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Congressional Institute Focus Group Findings
Congressional websites & e-newsletters

"I love [my Senator]. I mean I <u>love</u> the man. And I was very disappointed that his website was so poor, because if you didn't know [my Senator], and maybe you wanted to see what [he] was like, you would look at this and go, 'Oh my gosh.'…. Unfortunately his website does not do him justice. I was just appalled… Those of us who love him, we'll go, 'Oh well. Great man, lousy website.' But for people who…don't know him, his website does not encourage love and gratitude."

<div align="right">--Susan, 54, Republican</div>

Executive Summary

Members of Congress are missing out on opportunities to communicate and convince. Their websites and newsletters fall far short of where they could be. Members should be using the web to present their positions on issues and their reasons for important votes. With few exceptions, they are not.

Previous studies, conducted by others, asked constituents their preferences in websites, and produced grades and rankings for existing websites. We went beyond these studies, and produced a prototype website based on constituent preferences. Those preferences were described by the earlier studies and confirmed in the first round of our own research.

Furthermore, Members can be doing a better job of using their e-mail newsletters to inform their constituents about issues and legislation. We produced two sample newsletters.

We showed all these materials to groups of habitual voters in Iowa and Texas, along with examples of the best current websites and newsletters. Our primary finding: Constituents crave clear, well-organized websites that give them information on issues and on voting record. And they want newsletters that inform them about the actions Congress is taking.

Constituents go to a legislator's website to find a specific piece of information, and you need to make it easy for them to find it. If something is difficult to find, they will assume that it is not available.

Even worse, if a Member's position on an issue is not available, the assumption is that someone is trying to hide their positions. The same holds true for important votes.
Sandra 65, R, TX: "They don't want you to know how they vote!"

If you do not clearly communicate your position, then one of two things will happen. Either the citizen will find someone else who will—and thus you lose control over your image—or, more likely, the citizen will give up and just assume the worst about you.

But if you <u>do</u> clearly communicate, then exciting possibilities beckon—the un-tapped potential to get your message heard, unfiltered by the media, through your website and e-mail newsletter. The technology is mature and the audience is waiting.

The price you have to pay: Give them the information they want.
The potential reward: More people who love you. **Priceless.**

Website Dos and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Give them what they are looking for, there on your site.	Don't push them off to other sites, when they look for vital information about you and your positions.
Highlight your stand on issues, and your voting record.	Don't make it hard for them to find. Don't hold back from telling them where you stand. On your site, you get to give your version of the story. If they cannot find it on your site, likely they <u>will</u> search the web, and will find someone else's account of your positions and your record.
Do keep control of your message.	Don't allow others to define you in the online world.
Declutter. Most Congressional websites have <u>far</u> too much on the home page.	Don't force the citizen to: Sort through a lot of options. Learn your jargon.
But remember to make it easy to find the items that one-time users will be looking for: Capitol tickets, grants, internships, etc.	Don't ignore the needs of the one-time visitor who has a narrow goal in mind. Did you serve them, or did they feel like they got a run-around?
Provide a good search function. Over half of all web visitors prefer to navigate via site search.	Don't provide the option of searching the whole web; this just confuses matters.
Do consider making use of the excellent Google "mini search appliance."	Don't turn the job over to the free service possible with Yahoo and Google, which allow you to restrict search to a particular site. That service is paid for by sponsored ads, which produces unintended bad consequences.

Newsletter Dos and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
Cover multiple topics in the newsletter.	Don't make the newsletter more than four printed pages.
Give them a table of contents.	Don't make them look through the entire newsletter for the one thing that they are interested in.
Make use of graphics (but provide option for text only version, for those with slower connections).	Don't burden newsletter with pictures of visits with constituents, or meetings with famous politicians.
Give the highlights of a story in the newsletter, and provide a link for more details on your website.	Try to cram too much into the newsletter.
Provide multiple ways for them to "talk back."	Don't ask survey questions that can produce embarrassing results.
Inform your constituents—include "guest articles" from experts and from locals.	Let it be boring, or mired in technical legislative language
Let them know how to reach you, both in person and by phone/e-mail	Make them feel you're hard to contact or meet with.

Methodology

The recommendations in this report are based on research with constituents, along with expert opinion. But even better, we took our results back out to the citizens, and the recommendations were verified and refined.

Congressional websites and newsletters have been studied before. They have been critiqued and ranked and given awards. The study reported here took the process to the next level.

First, as in past studies, we developed a set of recommendations for Congressional websites based on the field research. And then we took the logical (and yet revolutionary) step of **testing** our recommendations.

