need from the committee?
- What does the public need to know to understand the work of the committee?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- The extent to which the website provides content aimed at meeting the needs of congressional staffers, subject matter experts off the Hill, reporters, and the general public.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Education and the Workforce

CHARACTERISTIC #4: Follows Best Practices for Usability

Poor usability can greatly frustrate visitors to the website and prevent them from finding the information they seek. With this in mind, the elements of usability that CMF evaluated include navigation, look and feel, readability, organization, and timeliness.

Questions to ask:

- Can users navigate the website and find what interests them even if they have never used the website before?
- Can they quickly move through the website using the navigation tools, menu options, and links provided? Is the experience hassle-free?
- How well is the website organized? Is the information arranged logically? Is content located where users would expect it?
- Are sections of the website labeled in ways that are intuitive for users so that it is clear what content they will find?

“Poor usability can greatly frustrate visitors to the website and prevent them from finding the information they seek.”

- How easy is it to read the content of the website? Is it written for the Web?
- How would you describe the look and feel/design of the website?
- Does the website make effective use of colors and graphics?
- Is the content up-to-date? Are any links broken or outdated?
- How current is the information on the website? Does the amount of information detract from its usability?
- How generic is the text/narrative? Can a user easily determine if the information is current?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- How easy/difficult it is to move about the website and whether users can tell where they are within the website and where they can go.
- Whether the website is effectively and logically organized, and to what extent the content is cross-referenced.
- How easy/difficult it is to read the website's content overall, including:
 - Use of consistent fonts, headers, and text;
 - Degree of contrast between the font color and the background color;
 - Consistent layout of pages, especially within each section of the website;
 - Easy identification of links through colors and formatting;
 - Use of bullets, headers, and short paragraphs, rather than lengthy paragraphs that are hard to scan and require lots of scrolling; and
 - Proper use of PDFs.
- Tools that can contribute to a very usable website include, but are not limited to:
 - A functional search engine;
 - A site map;
 - A privacy statement;
 - Clear menus and sub-menus;
 - Scannable and hyperlinked content; and
 - "Breadcrumbs" that indicate what specific section of the website the user is in and how they got there.
- The impression the look and feel of the website leaves with users, such as whether it is off-putting or uninviting, or whether it is inviting, professional, and in line with what users expect from current commercial websites.
- The extent to which the overall website content is current.
- How recently the website has posted information outside of press releases, such as videos, op-eds, district/state events, etc.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Small Business

CHARACTERISTIC #5: Facilitates Basic Interaction

Congressional committees do not need to be available to, or interactive with, the public in the same way individual Senators and Representatives must, yet their websites still must support the basic online and offline interactions visitors want and need. This includes providing such simple information as mailing addresses, hearing room locations, and phone numbers. It also might include web forms for submitting information to the committee. If the committee conducts hearings, it also means providing guidance on submitting testimony and attending hearings.

Questions to ask:

- In what ways do people interact with the committee and how can their interactions be better facilitated online?
- What do novices need to know about communicating with the committee, attending hearings, submitting testimony, etc.?
- Are there ways to better facilitate interactions with congressional staffers and subject matter experts?
- How do reporters interact with the committee and how can their interactions be better facilitated online?
- Are there specific audiences or stakeholders the committee is trying to target, and are there ways to use the website to attract and interact with them?

“Congressional committees do not need to be available to, or interactive with, the public in the same way individual Senators and Representatives must, yet their websites still must support the basic online and offline interactions visitors want and need.”

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Contact information for the general public and reporters;
- Guidance on submitting testimony, as appropriate;
- Guidance on attending hearings, as appropriate;
- Facebook and Twitter interactive posts; and
- Guidance on applying for an internship.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Natural Resources

CHARACTERISTIC #6: Maintains Diverse Communications Channels

Increasingly, websites are hubs for a diversity of communications channels, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, blogs, and more. Because Internet users are increasingly relying on these applications, committees that use them must consider them as part of their online strategy. CMF does not advocate congressional committees using social media merely for the sake of doing so, but there are tools and applications that committees can use strategically to further their goals, better inform their audiences and stakeholders, and even interact with those who follow the work of the committee

most closely. Just as committees must think strategically about the design and content of their websites, they must also determine how and why they use social media and other applications to engage and interact with their audiences.

Questions to ask:

- How can the committee's website increase the diversity of communication channels and information access available to visitors?
- Are the committee's work and/or the Chairman's style conducive to high-frequency content necessary to sustain a blog or social media?
- What do the frequent users of committee information on and off the Hill need from the committee and can that information be provided more effectively via social media?
- Can the committee's work and the Chairman's goals be furthered through social media?

The specifics CMF looks for in evaluations:

- Press releases by topic;
- E-newsletters;
- Blogs;
- Audio webcasts;
- RSS feeds;
- Podcasts;
- Unique video created by the committee;
- Facebook and Twitter accounts; and
- Social media bookmarking tools.

Award-Winning Example: House Committee on Energy and Commerce

GOLD MOUSE AWARD WINNERS: COMMITTEE WEBSITES

Three committee websites won Gold Mouse Awards for the 113th Congress. These websites embodied most, if not all, of the six characteristics of an effective committee website. CMF encourages committee staff seeking to improve their websites to browse the Gold Mouse-winning websites, as well as the Silver and Bronze Winners, for examples of these characteristics and best practices. The section below highlights some of the comments from our researchers captured during the evaluations of these websites. (For more information on our evaluation process and how the winners were selected, please see the Methodology on page 76.)

House Education & the Workforce, John Kline (R-MN), Chairman

<http://edworkforce.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

"The website provides the committee report for each markup, as well as amendments, statements, photos, and archived video. Reports include the vote tally by person. I really liked that on the markups page, you could scan the list of markups and the vote tally was in the summary text."

"This is a very well-organized and informative website. This committee is doing a great job of informing its range of audiences about its activities."

"I like that it sorts information by issue. Makes the website really easy to use."



House Natural Resources, Doc Hastings (R-WA), Chairman

<http://naturalresources.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“Offers content by year, subcommittee, topic, or keyword search. The “latest news” on the home page also breaks out the content by type—press releases, tweets, Facebook posts, videos—makes a lot of content easily and immediately accessible.”

“Has a handy FAQ about committee meetings and hearings that directs people to most commonly needed information.”

“In addition to the ‘Committee Votes’ section, they summarize committee votes on the page for each markup. The markup pages are extensive, with lots of embedded links and access to amendments and webcasts.”



House Rules, Pete Sessions (R-TX), Chairman

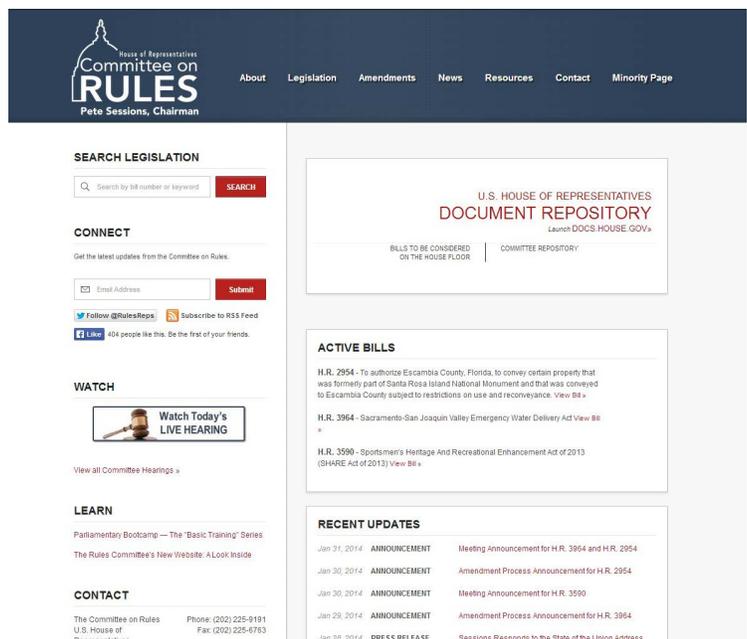
<http://rules.house.gov>

Comments from Reviewers:

“I REALLY like the way they present their bills (easy to read and understand, easy to access both the bill and the rule).”

