In the eye of the beholder: What your constituents actually see when you communicate online and via franked mail

January 2013

OVERVIEW

Technological advances make it possible for us to know more about human behavior than ever before. By harnessing one of the most powerful behavior-tracking tools now available, eye-tracking, we are able to discern minute aspects of constituent behavior that earlier had been impossible to uncover.

The purpose of this study is to help Members of Congress communicate more effectively with their constituents by acting upon lessons learned as a result of the eye-tracking research described in this report.

For those not familiar with it, eye tracking is a combined software and hardware application designed to capture the conscious and unconscious eye gaze movements of a respondent. This technology enables us to know what, when, for how long, and in what order information is absorbed and processed by a study respondent.

For the purposes of this study, we used eye tracking to study how constituents view Congressional official online advertising on the web, glossy franked mail, websites, and e-newsletters. We did not study online advertising specifically designed for hand-held devices because at the time of the study it was not allowed under House Administration rules.

Having a better understanding of how constituents interact with these forms of media will help Members know what is working, what is not working, and what improvements to make in their communications.
TABLE OF CONTENTS / KEY FINDINGS

METHODOLOGY / TERMINOLOGY ................................................................. 3

FINDINGS ........................................................................................................ 7

A. OFFICIAL ONLINE ADS ........................................................................... 7
   1) Repetition is key – one impression from a single display ad makes no dent .......... 7
   2) There is a threshold amount of time—and number of times—needed to view an ad for it to be remembered ................................................................. 12

B. FRANKED MAIL ....................................................................................... 13
   3) Constituents are more likely to read bullet points and highlighted text, and are less likely to read large blocks of text—unless that block is the only content on the page ... ................................................................. 13
   4) Most respondents viewed the mail pieces as having three main purposes—but only two of these are associated with Members’ official duties ................................................................. 17
   5) If there’s a tear-off card in your franked mail piece, make sure that it is prominent so that respondents actually mail it back ........................................................................ 20
   6) Many respondents liked the “past/present/future” timeline in one mail piece .......... 23
   7) Direct mail needs to be tailored to those most likely to value it; text size matters .... 24
   8) Photographs of the Member with constituents received more attention and positive feedback than stock photos ........................................................................ 25
   9) Reasons for liking mail pieces were often content-based ...................................... 29
   10) Footnote any statistics you include with credible sources .................................. 29
   11) Titles at the very top of the pages were generally overlooked ............................. 30

C. WEBSITE .................................................................................................... 31
   12) The good news: Respondents were able to complete important yet simple tasks quickly and easily .............................................................................. 31
   13) The bad news: It was a hassle for respondents to find out how their Member voted on a particular issue ........................................................................ 31
   14) There are ways to improve websites to make them easier for constituents to find how their Member voted on a particular issue ................................................................. 33

D. E-NEWSLETTERS .................................................................................... 36
   15) The e-newsletters tended to get read more thoroughly than the franked mail pieces .... ................................................................. 36
   16) Include an index or overview at the top of your longer e-newsletters with hyperlinks to sections below. And, constituents will appreciate it if you incorporate the past/present/future construct ........................................................................ 37
17) When available, include a video in the e-newsletter and embed it. Otherwise, make sure the image of the video has a play arrow in the center.

18) Include a time code in the image of the video, or mention in the text of the e-newsletter how long the video will be.

APPENDIX I .................................................................................................................... 41

APPENDIX II .................................................................................................................... 48

METHODOLOGY / TERMINOLOGY

Presentation Testing teamed up with Interactive Video Productions (IVP), a leading provider of eye-tracking technology with 15 years of industry experience. IVP has worked with clients from a variety of industries, including Charles Schwab, ESPN, Mapquest, and Dow Jones. Based on our research, this is the first known eye-tracking study of Congressional communications.

We used IVP’s eye-tracking technology during 24 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with constituents in two different locations: Tulsa, OK, and Daytona, FL. We tested actual content from two recently-retired Members of Congress, John Sullivan and Sandy Adams, conducting 12 IDIs in each of their districts.

In Round 1, we went to Tulsa and conducted IDIs on December 18 and 19, 2012, with 12 constituents from Oklahoma’s 1st Congressional district (still John Sullivan’s district at that time). There were six men and six women in total, with a wide range of ages, and a variety of education levels and work statuses.

In Part A, Round 1 respondents looked at a John Sullivan display ad on a popular Tulsa news site, Tulsaworld.com. In Part B, they looked at four franked mail pieces that the Member had sent to constituents. In Part C, they viewed his website and were asked to complete tasks that we know constituents typically do when visiting a Congressional website.

In Part D, respondents were asked to view two e-newsletters that Congressman Sullivan had emailed.