For that second stage, we put ourselves in the role of Congressional staff for a mythical Member, and created a prototype website that was based on our own recommendations. We then had citizens evaluate our creation, side-by-side with the existing sites.

We went through the same process with e-mail newsletters: develop recommendations, create samples based on recommendations, and test those samples. We created two sample newsletters, which were evaluated along with five existing newsletters.

In summary, the recommendations in this report have been refined and verified through research with constituents. As a result, you can immediately and confidently apply them to your own constituent communications.

Viewing prototype website

The prototype site we built is that of a non-existent Congressman Tom Smith, from the fictional 10th District of Missouri. Due to time constraints—only three weeks from initial design to final implementation—the site is incomplete and has several dead links. But it was complete enough for our research purposes.

To look at the Tom Smith site, use the link below:
> http://www.presentationtesting.com/congress/

The site is password protected, not because of security concerns, but just to prevent it from showing up in Google and Yahoo web searches. We did not want to see praises or denunciations of "Tom Smith" showing up in the "blogosphere."

When you try to access this prototype site, you will be prompted for user name and password. Both are case-sensitive, and must be typed in ALL CAPS with no spaces.

Please type in DIGITALCOMMUNICATIONS and INSTITUTE, as illustrated below.
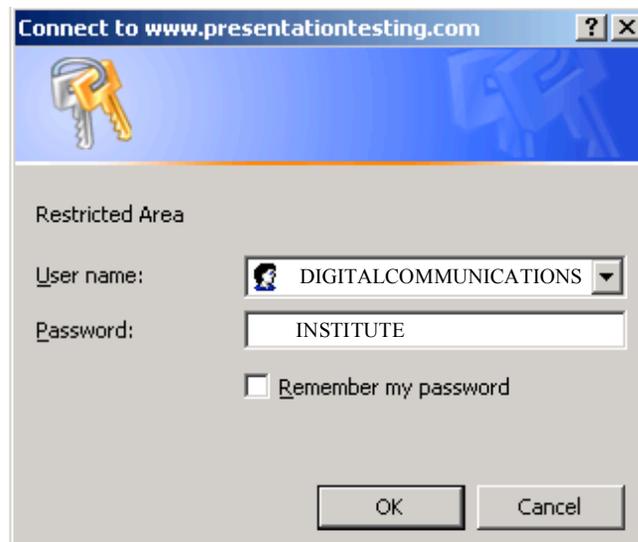
Sample newsletters

The two sample newsletters are attached to this report as PDF files. The longer one is for a mythical Congresswoman, Naomi Caison. The shorter one, which was rejected by constituents, is for nonexistent Congressman Steve Tyndell.

Detailed Website Findings and Recommendations

1. Finding: Keep it short and simple

The participants in our study responded very well to a carefully pared-down design. They were enthusiastic about the prototype site that we built for "Tom Smith." They uniformly described it as easy to use, well-organized, and clear. Tom Smith got the highest rating when we asked participants to rate the overall usefulness of four different home pages on a 0 to 10 scale, where higher is better. (The other three were all awarded the Golden Mouse award in 2003, the most recent results available. Awards for 2006 are due to be announced soon.)

Overall Usefulness of Home page	
D- Golden Mouse award winner	4.6
R- Golden Mouse award winner	6.0
R- Golden Mouse award winner	6.5
Tom Smith	**7.8**

Sandra, Moderate, 32, IA: "I don't even know Tom Smith, but this is one of my favorite websites, as far as keeping it short and sweet...."

Susan, R, 51, TX: "This one [Tom Smith's] was easy to navigate and concise…[I'm] pretty satisfied."

Having less information on the home page makes the remaining items stand out. Most of the other sites were described by participants as cluttered and difficult to navigate.

However, when de-cluttering it is vital that you do not eliminate information which is specifically sought out by constituents who are making their first—and possibly only—visit to a site. Examples include travel information, grant application processes, internship information, the Congressional Arts Competition. By putting all this information under a top-level "Help with:" button, the Tom Smith site included it all, featured it prominently and made it easy to find, all without clutter.

On the other hand, some of our experiments did <u>not</u> go over well. For details, see **Appendix C: Innovations eliminated by 2nd stage**.

Recommendation:

Declutter: Most Congressional home pages contain too many items.

Each item is a choice that needs to be evaluated (quickly) by the user. Having a lot of choices on the home page to evaluate makes it difficult for the user to find the single item they are looking for. That decision-making process is especially daunting for a first-time user.