“They present their information in a surprisingly transparent and user-friendly way. I also like all the information on the parliamentary process, including “parliamentary bootcamp” documents. They make it easy to learn about how Congress and the Rules committee works.”

“Readability is enhanced by the layout, which includes boxes to differentiate different documents on a page.”



113TH CONGRESS MOUSE AWARD WINNERS: A CLOSER LOOK

Members Who Won Awards in Their First Year in Current Office

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) (*social media*)
Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) (*website*)
Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-CA) (*website*)
Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-FL) (*social media*)
Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA) (*social media*)

Member Who Won Awards For Both Personal and Committee Websites

Rep. Fred Upton (R-MI), House Energy and Commerce

Members Who Won Awards For Their Websites and For Social Media

Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA)
Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
Rep. Stephen Fincher (R-TN)
Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)
Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA)

Members Whose Websites Have Won Three or More Times in the History of the Mouse Awards

*7 Times:

Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)

6 Times:

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT)

5 Times:

Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX)	Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI)
Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)	Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR)

4 Times:

Sen. John Boozman (R-AR)	Rep. John Dingell (D-MI)
Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD)	Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI)
Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID)	Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY)
Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO)	Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI)

3 Times:

Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE)	Rep. John Carter (R-TX)
Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA)	Rep. Jim Matheson (D-UT)
Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA)	Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA)
Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV)	

*Note: CMF has recognized the best congressional websites with awards seven times, making Rep. Mike Honda the only Member to have won an award every evaluation year.

Social Media

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media provide incredible new opportunities for Senators and Representatives to interact personally and intimately with constituents. Many users of social media access their networks at least once per day, and often via mobile devices⁴, and two-thirds of them engage in political activity on their social networks.⁵ Members can speak to these people wherever they are and in nearly real time. The possibilities for offering genuine, targeted information and assistance when and where people need it are staggering.

However, it can be daunting for Senators and Representatives to wade into social networking. There are dozens of social media platforms, and more are emerging all the time. Some—such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—have developed strong footholds, but the field will continue to shift for some time to come. As a result, many Members—and their staffs—are confused about which platforms and approaches they should use. Developing a presence begins with strategic thinking about the platforms, tone, style, and frequency that will work best given the Member's or committee's goals, comfort level and personality; the staff's ability to support social media; and the needs and interests of the audience.

Once an office or committee has defined its approach to social media, defined how it supports overall goals, and developed some mastery in using it, the trick is to engage people and keep them engaged. This requires a significant outreach effort, both online and offline, among the audiences the Member or committee wants to attract. The Member or committee needs to generate interest by providing value. Value may consist of targeted content, effective communications, and integration of online and offline interactions with citizens. However, these activities need to be meaningful and sustainable. Legislators and committees who generate followers, but who cannot sustain the content and interactivity will simply create disillusionment—building expectations

⁴ Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, Pew Research Center, January 2014, "Social Media Update 2013." Available at: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Social-Media-Update.aspx>

⁵ Aaron Smith, Pew Research Center, April 2013, "Civic Engagement in the Digital Age." Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>

among their followers and not delivering. It is better to build something that starts small and grows slowly than to try to build something that is too ambitious and ultimately unsustainable.

The social media practices of the congressional offices that won Gold Mouse Awards are excellent examples of strategic thinking about how best to use social media to accomplish Members' goals. They provided constituents with rich, relevant information and opportunities for interaction. However, it is important to note that in the world of social media, Members must be themselves. Their online persona should be an extension of their congressional voice and be authentic. While one can copy our award winners' *tactics and practices*, each legislator should develop their own *style*. Our reviews and research took us on a tour of the gamut of congressional social media practices, during which we formulated a number of recommendations for effectively communicating with constituents via social media. In addition to employing the evolving best practices for social media, we found that the most consistently good uses of social media exhibited the following characteristics.

"In the world of social media, Members must be themselves. While one can copy our award winners' tactics and practices, each legislator should develop their own style."

CHARACTERISTIC #1: Follows platform conventions.

At the foundation of all social media platforms are information-sharing and interactivity, and the people who use them have specific expectations of how this is done on their platforms of choice. Each has its own conventions. Some of them—such as the use of hashtags on Twitter—have become integrated into most Members' social media efforts. Others—like Instagram's first-person perspective or Pinterest's collecting and sharing others' content—are often not followed by Members. These are not broadcast media or simple billboards—they are networks of individuals accessing and sharing information of interest to them. Offices failing to follow these platform conventions are missing opportunities for more robust relationships with their constituents.

CHARACTERISTIC #2: Conveys authenticity and the Member's personality.

Constituents appreciate gaining a better sense of those who represent them in Congress, and social media are great platforms for expressing personality and humanizing Senators and Representatives. However, Members need to walk a line between being too officious and too open. There is tremendous opportunity in the course of a Member's day to share opinions, photos, videos, and humor from a perspective few in the world will ever see. A Member's personality can shine on social media without the risk of boring participants or over-sharing personal information.

One of the wonderful aspects of social media is its *authenticity*, and Members should strive to be truly authentic in their social media efforts. This creates a conundrum in congressional offices because, rather than being the product of a single person, most communications are collaborative efforts by the Member and the staff. Congressional offices that are most successful in the social media world have found a way to effectively

communicate the Member’s personality while preserving the authentic feeling of the communication. This authenticity requires close collaboration between the legislator and staff, a style guide or standards, and some transparency with followers. It does not require that the Member be personally responsible for every post. It does require clear practices regarding: the type of content appropriate for social media; the tone of first-person communications: who in the office is responsible for content; and how to stylistically convey the difference between posts by the Member and those by staff.

CHARACTERISTIC #3: Maintains a congressional persona.

Though it is difficult to separate their official, personal, and campaign personas on social media, Senators and Representatives should strive to do so. For a Member of Congress, each persona speaks to different audiences and requires different approaches, tone, and language. Campaign rhetoric is—or should be—very different from the official rhetoric of a Member of Congress. The official persona needs to speak to, and serve, all of the Member’s constituents—not just those who agree with them, who voted for them, or who volunteered with their campaign.

Of course, every Member has a political affiliation and strong views on the issues, and these views will and should come through in their social media efforts. However, using strongly partisan or campaign-style rhetoric in their official communications risks alienating some of the people the Member represents. Such posts may be more likely to be shared by supporters, but Senators and Representatives who make partisanship central to their social media strategies are likely to be mistrusted by constituents who have differing views (even slightly). Moreover, legislators will be missing opportunities to provide assistance and demonstrate accountability to all of the people in their district/state.

CHARACTERISTIC #4: Integrates communications platforms.

With their use of social media, Members now maintain a variety of online communications platforms. Most have created, at the very least, their websites, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube accounts. Some have created many more. These need to be integrated with one another, and with offline communications, so people who access the Member via one platform are aware of the key information provided on the others. This does not mean posting identical information on all platforms. There should, however, be enough cross-references that *important information* is shared across all communications platforms without being redundant.

This cross-referencing can take many forms, including:

- References to the website and social media accounts by Members and staffers during public appearances;
- Recent social media posts highlighted on the Member’s website; and
- References to YouTube videos and Flickr photos in Tweets and Facebook posts.

“With their use of social media, Members now maintain a variety of online communications platforms. These need to be integrated with one another, and with offline communications.”

Members are generating valuable content for each of the different communications platforms Senators and Representatives employ, and its value increases through integration with as many other platforms as possible.

CHARACTERISTIC #5: Encourages interactivity.

Given that the average population of a House district is more than 700,000, and the population of California—the most populous state in the union—is more than 37 million, encouraging interactivity is a daunting proposition for any congressional office. Additionally, given that on social media, it is difficult to know whether or not someone is a constituent (a Member's reach potentially extends worldwide), many offices are reluctant to engage with people on social media.