In Round 2, we went to Daytona and conducted IDIs on Jan. 3 and 4, 2013, with 12 constituents from Florida’s 24th Congressional district (formerly Sandy Adams’ district). Again, there were

---

1 Technical terms related to this project are denoted in bold in this section.
2 We chose those two Members for several reasons. First, we needed to use retiring Members, because under House rules we could not conduct independent research that would benefit some Members but not others. Since the presentation of these findings comes after the end of Sullivan’s and Adams’s terms, they were not benefitted by the results. Second, we needed Members who were still in office when the research was approved, so that we could easily gather the stimulus materials used in the study. A long-ago-retire Member would not have that material readily available. Third, we wanted the constituents to review relevant materials that did not seem out of date. (i.e. produced during the 112th Congress). Fourth, we wanted Members whose districts were geographically distinct from one another. Fifth, for variety’s sake, we wanted on non-freshman Member and one freshman.
3 We know from viewing Google Analytics data that two of the most commonly-performed tasks by people visiting Congressional websites are looking for the Member’s biography and contact information. We sought to discover how challenging a task that is for people who’d never done it before.
six men and six women, with a wide range of ages and a variety of education levels and work statuses.

In Part A, Round 2 respondents looked at a Sandy Adams display ad on six news sites in total, four local to Florida and two national (CNN.com and WSJ.com). In Part B, they looked at five franked mail pieces that the Member had sent out to constituents during her term. In Part C, they viewed her website and were asked to complete the same tasks as in Round 1, with one additional task. In Part D, respondents were asked to view two e-newsletters that Congressman Adams had sent out.

For all of these tasks, respondents were asked to view the material as they normally would do at home. We fully realize that respondents may have been more attentive to the material than they would have been outside of a focus group facility, but we continued to emphasize to them that they pay the same level of attention to each item as they normally would, in order to get their most natural reactions as possible.

Each IDI lasted 60-75 minutes, during which we showed respondents a variety of Congressional media, including websites, e-newsletters, online advertising, and franked mail. Using a technology called “eye-tracking,” we tracked the sequence of respondents’ eye movements, as well as how long they looked at each point, and then explored with them what they viewed—and why.

Importantly, all respondents knew, from the start of the session, that we were tracking their eye movements. In fact, the eye-tracking software had to be calibrated for each respondent at the start of each in-depth interview so that it would track their eye movements accurately.

One graphical result for this type of data gathering is called a “gaze plot”:

The lines indicate the “path” that the respondent’s eyes took, and the size of the dots indicates the length of time the respondent looked at each area (the larger the dot, the longer the area was
The gaze plot shows you where your first gaze was registered, and with a series of lines and circles you can determine the path for each addition gaze. Each gaze point is numbered sequentially.

The “heat map” is a summary of gaze data from one or multiple recordings. Most of the time this is an aggregated representation. The heat map data is primarily based on gaze time and uses color to visualize a summary of the gaze data. The darker the color, the longer the gaze concentration in those areas.

Importantly, we were able to aggregate the data from all respondents, in order to perform a more comprehensive analysis of the results.

The online advertising and e-newsletters required that we use non-moving, non-interactive images during testing, in order to ensure that each respondent is experiencing and viewing the same material. For example, we will take the official online advertisements used by Members of Congress, and insert them into local news sites.

As with any research study that looks into a topic for the first time, this first-ever, in-depth analysis of official online advertising offers a number of answers to the “low hanging fruit” questions. But it also raises a number of new questions and leaves other questions unanswered. We view it as a first look into a topic that merits future study by us and others in the years to come.

In order to undertake this current study, very special thanks belong to Mark Strand, the President of the Congressional Institute. His ongoing commitment to cutting-edge research, combined with the generous support of the Congressional Institute’s board of directors, is having a substantial impact on how well and how often Congress communicates with constituents.

We are especially indebted to the staff and leadership at two companies: FrankingGrid, which provided us with professional-quality online ad images that our team used to test the viewership

---

4 IVR’s eye trackers have no visible or moving “tracking devices” that might affect the subject. Large freedom of head movement allows respondents to behave naturally as in front of any other computer screen, and in-depth and accurate studies can be performed without fatigue.
and recall of ads appearing on various news sites, and Fireside21, which created both of the Member websites we tested in this study. Their efforts enabled us to have access to archived versions of those sites after the end of the 112th Congress.
FINDINGS

A. OFFICIAL ONLINE ADS

1) Repetition is key – one impression from a single display ad makes no dent

If your office plans to run official online ads, you’ll need to deliver multiple impressions of your ad in order for them to have a reasonable chance of noticing the ad. We found, in a small-scale case study that we conducted as part of this project, that when we showed an ad on just one local news website one time, not a single participant could recall seeing the ad. However, when we put the same ad on six different news sites and showed them to 12 participants in a different location, one-third of them could accurately recall their Member’s ad.

Specifically, in Round 1, we superimposed a display ad on a popular news site in the Tulsa area, called TulsaWorld.com. Below is a partial image of what respondents saw during the eye tracking (the full home page of Tulsa World was made available for them to view):
And below is a larger image of the ad:

![Ad Image]

It should be noted that Congressman John Sullivan never used this specific display ad format.5

We instructed the respondents to view the page as they would at home if they had just turned on their computer and opened the page. We told them that they could scroll and click like they would on a normal website, and we stopped the exercise as soon as respondents clicked on an item that would have led them to another web page. Respondents were not told to look for ads or to pay attention to anything in particular, and they were not told anything prior to this exercise that would prime them to think that our research was at all politically-, Congressionally- or advertising-related.