Instead, the home page should provide well-labeled links to three categories of items:
1. The most frequently requested items: Issues and votes.
2. Items sought by one-time visitors: Help with grants, tickets, agencies, etc.
3. Contact info for the Member.

See the next three finding for details on the frequently requested items.

2. Constituents want to know your stand on the issues

Rather than focusing on issues, the home page of most Members prominently features something called "News."

This is a waste of precious real-estate and a disservice to the citizens who visit the site. They go to a Legislator's site to find out how that Legislator voted, read what position the Legislator takes on an issue, or to give the Legislator a piece of their mind. No one goes to a Member's website for news about a bridge dedication—except perhaps those who were actually there and want to see a photo of themselves.

In both rounds of research, we asked participants to recollect their past behavior—who had visited legislator websites and what had they been seeking. Every person who recalled visiting a site was looking for one of four things:

> --legislator's stand on an issue
> --legislator's voting record
> --help with a problem
> --how to contact the legislator

In the first round, we had asked participants to brainstorm about what should be on a Member's website. In the second round, we asked them to rate the importance of 18 items, and brainstorm more of them. We ended up with 36 ranked items.

The top five items are all about issues and votes. Most of the websites of federal legislators, even the past Golden Mouse award winners, do a poor job presenting this information. Both issues and voting record are buried, or sketchy, or completely missing.

Instead, the items emphasized by most websites are news items and press releases, which were ranked at #18 and #33 (out of 36) by our participants. For the complete list see **Appendix B: List of Key Items for a** Legislator's Website, on page 23.

Rank	How important is it that a legislator's website include:	Rating
1	Legislator's stand on the issues	9.8
1	Details of why. The philosophy behind their position.	9.8
3	The details of the Legislator's voting record.	9.7
4	The Legislator's reasons for voting the way that he did.	9.5
5	Legislator's thoughts about legislation that will soon be coming up for votes.	9.4
18	News of recent activities by the Legislator.	7.8
33	Press releases from the Legislator's office.	6.0

Recommendation

We strongly recommend featuring a half-dozen "hot topic" issues on your home page, rather than news items. These topics should be the leading issues concerning the constituents, be they global, national, regional or local. The issues should be periodically updated, to reflect the items that are in the news or on your constituents' minds.

For the Tom Smith home page, we featured the first two paragraphs of a single hot topic, along with the titles of four other hot button issues.

http://www.presentationtesting.com/congress/

There are other reasonable approaches that can keep a site un-cluttered and easy to navigate.

Meanwhile, a top-level "Help with:" button was universally recognized as the place to go for what is commonly labeled "constituent services", including case work, tickets, internships, etc.

3. They want to know how you voted—and why

We asked focus group participants to compare several different approaches to the voting records, and to judge their usefulness.

Many Members simply send you over to Thomas, which has a difficult interface and forces you to hunt through reams of information, including many proposed bills that never made it to a vote.

> Ronald, R, 60+, TX: "If you are not computer savvy, you can't go to these websites."

Worst of all, even if on Thomas you manage to find out how someone voted, you are no closer to finding out why.

The focus group participants gave the highest rating to the narrative approach which we took in the Tom Smith prototype—and we only covered three bills:
http://www.presentationtesting.com/congress/legislation_past.html
Here's the best example:
http://www.presentationtesting.com/congress/legislation_past_energy2005.html

Overall Usefulness of Approach to Voting Record	
Link "silently" to Thomas	2.3
Instruct on use of Thomas	3.0
Provide explicit links to Thomas, VoteSmart, & Congress.org	5.9
Provide a "Thomas-like" table showing bill language and how individual Legislator voted	6.5
The information provided by OnTheIssues	7.7
Tom Smith's approach	8.7

> Sandra, Mod., 32: "If you click on how he [Tom Smith] voted, it's three sentences, and if you wanted to know more, you could click….If you remember [the U.S. Senator's site], you had to read three paragraphs...."

Some Members might be hesitant to share the details of their voting records with the public. For the reasons why you should not hesitate, please see **5. To lose control of your message, send website visitors away**.

Recommendation

Building on what we provided on the Tom Smith site, we recommend providing three things for each **important** bill:

1. At the top, a declarative sentence of how the Member voted
2. Reason why Member voted as he did, rooted in bill's purpose
3. A plain-English explanation of what the bill aims to accomplish

For #2, provide an explicit place-marking declaration, such as "I voted for this bill because…"

In that explanation include a list of positive outcomes that are to be produced by the bill. In addition, you must include a sentence about the overall purpose. Provide both the purpose and the list, and you will leave citizens content that they understand the "why" and that you are not hiding anything from them.