However, social media are inherently interactive. If Members of Congress wish to have a presence on one or many platforms, they need to be prepared to encourage and respond to interaction, no matter where it comes from. Scheduled question and answer sessions on different platforms—such as Facebook or Twitter—can offer great opportunities for interacting in manageable ways. Even with such opportunities, people will post comments, and even have lengthy discussions, in response to Members' posts. A response to every comment or on every thread is unnecessary, but it is important to monitor the reach and play of posts to strategically determine when to participate. It is also important to engage in the *social* aspects of social media and respond, repost, and reach out in thoughtful and strategic ways that advance key discussions, whether or not they originated with the committee or Member. Otherwise, social media users will be left with the impression that the office is only interested in using the platforms as one-way, broadcast media to tout the committee's or Member's activities and accomplishments.

“It is also important to engage in the social aspects of social media. Otherwise, users will be left with the impression that the office is only interested in using the platforms as one-way, broadcast media to tout the committee's or Member's activities and accomplishments.”

GOLD MOUSE AWARD WINNERS: SOCIAL MEDIA

For the first time, CMF is giving Gold Mouse Awards for Social Media. The award winners below represent the best of the practices nominated.⁶ The social media awards focus heavily on transparency, accountability, and constituent service, similar to our website awards. They do not necessarily go to the Senators and Representatives who are using the most social media platforms; have the most followers; are getting the most media attention; or are demonstrating the best practices for social media, across the board. The Gold Mouse Awards for Social Media go to the nominees whom CMF evaluators and our expert panel determined are using *specific* social media practices in ways that:

- 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.

These specific practices serve as examples for Senators and Representatives who wish to achieve similar goals with their online communications. Most of the award-winning practices are platform-agnostic, meaning they could be performed on social media platforms other than the ones these Senators and Representatives use. Regardless of the platforms used, these practices are models for other offices to follow as they consider how best to incorporate social media into their communications and constituent service strategies. The winners are discussed on the following pages, in alphabetical order by chamber.

⁶ For more information about CMF's methodology for selecting the winners of the Gold Mouse Awards for Social Media, see page 78.

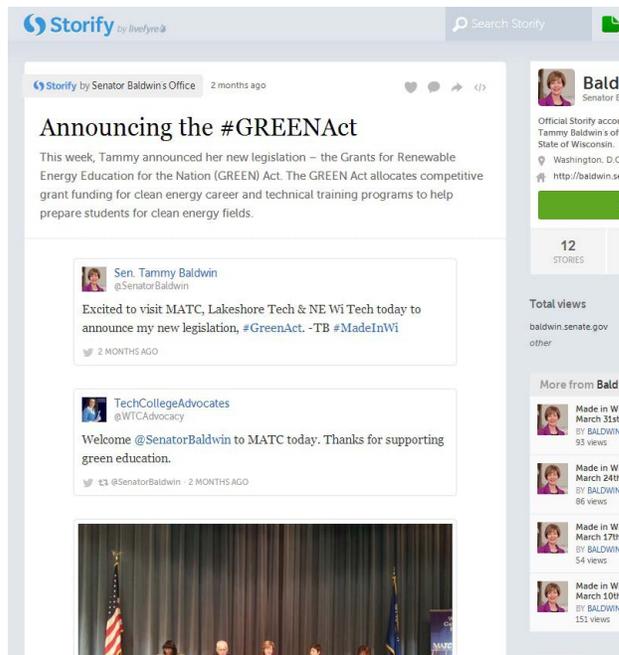
SENATE

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI)

Compilations of social media discussions into “stories.”

Social media discussions are generally point-in-time and ephemeral. They can also be disjointed. If someone misses a discussion in real time, or the discussion gets lost in a sea of posts in followers' feeds, it will never be seen. In this way, important discussions can be missed. To help highlight, preserve, and continue their most important social media discussions, Senator Baldwin's office uses Storify to compile posts by the Senator and others on a specific topic or event into “stories.” Examples include social media stories related to Senator Baldwin's announcement of her #NextGen Research Act, a #TweetTammy conversation with students, and her announcement of her #GREENAct. By compiling stories in this way, important discussions are captured and shared via their website and social media in ways that help perpetuate and sustain them.

Platform: Twitter and Storify



Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT)

Issue-based listicle.

Listicles have become very popular on social media. These are crosses between lists and articles, usually with animated graphics for each item in the list. After the July 2013 interest rate increase on student loan debt, Senator Blumenthal's office created a listicle entitled "11 Reasons Why Congress Needs to Fix Student Loan Rates Now" and posted it on BuzzFeed, a social news and entertainment network and resource. Given that BuzzFeed's audience skews toward college-educated Millennials, Senator Blumenthal's listicle—which effectively adhered to listicle conventions by being informative, humorous, and mildly irreverent—was well-targeted to the people most affected by student loans. In the first 24 hours of its posting, the listicle received more than 40,000 views.

Platform: BuzzFeed

11 Reasons Why Congress Needs To Fix Student Loan Rates Now

Shamefully, Congress failed to act before the July 1st deadline to prevent your student loan interest rates from doubling. This is an issue on which we should all agree. I call on Congress to pass legislation that will retroactively prevent this de facto tax increase on young people already struggling under mountains of debt. At a time when Americans owe more than \$1.2 trillion in student loans debt, the last thing we should do is make college more expensive for students and their families. Here are 11 reasons why Congress needs to act on student loan interest rates.

posted on July 11, 2013 at 11:04am EDT

Senator Blumenthal
BuzzFeed Contributor



1. Because on July 1st, your student loan rates doubled from 3.4% to 6.8%.

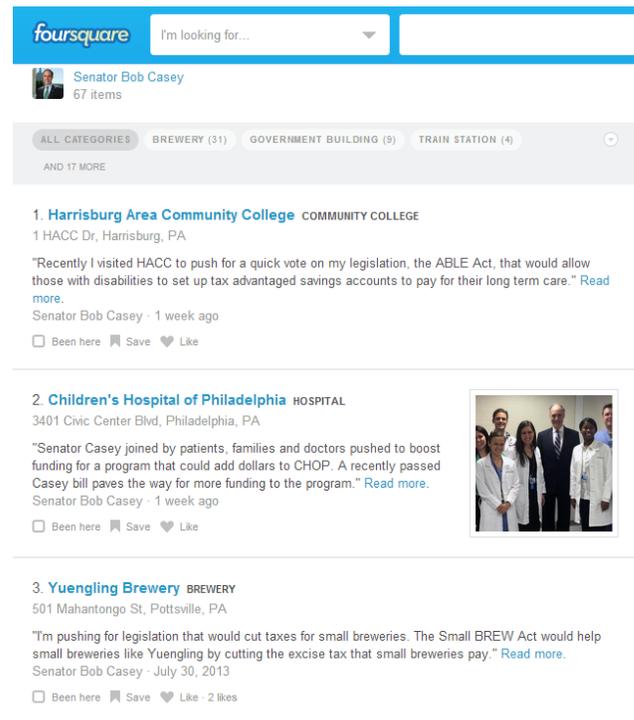


Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA)

Location-based legislative information.

When pushing for legislation to cut taxes for small breweries, Senator Casey went straight to his base: the many Pennsylvania craft breweries. Using Foursquare, a location-based social media platform, the Senator left “tips” at each of the breweries in his state about the legislation and with a link back to his website for more information. This was a creative way to get the word out to people directly affected by the legislation. He has used Foursquare for other issues, as well, including tips at rail stations about U.S. Department of Transportation grants to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) and at a Pennsylvania gas station about his plans to lower gas prices.