---

5 The display ad chosen had rated the highest in the research Presentation Testing conducted for the Congressional Institute in 2011-12. In that research, we conducted a poll of 600 respondents nationwide. We used a pseudo-Congressman identified as “Michael Adams,” and asked respondents, “How does this ad make you feel about Congressman Michael Adams, on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being very unfavorable and 10 being very favorable?” The ad received the highest score of 16 display ads tested, with a score of 7.08 out of 10.
Of 12 respondents, not a single person could recall seeing the John Sullivan ad, and the aggregate heat map for all 12 shows that very little time was spent on the ad by each respondent, if at all:

After showing the news site, we asked respondents whether there were any ads on the page they viewed, and if so, which ads they could recall seeing. Three respondents thought that they saw an ad – but only one of these three could accurately recall the ad that they saw, and it was not Sullivan’s.
In Round 2, we decided to place a nearly-identical ad on six news sites, not just one, to see whether repetition of the ad would increase respondent recall. This time, the ad was changed to show Congresswoman Sandy Adams’ name, as follows:

The six websites we superimposed the ad over were the following:

- The Daytona Beach News-Journal Online (http://www.news-journalonline.com)
- WFTV (http://www.wftv.com)
- CNN (http://www.cnn.com)
- WESH (http://www.wesh.com)
- Click Orlando (http://www.clickorlando.com)
- Wall Street Journal (http://www.wsj.com)

We gave the Daytona respondents the same directions as those in Tulsa. This time, instead of ending the exercise after the respondent clicked, we simply showed them a black screen and then repeated the directions before showing them the next webpage.

Of the 12 respondents, four recalled the Sandy Adams ad after seeing it on the six news sites. Six others recalled seeing ads, but did not identify the Adams ad as being one of them, and two claimed to have not seen any ads at all.
As an example, below is the aggregate heat map from CNN.com, which shows that respondents spent some time looking at the ad, although still not as much time as other areas of the webpage:

![CNN.com Heat Map](image)

It is interesting to note that respondents seemed to focus on “Sandy Adams,” “FREE,” and the date. Very little attention was paid to the rest of the ad, especially the image of the hand reaching out. This is true for all of the news sites we tested (see Appendix for other images).

When we asked respondents who recalled the ad what the ad was for, two of the four said they remembered the content:

> “The Sandy Adams ad I saw quite a bit – it was inviting you to a meeting. It made me feel like she was into suggestions and things like that, but it didn’t make me want to take part in it.” – Liz, Daytona

> “I remember Sandy-something with the hand. It kept saying ‘free,’ and I usually don’t even bother with it, but the color stuck out. It was for a job fair, but I’m not looking for a job.” – Cathy, Daytona

While there are many variables at play here – between the different respondents, the different news sites, and the design of the ad itself – constituents who visit news sites where ads appear multiple times are more likely to see it and remember it than if it only appears once.
2) There is a threshold amount of time—and number of times—needed to view an ad for it to be remembered

Of our 12 Daytona respondents, all of whom saw six different news site home pages in succession, four of them remembered seeing the Sandy Adams ad. Those four respondents spent 28.81 seconds, collectively, looking at the ad across all six sites. The other eight respondents spent 7.56 seconds, collectively, looking at the ad across the same six news site home pages, but none of these remember seeing it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recalled Sandy Adams Ad</th>
<th># of respondents</th>
<th>Average amount of time spent viewing Adams ad across all six news site home pages</th>
<th>% of time spent looking at ad, as a fraction of time spent looking at six news site home pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.20 sec.</td>
<td>3.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.95 sec.</td>
<td>0.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average amount of time the four respondents who remembered the ad spent looking at it was 7.20 seconds in total, across all six news sites combined. The eight respondents who did not remember seeing the ad spent an average of 0.95 seconds looking at it. And, the four respondents who remembered seeing the Sandy Adams ad spent an average of 3.99% of their time on the web pages looking at the ad, while the other eight respondents only spent an average of 0.75% of their time on the web pages looking at the ad.

What was the threshold amount of time required to view an ad for someone to remember it? Each of the four respondents who remembered seeing the ad spent at least 2.79 seconds looking at it. Only one of the other eight respondents spent more time than that (4.35 seconds) looking at the ad without remembering it.

Each of the four respondents who remembered seeing the Sandy Adams ad saw it on at least four of the six web pages they viewed. Six of the eight respondents who did not remember seeing the ad viewed it (according to heat map data) on three or fewer web pages. The other two respondents viewed it four or more times, but they did not remember seeing the ad. All 12 respondents viewed the ad on a web page at least once, which suggests that the act of seeing it just once does not cause it to be remembered.