Below is our best example, in its entirety, from:

http://www.presentationtesting.com/congress/legislation_past_energy2005.html

LEGISLATION > Past > Energy Policy Act of 2005

This bill became public law on August 8, 2005.

I voted in favor of it, because it moves us forward on the path to greater energy independence and more jobs for Americans.

The bill would have moved us even further by opening ANWR to drilling, but this part was eliminated by the Senate.

The bill runs to over 500 pages. My staff has created the following one paragraph summary:

> The Energy Policy Act of 2005 combats our nations growing energy problems with a comprehensive long-range policy. It provides tax incentives and loan guarantees for energy production--all sorts of energy, from the most innovative biomass to the most traditional fossil fuels. It also provides substantial incentives for conservation. The Act has hundreds of provisions, including tax credits for owners of hybrid vehicles, loan guarantees for innovative technologies that avoid greenhouse gases, subsidies for wind energy, and tax breaks for Americans who make energy conservation improvements to their homes.

You can see the entire bill, Public Law 109-58, on the Government Printing Office website.

4. Search is vitally important

No matter how wonderfully well-organized your site is, a prominent search functionality is needed. We observed example after example, in Golden Mouse award sites, where constituents were unable to find information that was on the site.

You must let constituents search your site. Include the search box on the home page, and on all sub-pages. If the search box is only on the home page, then citizens will not be able to find it when they need it. If it is not on the home page and only on the sub-pages, many users will assume from the home page that you do not provide search, and will stop looking for it. Half of all web-users will go straight to the search button when they enter a website[1], but even those who prefer to navigate like to use search on occasion. [2]

4.1. Put search box in the same place on every page. We recommend putting it in the upper left or upper right. It must be kept below any navigation bar. See **6. Make important items visible.**

4.2. Label it simply "Search."

4.3. Do not provide the ability to perform a search of the whole web from your site. That's not why citizens come to your site. Presenting that option just takes up space and forces people to make an extra decision about which option they want.

4.4. Do not farm the job out to the Google website.
Google does have an excellent search engine, and it is very easy to create a search which is restricted to your URL.[3]

However, the big problem is that the Google results created this way are "raw" Google searches. They are presented with the Google brand, and they will also display "sponsored links." This leads to two perception problems. The worse perception problem is: Sponsored links can be from organizations who are completely opposed to you on an issue. For example, a search on "abortion" will bring up a sponsored list of abortion providers. Note: "Google shall have the exclusive right to serve advertisements on any Web pages that contain the Results provided by Google."

In general, it is a bad idea to push citizens over to another site, since you lose control of the message. See: **5. To lose control of your message, send website visitors away**.

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[1] Jacob Neilsen, 1997. http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9707b.html

[2] For advice on how to implement standard web features, refer to Steve Krug's excellent and highly readable book, Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability. Page number references are to the second edition. General Search box advice: p 67.

[3] There are a number of ways to make use of Google search. The simplest way, which at least one golden mouse award winner has used, is to have Google perform a "site search." (In theory, Yahoo has a similar feature. In practice, it does not work as well.)
http://www.google.com/help/features.html#sitesearch
If Dennis Hastert's web-master were to implement this, then when the user typed "VA budget" into the search box on Dennis Hastert's site, that would be automatically turned into
"VA budget site:www.house.gov/hastert/" and handed to the Google website. The result looks exactly like a set of standard Google search results, except it shows only results from Hastert's site, along with sponsored links from the likes of Budget trucks, etc.

The other problem is also a bad one—some participants will think that you are getting money from the sponsors, or from Google.

Search options

It is possible for a non-profit organization to get Google's search functionality for free without ads and without any Google branding. However, Congressional offices do not appear to meet the basic requirement: "Any not-for-profit organization, as defined by Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3)…" And even if it did, this still might not be a good choice—the search index is only updated once a month, so *on average* any new information posted to your site will not be found by a search for two weeks.
https://services.google.com/pss_faq.html

Another option is to actually purchase Google search services—what they call their "search appliance"—the mini version.
http://www.google.com/enterprise/mini/index.html

The costs are minor, less than $2,000 per year for a site with up to 50,000 documents, which is much more than most Congressional sites hold. Some sort of group discount might be negotiable—this could be a matter for HIS to take up. As of publication date, Yahoo does not offer an equivalent service, but the online world moves rapidly. Likely there will soon be a competitor to the Google mini search appliance.