Platform: Foursquare



The screenshot shows Senator Bob Casey's Foursquare profile with 67 items. It lists three location-based tips:

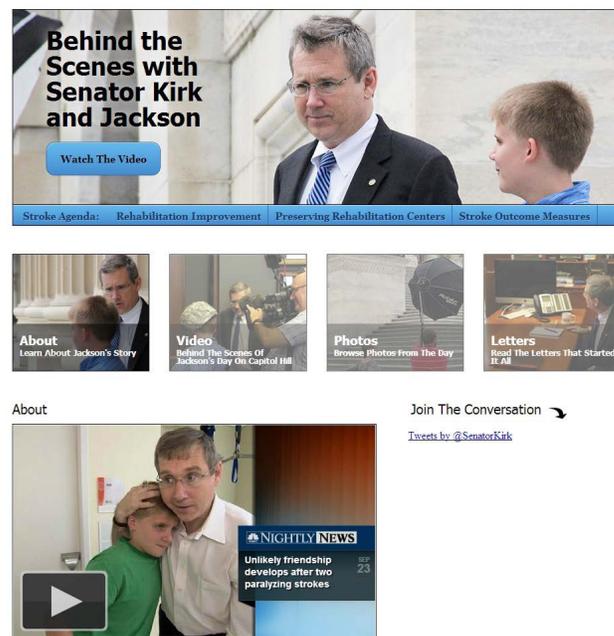
- Harrisburg Area Community College** (COMMUNITY COLLEGE): 1 HACC Dr, Harrisburg, PA. Tip: "Recently I visited HACC to push for a quick vote on my legislation, the ABLE Act, that would allow those with disabilities to set up tax advantaged savings accounts to pay for their long term care." Read more. (1 week ago)
- Children's Hospital of Philadelphia** (HOSPITAL): 3401 Civic Center Blvd, Philadelphia, PA. Tip: "Senator Casey joined by patients, families and doctors pushed to boost funding for a program that could add dollars to CHOP. A recently passed Casey bill paves the way for more funding to the program." Read more. (1 week ago)
- Yuengling Brewery** (BREWERY): 501 Mahantongo St, Pottsville, PA. Tip: "I'm pushing for legislation that would cut taxes for small breweries. The Small BREW Act would help small breweries like Yuengling by cutting the excise tax that small breweries pay." Read more. (July 30, 2013)

Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL)

Sharing personal journey that led to legislative action.

In a way that would not have been possible a few years ago, Senator Kirk shared his journey of recovery from stroke with the encouragement of his nine-year-old pen pal, Jackson Cunningham, also a stroke survivor. By sharing the journey, his return to Capitol Hill, his correspondence with Jackson, and his related legislative activities in the Senate via a multitude of social media platforms, Senator Kirk has drawn attention to issues of stroke prevention and rehabilitation. He used YouTube videos, a Scribd letter library, the hashtag #NeverGiveUp, a Flickr photo stream, and his website to highlight his recovery and his relationship with the boy who helped inspire him, for a rare personal and behind-the-scenes look at how one Senator, through a traumatic experience, became a strong advocate in the Senate for an issue that may not have drawn his attention previously.

Platform: Several, including YouTube, Scribd, and Flickr



The screenshot shows a website section titled "Behind the Scenes with Senator Kirk and Jackson". It includes a "Watch The Video" button and a navigation bar with links: Stroke Agenda, Rehabilitation Improvement, Preserving Rehabilitation Centers, and Stroke Outcome Measures. Below are four content blocks: "About" (Learn About Jackson's Story), "Video" (Behind The Scenes Of Jackson's Day On Capitol Hill), "Photos" (Browse Photos From The Day), and "Letters" (Read The Letters That Started It All). At the bottom, there is a "Join The Conversation" section with a tweet from @SenatorKirk: "Unlikely friendship develops after two paralyzing strokes" (SEP 23).

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT)

Real-time updates during markup of a key bill.

As Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Senator Leahy played a critical role in the consideration of comprehensive immigration reform in that committee. The markup of the proposed legislation occurred over five, non-consecutive days. To help keep citizens informed and engaged, the Senator used the hashtag #CIRmarkup and tweeted about: the schedule; availability of webcasts, key documents and amendments; and other information to help citizens follow the debate. The hashtag was also used by other Senators, Representatives, organizations, businesses, and individuals, leading to an active Twitter discussion related to the issue, legislation and markup. Once the legislation passed in committee, the Senator began using the hashtag #CIRfloor as he managed debate on the Senate floor and then #Immigration once the bill passed in the Senate, which helped keep the dialog and the momentum going while also demonstrating the movement through the legislative process. By restricting the content of his posts to official documents and information, the Senator also demonstrated accountability and a willingness to invite anyone into the debate, not just those who agreed with his stance on the issue.

Platform: Twitter



Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS)

Outreach on an issue before Congress.

The day before a scheduled hearing on Bitcoin in the Senate Banking Committee, Senator Moran took to Reddit to find out what users thought he should know about the online currency. He queried the participants in the Bitcoin "subreddit" (topic area) and received a range of responses, many substantive, to which he referred during the hearing (<http://youtu.be/ZsoF1XkPKCo>). Social media provide great opportunities for Senators and Representatives to seek input on issues before Congress, especially when there is an already-established community of people affected by the issue. By engaging the Bitcoin subreddit, Senator Moran heard directly from an active community who would be affected by any legislation Congress considers.

Platform: Reddit

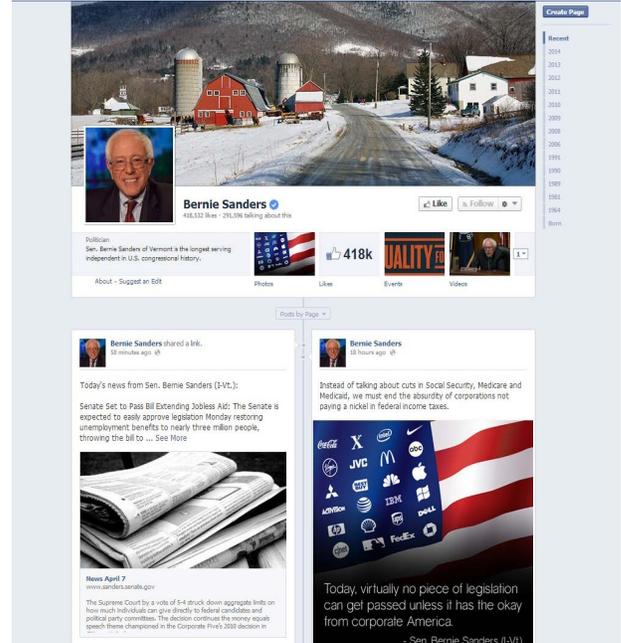


Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT)

Integration across platforms without redundancy.

Senator Sanders is a very active and effective participant in social media, and many of his practices are worthy of emulation, from his authoritative tone and use of quotes and graphics to his transparency in stating that “Tweets ending in –B are from Bernie, and all others are from a staffer.” The practice we wish to highlight, however, is the way he cross-posts information across social media platforms without making them seem redundant. Though he does almost always post the same information to all platforms, the posts are seldom identical. He might highlight different quotes, use different graphics, focus on a slightly different aspect of an issue, or any number of other ways to make each post seem fresh. As a result, people who follow him on more than one platform are given different ways of approaching the same information rather than seeing identical posts.

Platform: Several, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google+



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Rep. Stephen Fincher (R-TN)

Making Congress approachable.

Like many of the winners, Rep. Fincher is active on several social media platforms. One of his best practices is to use social media to make Congress—and himself—approachable. His posts are brief and authentic, grounded in his district, and helpful in demystifying Congress. They also effectively walk the line between being personable and being too personal. Like many Members, he highlights constituent visits in both D.C. and the district and posts and solicits photos of the district. Unlike many Members, he also posts many photos and videos from the Member perspective. By showing a video of a staffer fulfilling a flag request or of the U.S. Capitol flag flying at half-mast, he humanizes Congress. By posting photos of himself at work at his desk or of the view of a committee from his seat on the dais, he makes himself more approachable. His connection to the people he represents is apparent, both in his images and in his language.

Platform: Several, including Tumblr, Vine, and Instagram

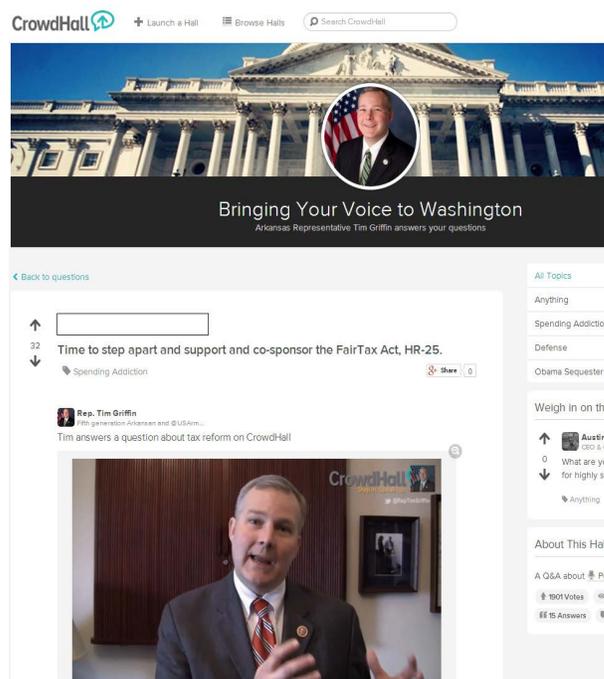


Rep. Tim Griffin (R-AR)

Responsiveness and engagement via social media.