Each of the four respondents who remembered seeing the Sandy Adams ad viewed it for at least 1.21% of the time that they were looking at the news site home pages, ranging from 1.21% to 8.56% of their total viewing time. Six of the eight respondents who did not remember seeing the Sandy Adams ad viewed it for less than one percent of the time that they were viewing web pages. The other two respondents saw the ad for 1.31% and 1.80% of the time that they were viewing web pages, but they did not remember seeing the ad.
B. FRANKED MAIL

3) Constituents are more likely to read bullet points and highlighted text, and are less likely to read large blocks of text—unless that block is the only content on the page

We found that people take the easy route with Congressional franked mail. That means they are not willing to make a big time commitment to reading the totality of a page, especially when they are given visual clues that it’s OK to take a shortcut. The exception occurs when the block of text is the main content on the page.

Constituents make snap decisions about what they want to read or have time to read. Therefore, when there are long paragraphs mixed in with bullet points or highlighted text, constituents may just look at what interests them most. So, just because Members or their staffs inserted material into a glossy mail piece, they cannot expect it to be consumed in its entirety – some content will be treated as just filler because recipients will not take the time to read everything.

So, with a mail piece like this, note the “hot spots” below where the readers focused their gaze:
In watching the eye movements of our respondents, we noticed that when block text, highlighted text, and bullet points appeared on the same page, respondents typically spent more time looking at the bullet points and highlighted text. In fact, they told us:

“*You don’t have to read it all – it’s easy to pick out the topic you’re interested in [with highlighted text].*” – Sharon, Tulsa

“I read highlights and bullets unless I see something that really interests me...I probably wouldn’t read [a letter] much. I’d open it and read the highlights, but I’d rather see it in a flyer. It takes me longer to go through it, so the shorter it is the more likely I’d be to read it.” – Tyler, Tulsa

One of the mail pieces we tested for Congresswoman Adams had four sides. Both the left inside and the right inside have a section of block text at the very top, and we noticed that the block text on the left page seemed to get skipped, while the block text on the right page tended to get read:
Focus on Job Creation: Getting Florida Back to Work

Since I came to Congress, the House of Representatives has focused on helping the private sector create jobs and grow the economy. Whether it is ending regulations like the numeric nutrient proposal or stopping the energy exploration moratorium, we have taken steps to help strengthen the economy and put people back to work. While the House continues to pass bills that reduce taxes and red tape, give incentives to employers to hire, and reduce federal spending and debt, the Senate is still mired in inaction.

Jobs Legislation Passed by the House
- H.R. 1154, the Reducing Regulatory Burdens Act (No action by Senate)
- H.R. 1230, the Clean Water Cooperative Federalism Act (No action by Senate)
- H.R. 8, the Small Business Paperwork Mandate Elimination Act (signed into law)
- H.R. 1230, Restoring American Offshore Leasing Now Act (No action by Senate)
- H.R. 1231, Reversing President Obama's Offshore Moratorium Act (No action by Senate)
- H.R. 2021, the Jobs and Energy Permitting Act (No action by Senate)

Social Security and Medicare: Honoring Our Commitments

America has a responsibility to elderly American taxpayers who have paid into Medicare and Social Security. It is important that the House increases the retirement benefit eligibility age for Medicare and Social Security. The average Social Security benefit is $17,000 and below, starting salaries for seniors who are now working is $17,000 and below. Those individuals need help in their health care costs. Seniors have an important role in health care. If seniors support their local hospitals, seniors would be able to use the private health insurance of their choice.

Physician Access to Medicare

Physicians are losing access to Medicare on a daily basis, and the number of seniors is increasing at an alarming rate. We need to see Medicare patients, and we need workers to support them.
We asked what caused certain respondents to skip over the block text on the left, but not the block text on the right, and heard:

“I jumped to the bullets [on the left] because of the job stuff. It interested me and [the bolded text] caught my eye so I skipped over [the block text].” – Cathy, Daytona

The block text on the right page is also followed by bullets points, so we can only hypothesize why this didn’t cause respondents to skip to it. Our best guess is that because the bullet points appeared to be in a different section with the dark blue background, respondents wanted to read what came first before moving on.

We also noticed that on pages with predominately block text and no bullets or headings, respondents spent a roughly equal amount of time on all of the text:

It should be noted that the bright red dot in the middle is due to respondents’ starting their gaze in the center of the screen, but otherwise, the length of time spent on the text on this page was nearly even throughout.
The takeaway here is that bullet points and highlighted text will probably garner the most attention, and should be used if you expect constituents to give the mail piece a quick read. However, a letter may be more appropriate if it is crucial for constituents to read every word you send to them.