We must acknowledge that at a technical level, good search is difficult to do. Most search engines perform poorly, including those that come bundled into most website design software. But users don't care about your webmasters' headaches. They have been spoiled by the excellent search results available on Google, Yahoo, Amazon, etc.

Recommendation
Include an excellent search capability on your site.
http://www.google.com/services/websearch.html
http://searchmarketing.yahoo.com/srchsb/sse_pr.php

Search option	Cost	**Positive**/Negatives
Use raw Google or Yahoo	Free	Includes Google or Yahoo branding. Includes Google or Yahoo ads. Index updated only once a month.
Google Free Web Search	Free	Google ads **(but perhaps not branding).** Index updated only once a month.
Google Public Service Search	Free	**No Google ads or branding**—but only available to 501(c)(3) organizations. Index updated only once a month.
Yahoo 'Search Submit Express'	Per click	**Updated every 48 hours.** Pricing per click could become very expensive.
Google mini search appliance	$2K/yr	**No Google ads or branding. Index updated immediately.** Not free.

5.   To lose control of your message, send website visitors away
You want to keep control of your message. That is the main reason to answer questions about yourself on your website, rather than sending constituents off somewhere else. This is a chance to tell your story. It is completely under your control. You can provide your take on the issues, and you can explain your votes with as much or as little nuance as you see fit.

In our research, we found a relatively nuanced understanding of what might drive a particular vote. Citizens are well aware a "no" vote can be motivated by any one of a wide variety of reasons. Focus group participants spontaneously mentioned that a legislator might be justly voting a bill down because of the contents of a single small amendment. And they also mentioned that, on the other hand, a legislator might decide vote for a bill which contains many disagreeable provisions, because of the judgment that on balance it has more good than bad.

Here are the two main reasons to tell the public about your voting record:

5.1. **Opportunity to state your case.** This is where you can declare, in your own words unfiltered by the media, why you voted the way you did. Otherwise, citizens can only speculate, or consult other sources. (But do be sure to keep it brief—only a sentence or two. Otherwise no one will read it.)

5.2. **Avoid reinforcing skepticism.** If you do not clearly communicate your voting record, constituents assume that you are trying to hide something.

> Sandra 65, R, TX: "They don't want you to know how they vote!"

There are several other reasons to not send citizens to another website to get information about you:

5.3. **You really do want their attention**
When a citizen comes to your website, she is giving you the rarest of gifts: her attention. When you push her on to another website, you are throwing that attention away.

5.4. **Outside sources can say whatever they like about you—which you might not like**. For example, some Members include a link to VoteSmart on their voting record page. For at least one of those Members, one click away from where he sends you on the VoteSmart site is the following:

[Name of Federal Legislator] HAS REFUSED TO PROVIDE ANY RESPONSES TO CITIZENS ON ISSUES THROUGH THE 2006 NATIONAL POLITICAL AWARENESS TEST.
Luckily, some participants were willing to grant the legislator the benefit of doubt, and assume that he had some good reason for not filling out the NPAT. But not all participants made that assumption.

5.5. **Some people get upset when you send them off to other places.**
They feel slighted, or ignored. See transcript below.

5.6. **Other people do not notice that they left your site, and will blame you for everything they see.** Again, see transcript below. Since they think it is all your site, they hold you responsible for everything they see. One dramatic example of this occurred with senior citizens in the first round of research. The senator's site sent them off to page containing the roll call vote tally maintained by the Senate. The seniors *thought* they were looking at the voting record of their individual Senator.

In this excerpt, Jim objects that they have left the Member's site, while Sue confesses that she did not notice.

Jim 47, Mod., IA:	"I don't like that... that it brings me to someone else's website..."
Sue 45, Mod., IA:	"I don't think I would've noticed that if you hadn't pointed it out..."
Jim:	"He's always sending you somewhere else…"

Recommendation

Tell your story. Tell it in your own words, on the site you control the content of.

Avoid sending visitors off to other sites. You can make reasonable exceptions, in order to point them at voluminous reference information, such as the actual text of a bill.

When you do send people off to another site, provide an intermediate banner page informing them that they are leaving your site.

6. Make important items visible

This is harder than it sounds. Web users employ selective attention to filter out the barrage of information on the screen—and especially, they have all developed unconscious habits of ignoring ads. This led, for example, to their not seeing a prominent "e-mail me" box on one Member's site. In form and placement, the box looks like an ad, and so is ignored.