Interaction and engagement are the foundations of social media, and Rep. Griffin does both in ways few Members do. Many use social media to broadcast what they are doing, who they are meeting with, and where in the district they are going, but few genuinely view social media as a two-way street. Rep. Griffin participates in a number of social media platforms in ways that invite—and even encourage—constituents to be involved. Through his approachable tone, open-ended questions, advance notice of radio and TV interviews, and participation in comment discussions, Rep. Griffin truly engages. He is visible and open. He lets his constituents know where he is and what he is doing through photos, vote rationales, and highlights from his work in committee. He also responds directly to questions about policy and votes through private messages in Facebook and his Crowdhall account, tools few Members are using. Rep. Griffin's social media are models for interacting with constituents in an approachable and authentic way.

Platform: Several, including Facebook, Crowdhall, and Pinterest

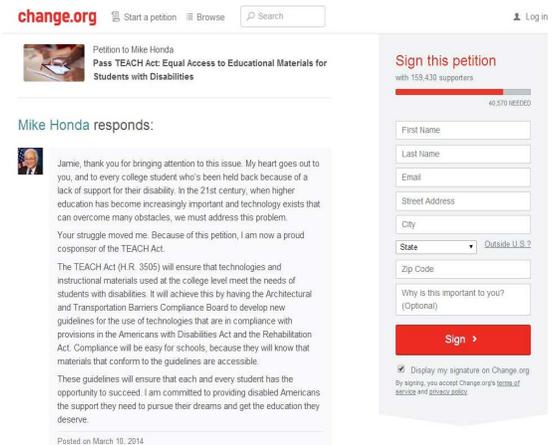


Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA)

Constituent-focused social media efforts.

Rep. Honda is the only Member who has won an award from CMF in every evaluation since the Gold Mouse Awards were founded in 2002. His social media efforts are a model for accountability, transparency, and constituent service in Congress. He even offers an explanation to his approach to constituents (<http://honda.house.gov/social-media>), which also serves as a valuable guide to other legislators. The practice recognized here is his sustained constituent focus on social media. Rather than trying to create content that he hopes will go viral nationally, Rep. Honda focuses on social media practices to inform and engage as many of his constituents as possible. He conducts outreach via paper and email inviting constituents to connect with him online. He crowdsourced the design of his website. He uses telephone townhalls integrated with Facebook to respond to constituent questions. He uses Eventbrite—a social-media-connected event management system—to organize in-person events in his district. He released a constituent-focused 2013 annual report on Scribd and as an iTunes iBook. And he uses his position as a Change.org Decision Maker to respond to petitions that gain significant traction among his constituents.

Platform: Several, including Change.org, Eventbrite, and Scribd



Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA)

Connecting past and present using social media.

In the 112th Congress, Rep. Issa pioneered legislative crowdsourcing through his Madison project, which gave citizens the ability to weigh in on—and even edit—drafts of legislation related to the Internet. He continues to provide a general model for effective and accountable use of social media. He has found an authoritative tone that leaves room for humor, and his posts weave past and present together in ways that help remind followers of the history that shaped the country we are today. One of the ways he does this is through his Throwback Thursday photos and hashtag. Each Thursday, Rep. Issa joins in on a Twitterverse meme using the hashtag #tbt by posting old photos of himself. Many of the photos relate to his past public service in Congress and the Army, which help demonstrate his long history working for the people. He also brings past and present together with posts about certain days in history and by commemorating events and people in the past. Of course, he also comments regularly on issues, events, and political activities in the present, and, in this way, he provides context and a sense of connection that helps to put things into perspective.

Platform: Facebook and Twitter



Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA)

Using social media to “caucus” with other Members.

Increasing numbers of Senators and Representatives are using social media to connect with constituents, the public, and thought leaders. Few have tried using them to connect and coordinate with other Senators and Representatives, something Rep. Lee did with great success around the hashtag #SNAPchallenge. In June 2013, Rep. Lee engaged more than 30 Members of Congress to take up the challenge to eat for a week on \$4.50 per day—the average amount recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program received. Through graphics, posts, and outreach online and offline, she encouraged Members and citizens alike to post photos of and comments about their meals and experiences. Through the involvement of so many Members, they demonstrated coordinated leadership and shared resources in ways that broadened the outreach and impact on the issue far beyond what would have been possible via mainstream media alone. They made the issue more understandable and used social media as they are meant to be used.

Platform: Facebook and Twitter

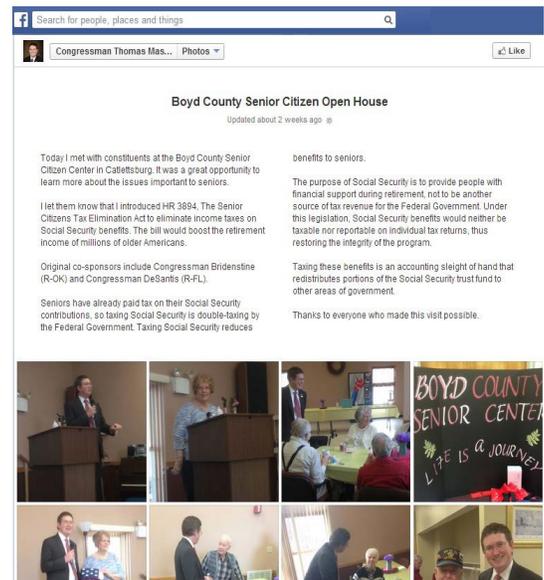


Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY)

Accountability and transparency through social media.

It is clear from his Facebook and Twitter posts that Rep. Massie takes his representational duties seriously. Their tone and content throughout his tenure have demonstrated his sense of accountability to constituents. In addition to expressing his views on both national issues and issues important to him, personally—as many Members do on social media—he also provides occasional rationales for key votes to help explain his actions to his constituents. When working in the district, he posts the towns he'll be visiting, along with photos and summaries of his meetings to help constituents understand the work he does when the House is in recess. Rep. Massie also engages constituents in his work by inviting them to send questions during his media appearances and even when he is participating in committee hearings. Many posts also ask questions to invite opinions and feedback, and these generate significant comments and discussion in which he often participates. In these and other ways, Rep. Massie uses social media to demonstrate accountability and transparency.

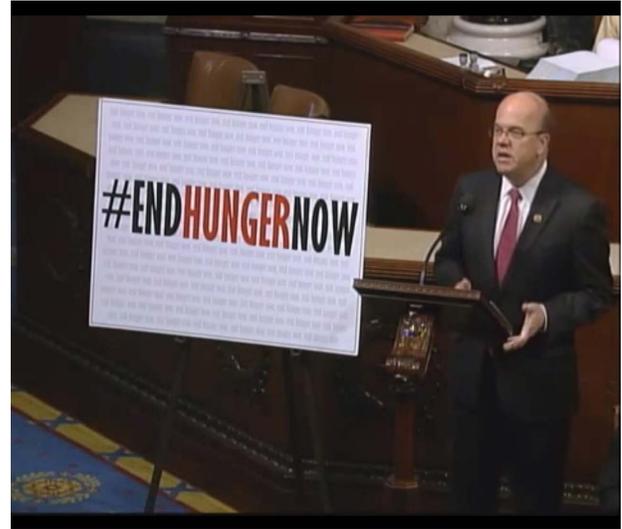
Platform: Facebook and Twitter



Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA)

Sustained, issue-based, cross-platform integration.