4) Most respondents viewed the mail pieces as having three main purposes—but only two of these are associated with Members’ official duties

The three purposes are:

a) To show that the Member is trying to be helpful

Especially in Round 2, we heard over and over again how respondents liked certain mail pieces or e-newsletters because it shows them that the Member is trying to be helpful. One mail piece had a list of phone numbers for veteran-specific resources, and another offered helpful senior contacts on a tear-off card for the constituents. Below is an image of the latter tear-off card, followed by the aggregate heat map results from Round 2:
Both mail pieces received very positive feedback, and nearly every time we asked respondents what they liked best about the mail pieces, we heard comments about how Adams is “trying to help” or “trying to do something.” This was true for all of the mail pieces. The following comment was said about the piece with the Veterans’ phone numbers:

“She’s trying to do something for veterans and trying to help. I like the phone numbers on the front page. Instead of tooting her own horn, she seems to be more helpful, which makes me think better of her.” – Cathy, Daytona

b) To show that the Member wants to hear from his/her constituents and to keep his/her constituents updated

In Round 1, we heard positive feedback from nearly every respondent when the direct mail pieces included surveys asking constituents for their opinions. The fact that the Congressman wanted to hear from them made most respondents view him more favorably. They also liked that he wanted to provide information to his constituents in order to keep them updated on events in Washington, as well as constituent services. And, he offered many ways to contact him and connect with him.

“I liked that you could sign up for his e-mails—not something I’d do, but I like that he offers it. It shows he’s reaching out.” – Tyler, Tulsa

Below is the aggregate heat map of one of part of this mail piece we showed respondents in Tulsa:
The heat map shows that respondents spent a significant length of time reading the survey at the left portion of the e-newsletter, which is represented by the red coloring.

In Round 2, we heard fewer comments about how the Congresswoman wanted to hear from them, but one respondent did make the following comment:

“'I’m interested in what she’s saying, but if she’s corresponding with me, I want it to be so that she knows what my concerns are [instead of just telling me what she’s doing, or that she’s in my district].” – Liz, Daytona

The big takeaway here is this: Make your mail piece a dialogue rather than a monologue.

c) To show that the Member wants to be re-elected (even if that’s not the point of a franked mail piece)

Be aware that a number of people will wrongly assume franked mail pieces are campaign material.

“I’m not expecting much, not sure if it’ll be interesting. I label it as junk mail—I assume it’s campaign material even though I really know it’s from his office. He’s tooting his own horn, and making himself look good.” – John, Tulsa

Even after our moderator pointed out that a franked mail piece was paid for at taxpayer expense, one respondent in Daytona thought the mail pieces were campaign literature. The respondent pointed out the irony that the Congresswoman talks about the misuse of taxpayer dollars on the front side of the mail piece, and then labels the piece as “prepared, published and mailed at taxpayer expense” on the back side.
5) If there’s a tear-off card in your franked mail piece, make sure that it is prominent so that respondents actually mail it back

Response rates on survey cards apparently could be much higher if mail pieces were better designed. For example, nearly all of our respondents did not notice that this mail piece had a tear-off card until closer inspection:

“I would’ve had to think about it. [The tear-off card] is not obvious.” – Sharon, Tulsa

“It wasn’t immediately clear that it was a tear-off card.” – Rich, Tulsa

We heard similar comments about one of the mail pieces studied in Daytona, the bottom portion of which appears here:
Most respondents did not realize that the survey above was a tear-off card. When we pointed out the perforation to one respondent and asked her what she was supposed to do with it, she answered that she could keep it for future reference so that she’ll be prepared to vote on those specific topics in the next election. On the other hand, it was clear to most other respondents that the survey in this mail piece was meant to be torn off and mailed in:
One respondent in Round 2 also suggested making the tear-off portion on the first image a different color to help it stand out from the rest of the mail piece. We believe this is why it was clear on the second image immediately above that the survey was on a tear-off card.

In addition to a perforation, we suggest printing a dotted line around the tear-off in a color that stands out from the background. And even though it is a perforation and doesn’t need to be cut with scissors, include the scissor marks along the perforation on both sides of the cards to better indicate that it should be torn off. Here’s an example:

![Example of tear-off card with perforation and scissor marks]

Important information for constituents, and not just surveys, should also be perforated and clearly labeled that it can be torn off. This holds true for the bottom half of this veterans mailing sent by Rep. Adams:
6) Many respondents liked the “past/present/future” timeline in one mail piece

We showed respondents the following mail piece, and noticed that a lot of time was spent on the portion where the years 2009-2014 were mapped out with details about the measures that were/would be implemented in each year:
When we asked respondents why, we heard the following reasons:

“*The timeline told me this is what had happened and this is what you plan to do in the future.*” – Tyler, Tulsa

“He seems to be doing this best about telling us what’s going on now and what’s let up to the state we’re in.” – Sharon, Tulsa

This idea of hearing about what happened before, what’s happening now, and what’s going to happen is a concept we uncovered in past research, which we call the past/present/future construct. This will be mentioned later in the report since we asked respondents in Round 2 about including an index in the e-newsletters that revolve around this construct (see finding #14).

7) **Direct mail needs to be tailored to those most likely to value it; text size matters**

It is important to keep sending franked mail to certain audiences that like getting printed mail. When we asked what one respondent liked best about a particular Sullivan piece, we heard:
“The contact information, and ways to get help. Not everyone is computer-literate and has access to the same facts.” – Sharon, Tulsa

Many of these non-computer-users are probably seniors, so also make sure the text on mail pieces is big enough to read.