Similarly, they will ignore the space above any top of screen navigation bar. Usability experts call this "banner blindness." An early prototype of the Tom Smith website had the search box inside the graphical banner at the top. No one saw it.

A similar "right side-bar blindness" now afflicts most users.

Recommendation

Do not put any important items into or above the top of page banner.

Do not put anything into a right-hand column.

Keep the most important items either in the left hand column, or at the top of the page but below the banner and below any navigation bar.

When writing, assume that constituents will only read the first paragraph on your homepage, and only the first couple of words in each line of the left hand column.[4]

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[4] Jacob Neilsen, 2006. http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html

7. Website: First person or third person?

With the Tom Smith prototype, we started out to produce a third person website. We were motivated by the objections raised during in the first round, that "he didn't write that."

However, when doing the writing, we rapidly found that it just made more sense to write in Congressman Tom Smith's voice when talking about his issue positions and votes.

Using first person made the language more straightforward: "I voted for it." rather than "Congressman Tom Smith voted for it."

We were careful to attribute some of the writing to others: "My staff created the following summary."

Participants expressed no objection to the use of first person throughout the Tom Smith site.

Recommendation

We recommend use of first person voice, especially for explanation of issue positions and voting record. Participants understood that the text might be written by a staff Member, and this did not upset them. If anything, their concerns seemed to run in the other direction—when their attention was brought to the blog kept by one Congressman, several participants expressed their opinion that he should be doing something more important.

Detailed Newsletter Recommendations

We tested our newsletter recommendations by creating two different prototype newsletters for fictional Members of Congress. One ran multiple pages and contained multiple articles, which we already knew was the more popular option among constituents.

The other prototype was an attempt at a single-page, single-article newsletter. We had set ourselves the challenge of making one which would be as well-received as the longer newsletters. We fell short.

Including our prototypes, we had participants rate a total of seven newsletters—four short (three real, plus our contrived one), and three longer ones (two real, plus one contrived).

1. They want you to make it easy for them

Participants loved the multi-page newsletter we created, for the fictional Rep. Naomi Chason. They appreciated the ease with which you could see what was covered, and the links that made it easy to decide what to look at and what to skip over. We had them give seven different newsletters an overall grade, from 0 to 10.

They strongly and consistently preferred Naomi's over all the others. Here are the seven newsletters, in order of ascending grade. Our prototypes are listed in *italics*.

Overall Grade for E-Newsletter	
R-NC, short	4.9
R-PA, short	5.5
Steve Tyndell, short	*5.9*
R-CA, long	6.3
D-WI, short	6.6
R-OH, long	7.1
Naomi Caison, long	*8.0*

Caison's table of contents and clear headlines let them figure out right away whether they wanted to read more of each article. The other newsletters, even the best, make you look through the newsletter in order to figure out what was included.

1.1. Include a table of contents
Make it easy for them to see, at a glance, what topics the newsletter covers.

1.2. Organize your newsletter
For bonus points, provide an overall organizing principle for the newsletter. During our first round of research, participants repeatedly said that they wanted to know about the recent past, current events, and upcoming events. Consequently, we used a Past/Present/Future design for the Caison newsletter, and participants consistently liked it.

1.3. Brevity, with links to more information
The Caison newsletter included only the first couple of paragraphs of each story, and provided a link to the full text. Most participants really liked this approach, as it made it even easier to skim through the newsletter, but they could still delve deeper if they wanted to. There were a total of three participants, out of 44 in the second round, who insisted that they would want the entire article in the e-mail newsletter.

Recommendations:

Once the articles are written, do not send out the newsletter until you have spent the small amount of additional time required to organize the newsletter, and to convey that organization to the reader.

Taking this extra time will have a dramatic effect on the number of recipients who will actually read the newsletter.

2. Include multiple items in newsletter

We had participants rate four short newsletters and three longer ones. The best-rated short one barely edged out the worse-rated long one (6.6 to 6.3).

Among the short newsletters, R-NC did surprisingly poorly. Many participants got turned off by an opening quote from an obscure British author. They found the piece to be poorly organized and rather "clunky."

They objected in general to newsletters that had only a single item. And so our prototype short newsletter, for the fictional Steve Tyndell, also did poorly. D-WI did much better, with two items, including one about the "hot button" issue of reducing government waste. A different issue of his newsletter, with any other content, would not have done as well.

Recommendation:

Produce multi-item newsletters. Even if the newsletter is very short, include multiple items, like R-PA. This newsletter was rated poorly for lack of organization, but participants consistently liked that he had multiple items.