Rep. McGovern engages constituents on social media through coordinated efforts and open, sustained dialogues on complicated issues that might otherwise be seen as too daunting to tackle. Take, for example, his use of the #EndHungerNow hashtag. Rep. McGovern has always been active on issues related to combating hunger, and he has integrated social media into his communications strategy in ways that broaden his message. His office has been conducting a long-term, integrated messaging campaign around the hashtag they created in an effort to bring attention to cuts in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The campaign, which has extended beyond the SNAP debate, is integrated across online and offline platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, their website, and floor speeches, and has drawn the attention and engagement of constituents, media, Senators and Representatives, celebrities, and citizens nationwide.

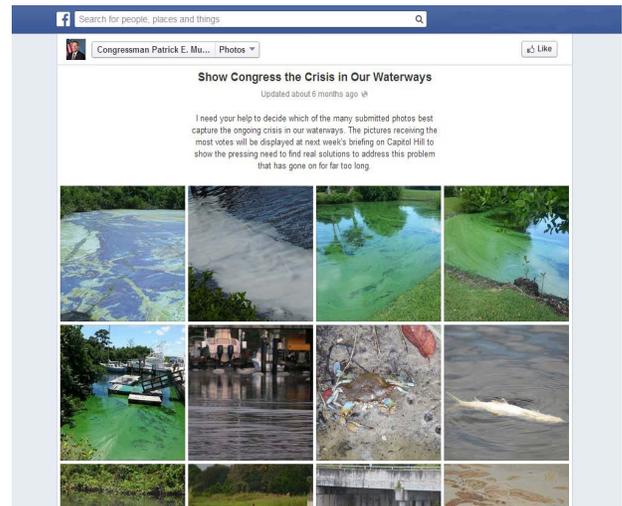


Platform: Several, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit

Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-FL)

Photo contest with a legislative purpose.

Members of Congress frequently use photo contests to engage citizens and bolster their followers, but seldom do the contests have legislative purpose. Rather than requesting photos of district sights or sunsets, Rep. Murphy called for photos of pollution. He turned to Facebook to “show Congress the crisis in our waterways” to draw attention to the need to clean up polluted south Florida waterways. The photo contest was part of a coordinated online and offline effort to urge Congress to fund the completion of an Army Corps of Engineers Everglades restoration project and pass the House Water Resources Reform and Development Act. Through the photo contest and through his continued efforts on Facebook, Rep. Murphy was able to keep people informed of and engaged in his activities on the issue. His efforts also helped to encourage dozens of constituents come to Washington, D.C. by bus during the government shutdown to attend a bipartisan congressional briefing he hosted on the topic.



Platform: Facebook

Rep. Erik Paulsen (R-MN)

Weekly videos with updates and answers to constituent questions.

CMF examined many examples of videos of Members answering constituent questions, but Rep. Paulsen's stood out. Since 2011, Rep. Paulsen has been producing a YouTube video series entitled "Erik's Correspondence Corner" on a near-weekly basis. In these videos he provides brief updates on his activities and responds to constituents' letters and emails. Apart from the frequency and longevity, what sets them apart are their tone and the settings. The correspondence addressed does not feel specifically chosen to allow Rep. Paulsen to advance his agenda or emphasize party talking points. In some cases, he even replies to correspondence from people who disagree with him, and all responses are presented thoughtfully and respectfully, which makes him seem more accountable than self-promotional. The settings are always interesting, as well, with backdrops throughout his office, his office building, the Capitol, and his district, which give the videos added interest and a behind-the-scenes look at where and how a Member of Congress works.

Platform: YouTube



Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA)

Using popular culture as tie-ins to congressional activity.

Rep. Takano is known for his slightly irreverent, but on-point use of social media to explain and draw attention to congressional activity. Some of his earliest social media activities in Congress were six-second Vine videos of him walking to his first debate on the House floor and to cast his first vote. These were behind-the-scenes looks at places few people ever see, such as the underground tunnels and Members-only subway between the House buildings and the Capitol. Some of his best posts, however, are those in which he references popular TV shows, trending news stories, and Internet memes to connect congressional activity with popular culture. Rep. Takano engages, informs, and incites discussions through his use of comic-style graphics in YouTube videos explaining immigration reform and the debt ceiling; his frequent references to TV shows such as *Star Trek* and *Breaking Bad*; and his use of congressional information, such as stills from floor speeches and a letter from another Member, as the basis for pointed humor and new memes. These tactics may appear superficial and merely "audience-pleasing," but when a public official uses a popular culture reference the audience *instantly* understands the connection between public policy and real life (even though fiction is used to make the connection).

Platform: Several, including Tumblr, YouTube, and Vine



Methodology

WEBSITE AWARDS

Developing the Criteria

Since 2001, CMF has conducted extensive research into what constitutes an effective congressional website, including: focus groups with constituents; interviews with Members of Congress and with managerial, legislative, administrative, support, and technical staff from the House and Senate; reviews of industry research; interviews with technology experts and representatives of social media companies; surveys of political reporters and advocacy groups; and in-depth evaluations of past and present congressional websites.

Using this research, CMF has developed extensive criteria for our website evaluations, and prior to each award year, the criteria are updated and refined to reflect current and evolving technology and practice standards. For the 113th Congress Awards, CMF used 74 criteria in 10 categories for Member websites, and up to 61 criteria in six categories for committee websites. These criteria are discussed in detail in “Characteristics of Effective Member Websites” (page 30) and “Characteristics of Effective Committee Websites” (page 50).

Conducting the Evaluations

After identifying the criteria for the evaluations, CMF organized the criteria into rounds that prioritized the most critical criteria. Member websites were evaluated in three rounds, whereas committee websites were evaluated in two rounds. For both Members and committees, the first round of evaluation placed 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.

To ensure fairness and accuracy, CMF researchers were trained extensively for each round to ensure that they assessed the website and judged each criterion reliably—especially the qualitative ones. The training included everything from ensuring that all evaluators used the same browser to ensuring that all evaluators consistently judged the difference between a “4” rating and a “5” rating. For every round, each researcher

received a randomly generated list of websites and evaluated them in that order. Evaluators used customized forms for each round that included detailed descriptions of the criteria in that round and guidance on how to evaluate the criteria consistently. Qualitative criteria—those that rated how well the website did something—were coded on a “1” (low) to “5” (high) scale. Quantitative criteria—those that noted whether or not a website had a particular feature or specific content (such as a list of co-sponsorships)—were coded as either present (“1”) or absent (“0”). For quality assurance, their work was reviewed by senior CMF staff.

Member Websites

Round 1. For their first round, Member websites were required to meet a minimum threshold for accountability and transparency, as well as for constituent service. For transparency and accountability, a website was judged on the extent to which it provided information on major national issues and whether it included information on the Member’s voting record or explanations of the Member’s votes on key pieces of legislation. In other words: to what extent could a constituent visiting the website determine the Member’s position, activity, and record on major national issues? For constituent service, Member websites were judged on the extent to which the websites helped constituents get answers to their questions and help with problems regarding federal agencies (also known as casework). Of the 537 Member websites⁷, 58% (312) were eliminated from contention in the first round, and 42% (225) advanced to the second round.

Round 2. The second round of Member website evaluations focused on usability. Websites were scored from “1” (low) to “5” (high) on their navigation, organization, look and feel, readability, and timeliness. To ensure that websites with older, but more comprehensive information were given a fair evaluation, usability averages were calculated with and without the timeliness score. Any website scoring above average (higher than a “3.00”) on either score proceeded to the third and final round for evaluation. Of the 225 websites evaluated in the second round, 26% (58) were eliminated from contention, and 74% (167) advanced to the third round. These 167 websites represent 31% of all Member websites.

Round 3. The websites that made it to the third and final round were subjected to all the remaining criteria. Of the 167 websites evaluated in the third round, 62% (103) were eliminated from contention following the final scoring (detailed in the next section), and 38% (64) were recognized with Gold, Silver, or Bronze Mouse Awards. These 64 websites represent 12% of all Member websites.

Timeframe. Member websites were evaluated between September 30 and December 20, 2013.

⁷ 100 Senate Member websites and 437 House Member websites. There were four vacancies in the House of Representatives at the time of our evaluations.