“Make print a little larger and easier to read. You have to work to see it now.” – Ken, Daytona

“I can read it comfortably, the dark big print [has high contrast to the background], and it’s separated by different colors, which is good. As people get older, they have a hard time reading small text, so they need bolder print as she has here.” – Maurice, Daytona

8) Photographs of the Member with constituents received more attention and positive feedback than stock photos

In watching respondents’ eye movements, we noticed that pictures of the Member interacting with constituents got slightly more attention than “stock” photos. Here are some comments we heard about pictures of the Members with constituents:

“I was looking at the picture and trying to see the kinds of people he’s talking to—if they were in business attire or casual clothes. I’d care more about seeing him talking to normal people.” – Rich, Tulsa
“The picture catches my eye and makes it more personal for me. She is with them and shows she’s in the county doing things. It made me keep paying attention because I thought that [the rest of the mailer] might have something to do with me.” – Ashley, Daytona

And here are some comments we heard about the stock photos:

“Put pictures of her actually doing something – [right now it’s] a guy cutting up credit cards and doctors – none of her actually doing anything, just her and a bunch of clip art. If she’s standing with these workers, it shows she supports those workers. I’d like to see her actually getting involved, maybe it should be her cutting up that [Federal spending] credit card.” – Mark, Daytona
“I’d put her in the picture. Why can’t she be at a nursing home or shaking the hands of seniors? A picture would add a personal touch – otherwise, it could be anyone else’s mail piece.” – Mark, Daytona

We also noticed that not much time was spent looking at both Sullivan’s and Adams’ formal headshot photos:
Two images used in the same mail piece

We asked one respondent in Tulsa why he didn’t seem to be paying any attention to the pictures of John Sullivan:

“I know what Sullivan looks like and I don’t really care. If it were a three-eyed ogre I probably would’ve paid attention.” – Mike, Tulsa
A FEW OTHER MINOR POINTS ABOUT FRANKED MAIL

9) Reasons for liking mail pieces were often content-based

We asked respondents what they liked best about each mail piece, and heard over and over again mentions of the issues covered in the mail piece. This is important because it shows that content really matters to constituents.

Many respondents also seemed to like when many different topics were covered on one piece because they felt like they were getting a good overview of what was going on.

“The proposals are short, sweet, and to the point.” – Maurice, Daytona

10) Footnote any statistics you include with credible sources

One respondent mentioned that there was no footnote on a mail piece after a specific statistic was cited.

“I need more proof because that doesn’t ring true to me. Where’s the footnote? Maybe I’d be more likely to believe it. Add footnotes where you can because I lose interest as soon as I see something I don’t believe.” – Cathy, Daytona

This is something we’ve heard before in past research, and it is not clear why more participants did not bring up the lack of footnotes in these mail pieces, but it is still good practice to use footnotes when possible.
11) Titles at the very top of the pages were generally overlooked

Keep in mind when you are creating franked mail pieces that the titles at the top of pages are often overlooked.

What this means is that often the headlines are ignored. The content of the rest of the mailer, relying on bullet points and bolded text in the body, needs to convey the purpose of the piece.
C. WEBSITE

12) The good news: Respondents were able to complete important yet simple tasks quickly and easily

Respondents were asked to perform a set of commonly-performed tasks with the Congressional websites. First, we asked them to locate the Representative’s biography, which, we know from Google Analytics research, is one of the top reasons people visit a Congressional website. We then asked them to find the page where they’d be told how to contact his/her Washington, DC office—another reason people commonly visit these sites. Nearly all respondents performed both of these tasks very quickly—within a few seconds. For the Daytona respondents, we also asked them to find the search box on the website, and most found this somewhat or very quickly as well.

13) The bad news: It was a hassle for respondents to find out how their Member voted on a particular issue

We gave respondents the following instructions: “I’d like you to find the information that tells you how the Congressman/woman voted on the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare.” Unfortunately, Tulsa respondents found this task to be a hassle.

Most of the Tulsa respondents eventually found their way to the “Healthcare” webpage on Sullivan’s site. And, many felt they knew how he voted on the Affordable Care Act after reading one or two press releases.

The heat map shows us that respondents didn’t spend a lot of time reading the block text on the “Healthcare” page, and they tended to jump down to the “Press Release” links (indicated by the red spot):
Overall, Sullivan’s site was user-friendly, since most respondents found out how the Congressman voted on Obamacare, although it could have been made more explicit for them.

To say it was a challenge for the Daytona respondents to find how Sandy Adams cast any votes on Obamacare would be an understatement. Many respondents were unsuccessful and gave up completely before finding the answer. When given the task, they tended to: 1) read the “Latest News” on the home page; 2) hover over “Issues & Legislation;” 3) choose within “Issues & Legislation” the “Vote Record” tab, and scroll through a reverse chronological list of recent votes before either giving up or starting over.