But even better, produce a newsletter that has multiple items and enough length to do them justice.

3. Constituents want two-way communication

Participants consistently liked the two feedback features in Caison's newsletter.

The first was a single question about their attitudes toward a single aspect of the immigration debate: "Are you personally willing to carry a [national identity] card?"

One problem with internet surveys is that it is easy to stuff the ballot box. The related problem is that it can be embarrassing to report results contrary to your position. Both those problems are reduced by asking a question of attitude or behavior as opposed to an up/down vote on an issue. Intriguingly, no participants objected to the lack of a report of previous questions, but we suspect that your constituents eventually would object.

The second feedback feature was the inclusion of two e-mails from constituents. This demonstrated to the participants that Caison was paying attention to the e-mail that was sent in. For balance, we included one e-mail of praise, and one critique. The praise included a link to the touted material.

Recommendation:

Ask them to send in letters, and publish a couple in each newsletter.

Ask for their feedback on an issue, by including survey questions about attitude or behavior.

Report results, with a disclaimer that the results are "unscientific"—that is, because of the ease of "ballot stuffing" the results might not reflect the actual attitude of people in the district.

4. Inform your constituents

Participants commented positively on the inclusion of a brief "guest opinion" article in Caison's newsletter.

The newsletter is an opportunity to present yourself directly to you constituents. And adding other voices is the natural next step in this process of going around the traditional media. Of course, the guest articles will have to be brief and well-written.

Recommendation

Line up "guest articles" for your newsletter, from a variety of sources, including sympathetic academics and local activists.

5. Newsletter: First person or third person?

Most of Naomi Caison's newsletter is written in the third person, like a traditional news story.

However, we used two means to express Congresswoman Caison's voice. First, articles included quotes from her. Second, the newsletter included a single opinion piece she had written.

Recommendation

We recommend the use of third person voice for e-mail newsletters, but it is not a strong recommendation. The R-OH newsletter, written in the first person, was also well received.

No participants commented on the voice of any newsletter.

Appendix A: Methodology

Research dates:
Round 1: May 9-11, 2006
Round 2: June 20-22, 2006

For both rounds of research, we recruited Moderates from a slow-growing region of the country and Conservatives from a fast-growing region.

In the first round, we visited the long-settled urban area of Montgomery, Alabama and a fast growing suburb of LA, Irvine, California. In the second round, we visited the shrinking small town of Newton, Iowa, and the fast-growing "exurb," Denton, Texas, located north of Dallas-Fort Worth.

Web homework
For both rounds, we sent participants a "homework" assignment to be completed before the session. They were asked to go to the websites of several Members of Congress and attempt to complete a variety of tasks, including sending e-mail and finding their positions on issues. They rated each task for difficulty, and also wrote down their comments.

For the first round, participants visited the website of one of their Senators, and the award winning sites of two Congressional Representatives, one Democrat and one Republican.

For the second round, we picked two other award winners, and added a fourth site, the prototype that we had built based on the preferences they expressed in the first round.

Newsletters
During the focus group session, we had participants review printouts of Member newsletters.

For the first round, we wanted to get opinions on a wide array of newsletters, so we had each individual look at two of twenty different newsletters, one text-only and the other including graphics.

For the second round, we narrowed the field down considerably. Based on the findings of the first round, all the newsletters had at least one photograph or graphic. This time, we were comparing one-page newsletters to longer ones. We created two prototype newsletters, one long and one short. In addition, we picked five of the best Member newsletters, based in part on the first round of research. We had each person review and rate all seven newsletters.

Appendix B: List of Key Items for a Legislator's Website

We asked participants to brainstorm about what should appear on a Member's website, and then give each element an "importance" rating on a scale from 0 to 10. Here's the list, starting with the highest rated elements.