FIGURE 13. ELIMINATION OF MEMBER WEBSITES THROUGH EVALUATION ROUNDS AND SCORING



Committee Websites

For the 113th Congress, CMF did not evaluate minority committee websites. Previously, minority committee websites were evaluated using the same criteria as majority websites, but weighting them differently in the final scoring formula. This year CMF modified the evaluation process for all websites to place greater emphasis on accountability and transparency. In doing so, it became clear that because the minority is not responsible by law, rules, or statutes to produce any specific official documents, it is more difficult to apply this modified emphasis to minority websites independently of the majority websites.

Round 1. All standing committees were evaluated in Round 1, using the links provided via House.gov and Senate.gov. For committees that maintain separate majority and minority websites, only the majority website was evaluated. In Round 1, committee websites were judged on key aspects of committee accountability and transparency, focusing primarily on hearings and legislation. Could a visitor to the website access the legislation that had been assigned to the committee, as well as information about upcoming and past hearings? All committees that provided either a complete list of the bills assigned to the committee or hearing transcripts within one month of the hearing, as well as all committees that do not consider legislation and/or conduct hearings, were advanced to Round 2. Of the 43 committee websites evaluated, 15 went on to Round 2.

Round 2. The websites that made it to the second round were subjected to all remaining criteria. Of the 15 evaluated in the second round, nine were eliminated from contention following the final scoring (detailed in the next section) and six were awarded Gold, Silver, or Bronze Mouse Awards.

Timeframe. Committee websites were evaluated between January 22 and February 10, 2014.

Scoring the Websites

Member Websites

Once the Member website evaluations were complete, the data for the 167 websites in the final round were scored. All 74 criteria were given weights from “1” (low) to “10” (high) that corresponded to their importance and level of difficulty. Criteria were then grouped into 10 broad categories and, using the assigned weights for each criterion, scores were calculated for each category. These category scores were then used to calculate a preliminary overall score, using a formula that placed greater emphasis on categories related to transparency and accountability. The 10 criteria categories and a condensed version of the scoring formula are shown in Figure 14. Final overall scores were then calculated by sorting the websites by chamber and scoring on a curve. Awards were given to websites scoring 80 or higher as shown in Figure 16.

FIGURE 14. CRITERIA CATEGORIES AND SCORING FORMULA FOR MEMBER WEBSITES	
35% =	Information on Issues
	Demonstrations of Accountability
	Information on the Legislative Process
25% =	Assistance with Federal Agencies/Casework
	Constituent Services
	District/State Information
25% =	Usability
	Timeliness
15% =	Diversity of Communications Channels
	Diversity of Communications Content

Committee Websites

Committee websites were subjected to a similar, but slightly different scoring process than the Member websites. Committee websites were divided into classes based on their primary audiences and scores were weighted based on the information their audiences would expect. Additionally, committee formulas were customized so that committee websites were scored only for criteria that applied to them. For example, for committees without subcommittees, criteria relating to subcommittee information were removed from their calculations.

To calculate the scores of the committee websites, first each criterion was weighted according to its importance and level of difficulty, from “1” (low) to “10” (high). Next, criteria were grouped into six categories, and scores were calculated for each category using the assigned weights for each criterion. These category scores were then used to calculate a preliminary overall score, using a formula that placed greater emphasis on categories relating to furthering transparency and accountability in government. The six criteria categories and their importance in the scoring formula is shown in Figure 15. As with the Member websites, preliminary scores were adjusted on a curve, and websites scoring 80 or higher received awards as shown in Figure 16.

FIGURE 15. CRITERIA CATEGORIES AND SCORING FORMULA FOR COMMITTEE WEBSITES	
30% =	Information about What the Committee Does and How it Works
20% =	Timeliness and Usability
15% =	Demonstrations of Accountability
15% =	Information Targeted to the Committee’s Audiences
10% =	Interactivity
10% =	Diversity of Communications Channels

FIGURE 16. WEBSITE AWARD LEVELS BY FINAL SCORE	
Final Score	Award Level
93-100	Gold Mouse
87-92	Silver Mouse
80-86	Bronze Mouse

SOCIAL MEDIA AWARDS

Like the website awards, the Gold Mouse Awards for Social Media focus heavily on transparency, accountability, and constituent service. Rather than centering on the platforms Member are using—such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—CMF’s awards for social media emphasize *specific* practices, regardless of the platform used, that:

- 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.

The awards for social media do not necessarily go to the Senators and Representatives who are using the most social media platforms; have the most followers; are getting the most media attention; or are most prolific on social media.

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 offices to nominate themselves to be considered for the 113th Congress Gold Mouse Social Media Awards. The nominating form asked Member offices about their innovative use of social media, its impact, and how their use of social media set them apart from their colleagues. Nominations were limited to Members’ personal offices for social media use in the 113th Congress.

Nominations for social media awards were accepted between October 16 and December 2, 2013. CMF staff reviewed the 85 submissions received from House and Senate offices, and sent the 35 most innovative and congressionally-focused practices on to an expert panel review. The expert panel was 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 follow the guidelines above. Biographies of the expert panelists are in alphabetical order below.

Jack Holt

Jack Holt is a recognized leader in successfully formulating, implementing, and managing communication programs for very large organizations including both the Department of Defense and the U.S. Federal Government. He created, developed, and produced the DoD Bloggers Roundtable and DoDLive web communication concept, co-authored the OSD policy memorandum DTM 09-026 for the Responsible and Effective Use of Internet-based Capabilities, and is co-founder of the DoD All Services Social Media Council.

Jack has more than 20 years communication policy development and application experience, teaches at the graduate level, consults, and collaborates on how to effectively use the new and emerging media in meeting business needs including improving customer relationships, implementing change management and developing innovative organizational environments. He has more than fifteen years direct experience as a leader, coach, teacher and mentor in policy analysis and development, communication and business strategy development, organizational design, knowledge management, and workforce training and development.

Currently, Jack is the Director for Policy Analysis for Blue Ridge Information Systems and adjunct lecturer at Georgetown University in the Master of Professional Studies in Technology Management Program. He has taught sessions on Communication, Journalism, and New Media strategies and tactics at the Defense Information School, the Navl Postgraduate School, and the NATO School.

Rob Pierson

Rob Pierson has been an integral force in driving innovation in Congress. As New Media Director for the House Democratic Caucus, he trained Members of Congress and their staff in social media best practices and helped develop an intranet to improve the coordination of Democratic messaging and outreach. In addition to the strategic role he's played, he also pushed the technology envelope in Congress, leading the development of the first public Drupal website within the House of Representatives, a project so successful that it led to Drupal being instituted as the default content management system for newly elected Members of Congress.

In addition to working in House Leadership, Rob has also worked for Congressman Mike Honda, who represents Silicon Valley. As Congressman Honda's Online Communication Director, Rob established several innovative practices that earned his office more Gold Mouse Awards than any other office in Congress. In addition, he also collaborated with the Sunlight Foundation to create a bipartisan, bicameral working group of staffers dedicated to improving political transparency and offering legislative data and APIs to provide the public.

Rob currently provides online marketing and data analysis services, and can be reached at @robpierson.

Nick Schaper

For over a decade, Nick Schaper has been driving innovation at the intersection of technology and public affairs. As the first-ever director of digital media for the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nick led a team that the Tampa Bay Times and Politifact.com said “dominated Twitter, YouTube, and other social media in Congress.” During his tenure, Nick’s team earned a 111th Congress Gold Mouse Award for having one of the best leadership websites in Congress. In 2011, after four years with Speaker Boehner, Nick joined the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and was named to Washingtonian Magazine’s Tech Titans list of the most influential technology professionals in the nation’s capital.

A graduate of the University of Central Florida, Nick joined Engage in 2013 and serves as Senior Vice President. At Engage, Nick draws on his extensive experience in government and corporate public affairs to deliver innovative solutions to challenges facing top advocacy organizations, Fortune 500 companies, and elected officials. He can be reached @nickschaper.

Scott Talan

Scott Talan is a full-time professor of Public Communication at American University, where he teaches social media. He started using social sites in class as early as 2006, with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and continues to incorporate the latest tools as makes sense for his teaching. Scott has worked in media, PR, and communications in four distinct fields: TV News, Politics, Nonprofits, and Higher Education. He worked at the United Nations, Harvard University, and the New Mexico Legislature, and recently served as the Director of Communications for the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs.