Even after identifying the location of the search box in the task immediately prior to this one, so that it was primed in their minds, only one of the 12 Daytona respondents first turned to this functionality to search for the answer. And, only one of the 12 respondents made it to the “Healthcare” page (which was a sub-page under “Issues”) to see the Congresswoman’s stance on the topic area. But before reading the content on this page she was quickly distracted by the “Vote Record” button located on the right side, and wrongly assumed it would show Adams’s healthcare-related vote records.
14) There are ways to improve websites to make them easier for constituents to find how their Member voted on a particular issue

We suggestion doing the following:

- Make it easy for users to find pages on specific issues they might be interested in:

We recommend showing “Policy Issues” in the menu bar, with all of the categories listed in a dropdown. This way, users will be able to see all of the categories available before leaving the home page, and should be more likely to find the information they are looking for.

DO THIS:
If the format of your website doesn’t give you the liberty to have the different issues in a separate drop-down menu, make sure it’s at least labeled as “Policy Issues” in the drop-down options. One respondent was thrown off by the word “Issues,” assuming it was synonymous with “problems,” and would not detail the Congresswoman’s stance on particular subject matters.

Also, that fact that “Issues” is repeated under “Issues & Legislation” was confusing to some respondents. One respondent did not think that this was clickable, so never ended up finding the “Healthcare” page. So, make sure you don’t repeat items in the drop-down menu that are already listed in the menu bar.

- Be explicit about your position on the issue:

This can be done either in the description of the Member’s stance, or by allowing users to categorize the Member’s voting record by specific topic areas. The website could also include another prominent search box within the “Vote Records” page—to help constituents find what they are looking for more efficiently.

- Put the search box in an easy-to-locate position and make it stand out:

This can be done by making the search box white with a “search” button next to it, which is what computer users are used to seeing and will quickly recognize.
“I forgot that you could type it in [to search what you’re looking for]. I wouldn’t have to change anything [about the website] if I remembered where the search box was – maybe make it a white bar.” – Kathy, Daytona

“A little more eye-level and white instead of dark blue would’ve been better.” – Ashley, Daytona
D. E-NEWSLETTERS

15) The e-newsletters tended to get read more thoroughly than the franked mail pieces

We asked respondents to read two e-newsletters from their Member, and instructed them to look at them the way they’d look at an email attachment sent to their in-boxes. We observed that most respondents spent more time reading the e-newsletters than they did the franked mail pieces. This was especially apparent for certain respondents who seemed to skim the mail pieces very quickly, but then took their time reading most of the e-newsletter, like this:
We asked one respondent in Round 1 why he seemed to spend more time on the e-newsletter:

“I spent more time reading the e-newsletters because e-mail is a little more personal than bulk mail, and they’re using my money [for franked mail] instead of e-mailing me for free. I’d at least start reading [the e-mail].” – Mike, Tulsa

16) Include an index or overview at the top of your longer e-newsletters with hyperlinks to sections below. And, constituents will appreciate it if you incorporate the past/present/future construct

For longer e-newsletters, respondents would like to see an overview at the top of the page with hyperlinks to specific sections within the e-newsletter.

We noticed with the eye-tracking that one respondent seemed more interested in the second topic of the first e-newsletter we showed, but spent less time reading it, indicating that the e-newsletter may have been too long and he got tired of reading at that point. Our moderator proposed an itinerary or index at the top, with links to different subjects, and this respondent liked the idea:

“I like that idea. You can go further in depth and hit what [topics] you want.” – Tyler, Tulsa

In Round 2, we asked respondents about this idea of an overview at the top of the page and those we asked agreed it would be helpful. Based on what we found in Round 1 with the franked mail piece that had the past/present/future construct (see finding #6), we decided to incorporate this idea as part of the e-newsletter index when we asked Round 2 respondents about it. This seemed to be viewed favorably as well:

“That [index at the top] would definitely make it feel more organized, and I could go to where I wanted to go to. If I don’t want to worry about what was happening last week and I just want to know what is happening next week, and what is going to pertain to me in the immediate future, that would definitely make it a little easier.” – Ashley, Daytona

“That’d be good for people like me who want to know what’s happening quickly, compared to the people who have the time to sit and read and research.” – Cathy, Daytona

“I’d like that because you can pick and choose what you want to read about.” – Ken, Daytona

“You actually get to choose which one you want to go to, instead of having to go through everything to find [what you want].” – Sheri, Daytona
In order for readers here to get a better sense of what something like this could look like, we created a mock-up shown below:

Please keep in mind that we are researchers and not graphic designers! Ask your vendor if they could create something like this for you and it should help your constituents get the most out of your e-newsletters.

17) When available, include a video in the e-newsletter and embed it. Otherwise, make sure the image of the video has a play arrow in the center

One respondent in Round 1 suggested that the video be embedded on the page, if possible, since it would look neater. An embedded video would also load faster than re-opening it in a whole new window (which is what happens with videos that are hosted elsewhere). Embedding would be beneficial for constituents with a slow internet connection or a slow computer.
Below is a heat map that shows readers gave the video just as much attention as the first paragraph of the e-newsletter:

![Heat Map Image]

When we asked, “What did you like best about the second e-newsletter?,” most Tulsa respondents mentioned the inclusion of the video.