Rank	How important is it that a legislator's website include:	Rating
1	Legislator's stand on the issues	9.8
1	Details of why. The philosophy behind their position.	9.8
3	The details of the Legislator's voting record.	9.7
4	The Legislator's reasons for voting the way that they did.	9.5
5	Legislator's thoughts about legislation that will soon be coming up for votes.	9.4
6	How to send e-mail to the Legislator's office.	8.8
6	Contact phone numbers.	8.8
6	Sponsored/co-sponsored/introduced legislation.	8.8
6	Attendance record.	8.8
10	How to get help, if you are having problems with a government agency.	8.6
11	Position papers on issues.	8.5
12	Search	8.3
13	Information on any conflicts of interest they might have, due to business interests.	8.2
14	The committees that the Legislator is on.	8.1
14	A campaign promises "scorecard." (Report on which promises have been delivered on, which are in progress, etc.)	8.1
16	Information on which their contributors are.	8.0
17	What the Legislator is doing to help solve local issues.	7.9
18	News of recent activities by the Legislator.	7.8
18	Links to external info, such as Congressional Record.	7.8
18	Transcripts of floor statements.	7.8
21	Groups the Legislator is Member of, such as NRA.	7.7
22	Tickets to the Capitol (knowing that this is the only way to get the tickets).	7.5
23	Independent confirmation of voting record.	7.1
23	Listing of staff, including areas of responsibility.	7.1
23	When they did NOT vote with the party.	7.1
26	Information on what is likely to happen to an e-mail that gets sent to the Legislator. (Likelihood of an answer, etc.)	7.0
27	Biographical information about the Legislator.	6.8
27	Scorecard of responsiveness to citizen concerns.	6.8
29	Details of their work schedule.	6.7
29	A poll on an issue.	6.7
31	Upcoming appearances back home by the Legislator.	6.6
32	Link to external information on Legislator's income and finances.	6.4
33	Press releases from the Legislator's office.	6.0
34	How to get help qualifying for Federal grant programs.	5.9
35	Internship info.	5.3
36	Travel budget and travel expenses.	4.5

Appendix C: Innovations eliminated by 2nd stage

The second round of research was an opportunity to test the ideas that grew out of our first round. We also included several innovative ideas that we wanted to test out in the safe research environment. Here are three of the ideas that were rejected, based on the response in the second round of research:

Website: Emphasizing color scheme over legibility.
> We wanted to keep a consistent red, white and blue color scheme for the website. We knew that there would be some legibility problems associated with red, but believed that they would be nothing more than minor irritations. Some participants found the red text we used for headings difficult to read. The navigation bar was objectionable to even more of them, due to the use of white text on a red background.

Website: Horizontal sub-menus.
> In our first round of research, we had found that people especially liked navigation bars which included pull-down menus displaying their sub-choices. We tried to improve on this design. It did not work out. Details below.

Newsletter: Short format, single-subject rejected.
> We knew from the first round of research that constituents had a strong preference for multi-subject, multi-page newsletters. Going into the second stage, we were confident that we could create an excellent multi-subject newsletter. But for an extra challenge, we also attempted to create a single-subject newsletter that would be viewed just as favorably.

> In this attempt, we fell short of our goal. Participants in the study uniformly critiqued the Steve Tyndell newsletter for handling only a single subject. They rated it as worse than all three of the long-format newsletters.

Horizontal sub-menus

As a bonus, we used the Tom Smith prototype website to try out a new approach to the user interface of website navigation. Our goal was to have an interface with the immediacy and ease of use of pull-downs, but without two of the drawbacks:

1. Pull-downs obscure the text of the current web page,
2. Pull-downs require a completely separate area for displaying the sub-menus in their persistent, non-pull-down incarnation.

We tried out a design that displayed the contents of the pull-down in a horizontal bar, just below the navigation bar. The concept was great—an elegantly economical use of screen space. But, in practice, the menus proved difficult to use. It was just too easy to let your mouse slip off the navigation bar, which causes the sub-menu to disappear. Keeping the mouse on the sub-menu required tight control of mouse position in two dimensions, as you moved the cursor both down and sideways.

Pull-downs also go away when you move your mouse off of them. But they appear directly below the navigation bar item you click on, so it is pretty easy to keep your mouse on them.

We struggled to make our horizontal menu bar work well, in multiple revisions of the underlying code, but to no avail. After our prototype experience, we recommend staying with a "traditional" pull-down design: Easy to use, easy to implement. A bit of a screen space hog, but there are worse sins.

Another alternative would be something like the Charles Schwab tabbed design, www.schwab.com. However, the sub-menus on the Schwab site appear only after you click on the tab, which means that you do not have the same fluid immediacy that you get with pull-downs.

If we were to do another prototype, we would try out adding pull-downs to a tabbed design. The horizontal sub-menus would give us the benefit of economical use of screen space, and at the same time the pull downs would provide immediacy and ease of use.

We have given up on the goal of not obscuring the current page.

Our guess is that users would easily accept this, just as right now they accept that the persistent version of the pull-down menu appears in a completely different place on the screen. However, we would need to prototype and then perform a usability study before recommending this hybrid approach of "tab plus pull-down."