Scott has worked as a writer at ABC News Good Morning America. He’s also reported on-air for local TV news stations in several states (Florida, New Mexico, California) covering politics including the 2000 presidential recount story. Before news, Scott was as an elected city council member and Mayor of Lafayette, California. His first career was in nonprofit communications working for the March of Dimes.

Scott received his Master in Public Administration from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and studied broadcast journalism at Stanford after getting his BA from the University of California at Davis. Prior to joining American University, he was an adjunct faculty member at George Washington and Johns Hopkins. He can be reached @talan.

About the Gold Mouse Awards

Since 2001, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) has assessed the quality of congressional websites and recognized the best with Gold Mouse Awards. Through partnerships with foundations and academic institutions across the country, the project has resulted in extensive research, focus groups, training programs, briefings, individual consultations, and reports to accomplish the goals of the project, which are to:

- Determine how Members of Congress can use the Internet to enhance communication with citizens and promote citizen engagement; and
- Identify best and innovative practices for online communications and technology use that can be more widely adopted by congressional offices and help Congress function more effectively.

The project began as a two-year program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted jointly by CMF and The George Washington University’s Graduate School of Political Management as the “Congress Online Project.” It resulted in two sets of awards and reports, published in 2002 and 2003.

The Gold Mouse Awards continued as part of the broader research project “Connecting to Congress,” which was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation’s (NSF)

FIGURE 17. GOLD MOUSE AWARDS AND REPORTS

January 2002	“Congress Online: Assessing and Improving Capitol Hill Websites”
March 2003	“Congress Online 2003: Turning the Corner on the Information Age”
February 2007	“2006 Gold Mouse Report: Recognizing the Best Websites on Capitol Hill”
January 2008	“2007 Gold Mouse Report: Lessons from the Best Websites on Capitol Hill”
April 2010	“111 th Congress Gold Mouse Project”
October 2011	“112 th Congress Gold Mouse Awards: Best Practices in Online Communications on Capitol Hill”
April 2014	“113 th Congress Gold Mouse Awards: Best Practices in Online Communications on Capitol Hill”

Digital Government program, and conducted in partnership with the Harvard Kennedy School, University of California-Riverside, and The Ohio State University. It also resulted in two sets of awards and reports, published in 2007 and 2008.

Currently, CMF continues our partnership with our academic researchers, but with the project funded through private donations and with the best websites being recognized every Congress. This approach has resulted in three sets of awards and reports for the 111th, 112th, and 113th Congresses. Additionally, the 113th Congress report marks the first time that CMF has included awards for social media practices. These awards recognize the specific strategies of Members who use social media to further transparency, accountability, and constituent service.

Acknowledgments

Reviewing more than 600 congressional websites for the Gold Mouse Awards is a daunting task. Also reviewing the social media practices of more than 80 Members of Congress, some of which required accessing several platforms, makes the effort put forth by our team even more incredible. The 113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards could not have been accomplished without an extraordinary amount of dedication and hard work from many people, and CMF thanks every member of the team who contributed their enthusiasm, knowledge, and professionalism to make this project a success.

First, CMF extends its gratitude to everyone who conducted website evaluations and/or reviewed social media submissions: Zainab Badi, Woody Campbell, Nicole Folk Cooper, Kathy Goldschmidt, Susie Gorden, Liliana Lopez, Hector Morales, James Vaughn, and Elizabeth Wright. The efforts of this team could not be overstated and we are deeply appreciative of their contributions. We also thank research assistants Eddie Hamm, David Schutt, and David Trigaux for their assistance with this project.

CMF also expresses its appreciation to: Collin Burden, whose insight and answers to countless questions were instrumental in guiding our approach; Bradford Fitch, whose input and unparalleled enthusiasm were essential throughout the project, and whose thinking and writing greatly contributed to this report; Kathy Goldschmidt, whose critical thinking, masterful writing, and trademark willingness to go above and beyond what was required kept the project moving forward; and Susanne Fitch, whose editing and proofreading skills brought a fresh perspective to this report. We also thank Bill Black and Greg Fisk of Fleishman-Hillard for their assistance in collaborating on new icons and branding for the awards.

CMF thanks our academic partners—Dr. David Lazer (Northeastern University), Dr. Michael Neblo (The Ohio State University), and Dr. Kevin Esterling (the University of California–Riverside)—for their long-term support, guidance, and commitment to this project. In particular, we are grateful for the time and advice given by Dr. Esterling, whose assistance was invaluable as we revised our process for the 113th Congress. CMF also thanks Homero Garza, Rama Halaseh, Kerry Hobson, Kendall Reed, Emily Ruddock, and Dr. Ines Mergel at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University for their exemplary social media research.

Kicking off a new awards category is no small feat, and CMF is indebted to the expert panelists who contributed their communications and technology expertise to reviewing the social media finalists: Jack Holt, Rob Pierson, Nick Schaper, and Scott Talan. Each of these panelists brought a unique and helpful perspective to CMF's first-ever social media awards and we are grateful for their comments and time.

Throughout the history of the Gold Mouse Awards, CMF has been fortunate to have the support of congressional staff, and to be able to draw upon the expertise of institutional, leadership, committee, and personal office staff. We thank the staff of the Chief Administrative Officer, the Committee on House Administration, the Congressional Research Service, the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, and the Senate Sergeant at Arms, especially Richard Capito, Elliot Chabot, John Clocker, George Hadijski, Jennifer Maas, and Judy Schneider. Numerous staff associations, individual staffers, and vendors helped CMF communicate updates on the Gold Mouse Awards to the broader congressional community and we thank them for their efforts as well.

CMF also expresses its gratitude to the project manager for the 113th Congress Gold Mouse Awards, CMF's Director of Research and Publications, Nicole Folk Cooper. Nicole was hired by CMF in late 2000, and has worked on every Gold Mouse Award report during her 14-year tenure. Her expertise, dedication, and institutional knowledge continue to be instrumental to the success of this project.

Finally, CMF gratefully acknowledges the contributions of our sponsors whose support made this research possible: **BIPAC**; **Lockheed Martin Desktop Solutions, Inc.**; **National Write Your Congressman**; and **Shoutpoint**.

About the Congressional Management Foundation

Who We Are

Citizen trust in an effective and responsive Congress is essential to democracy. The Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) advances this goal by working directly with Members of Congress and staff to enhance their operations and interactions with constituents. CMF works directly with citizen groups to educate them on how Congress works, giving constituents a stronger voice in policy outcomes. The results are: a Congress more accountable, transparent, and effective; and an informed citizenry with greater trust in their democratic institutions.

What We Accomplish

CMF enhances the effectiveness of congressional offices, enabling them to provide better services for their constituents and create better policy outcomes for all Americans.

CMF promotes transparency and accountability in Congress, affording citizens data and tools to become more informed about decisions that affect them, their families, and communities.

CMF educates and motivates individuals to become active and informed citizen-advocates, providing them with an understanding of Congress, the skills to influence public policy, and the value of citizen engagement.

CMF enhances the public's understanding of how the Congress *really* works, providing a window into our democratic institutions through its unique relationship with lawmakers and staff.

How We Do It

CMF conducts professional development training for all levels of congressional staff on office operations and management. These interactive sessions provide bipartisan "safe havens" on Capitol Hill where congressional staff come together to engage in problem-solving.

CMF provides research, training, and publications to citizens and groups that interact with Congress. CMF's citizen-advocate trainings are conducted for citizens who

participate in visits with Members of Congress organized by trade associations, nonprofits, and corporations.

CMF acts as the critic, defender, and explainer of Congress—demystifying congressional operations. Its work has been cited in many media outlets including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and major television networks.

CMF conducts primary research on Congress and provides best practices guidance on office operations. CMF's most prominent research program—the Gold Mouse Awards for the best congressional websites—is responsible for significant improvements to the transparency and accountability in congressional offices.

CMF consults with individual House and Senate offices to strengthen their operations. This work entails spending weeks with a Member of Congress and staff, culminating in an intensive strategic planning session to help each office develop goals and plans to meet the needs of its constituents.

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