To make it clear that an image in the e-newsletter is a playable video, you should put an image of a play button (right facing triangle inside of a square or oval) over top of the video:

![Play Button Image]

This is what it should look like if you embed it, but if you just include a screen cap of the video, this additional imagery will help constituents realize that there is a video for them to view.
18) Include a time code in the image of the video, or mention in the text of the e-newsletter how long the video will be

In Round 1, respondents were pleasantly surprised that the video was roughly 90 seconds long, and viewed the Congressman more favorably for including the video in his e-newsletter.

“The short video—a one minute video, I have time for that, but six minutes, I would’ve clicked off for making me watch a whole session of Congress. One to one-and-a-half minutes is good, unless it’s action packed.” - Tyler, Tulsa

In Round 2, most respondents did not bother to click the Sandy Adams video (they were not sure they were allowed to do so), so we asked them how long they thought the video might be. Most answered between two and three minutes, and were surprised when we informed them that it was actually seven minutes long. We then asked them if they would have clicked if they’d known the video was 90 seconds long (the length of Sullivan’s video), and most answered yes. The only caveat to this was that respondents who were reading the e-newsletter did not feel the need to click on the video since they believed it was sufficiently summarized in the text above it.

So, if Members would like constituents to watch a video, they need make sure to place it higher up on the page, and have most of the descriptive text below the video image so that people might bother to click. Below is an example we created:
APPENDIX II

Quick Guide for Effective Online Ads, Franked Mail, Websites, and E-newsletters

A. OFFICIAL ONLINE ADS

- **Be robust in your outreach:** Deliver multiple impressions to your web-using constituents (just one impression to each web-user will most likely go unnoticed). In other words, place your ad on multiple sites, multiple times.

B. FRANKED MAIL

- **Control what’s likeliest to get read:** Use bullet points and bolded text when you want to grab readers’ attention; use block text in a letter form when it’s crucial for constituents to read every word you send them.
- **Make your mailing actionable:** Include information about constituent services or other important resources to show that you’re trying to be helpful.
  - Put the information on a tear-off card so constituents can save it for reference.
- **Solicit feedback—smartly:** Ask survey questions on a tear-off card for constituents to mail back in to show that you value their opinions.
  - Make the tear-off card prominent so it’s obvious it should be saved if it’s for reference, or mailed back if it’s a survey.
  - Put the tear-off portion in a different color than the rest of the mail piece.
  - Print a dotted line around the perforation that stands out from the background.
  - Include scissor marks around the perforation as an obvious visual cue.
- **Demonstrate your accessibility:** Include multiple contact methods and addresses throughout the mail piece to show your constituents that you want to hear from them.
- **Incorporate policy timelines:** When a policy is being implemented over time, use a timeline (by year) to show the law’s passage and implementation schedule.
- **Tailor your mail pieces:** If you are mailing mostly to seniors, keep the type fonts large.
- **Don’t appear in photos alone:** When possible, include pictures of yourself interacting with constituents, rather than using stock photos which won’t get as much attention, and won’t help constituents view you more favorably.
- **Footnote statistics:** Know that your data will be questioned, particularly if it is counter-intuitive. If you don’t cite a credible source, that data will be dismissed—or worse still, it will undermine your reputation.
C. WEBSITES

- **Label with precision**: Instead of having a button on the toolbar labeled “Issues,” denote “Policy Issues” instead, since it’s clearer what information constituents will find there.
  - Make sure “Policy Issues” has its own drop-down menu so that viewers can easily see the different public policy topics you offer information on before leaving the home page.

- **Don’t make them hunt**: Make your vote on particular issues explicit and easy for constituents to find.
  - In the descriptions of where you stand on policy issues, include links to votes.
  - Allow users to sort vote records by topic area.
  - Include an additional search box with the “Vote Records” page.

- **Make “Search” prominent and attractive**: Put the search box in an easy-to-locate position, preferably near or in the menu bar. Have it look inviting and distinct, and encourage its use by including visually-engaging design elements.

D. E-NEWSLETTERS

- **Include an index**: You need some sort of overview at the top of your longer e-newsletters with hyperlinks to the sections below so constituents don’t have to review the whole document to know what’s in it.

- **Provide a “temporal” structure**: Incorporate the past/present/future construct into the index and the body of the e-newsletter. In other words, tell them what you did, tell them what you’re doing, and tell them what you’re going to do.

- **Be brief**: Keep the text short, sweet, and to the point.
  - Provide links at the end of each segment for constituents to “click to read more.”

- **Use videos**: Include videos in the e-newsletter and embed them.
  - Make sure there is a play button over the image of the video.
  - Include a time code, or reference the length of the video in the text.
  - Keep the video under three minutes and preferably around 90 seconds.
  - Place text about the video topic below the video itself, so constituents will still get some value from watching the video if they have not read the summary yet.