

FirstGov:
Online Government in the Year 2000

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FirstGov.gov was the largest effort of its time to organize government information available over the Internet and make it available to citizens quickly and intuitively.

It grew out of work begun in the National Partnership for Reinventing Government in 1999. At the time, just four years following the general availability of reliable commercial browsers, Internet content was growing at an exponential rate. Search services were proliferating on the Internet, but none ensured 100 percent inclusion of governmental information. Adding to the complexity was the fact that there were no reliable estimates of the amount of information agencies had place on the Internet. Some estimates ran as high as 100 million web pages, though in fact, no one really knew.

There were many challenges to overcome. The first challenge was that no one had ever attempted to organize an institution as large and diverse as the federal government in this way before. For example, most search technology at the time relied upon hidden “metatags” that provided a synopsis of the content on a given page. Most pages, however, had no metatag data or the hidden field was used to store irrelevant data, such as the date of the page’s creation and author’s name. A solution that required disparate components of the executive branch to populate and maintain metatag data was not considered viable. The solution had to be totally passive, requiring no specific actions from the web site operators.

A second challenge was that, though the initiative had the active backing of many of the most senior leaders in the federal government, it was being undertaken at the tail end of a presidential administration. It was essential to move very quickly to complete the effort and to ensure that it was sustainable without the presence of any of the key players who had brought it into existence.

A third and surprisingly significant obstacle was the entrenched resistance to making the information easy to find. There were governmental organizations and programs that preferred not to have their activities known beyond a small group of well-defined users. There were also companies that charged handsome subscription fees to research and provide information on governmental activities to clients. Both groups had a strong stake in the status quo.

The vision for *FirstGov*, though, was too compelling to be stifled by these obstacles. A child of the dot-com excitement of the 1990s, it was intended to be both very simple and massively transformational. Its simplicity was evident in the basic concept — to catalogue all federal governmental information available on the Internet in a manner that would make it easy to find, always available, and continuously updated. It was to be the one place to look that would find any governmental information that was available. Conversely, if *FirstGov* couldn’t find it, then it didn’t exist. It was to serve as the federal concierge, assisting visitors to find what they needed in an unfamiliar place, quickly and easily.

The transformational aspects were the most powerful components. At a basic level, it was obvious that many web sites contained similar, yet conflicting, information. By exposing all sites containing the same information, it would become apparent which were authoritative sources and eliminate the need for others to continue to try to maintain information that was not central to their operations. This efficiency in operations could then free up funding to improve the user experience on the other sites. That included the use of the *FirstGov* search engine to provide search capabilities tailored to the individual sites.

Though the benefits listed above were considered more than sufficient to justify the project, the most fundamental transformational aspect of *FirstGov* was the attempt to use the information in the index as a platform for the development of a new “gov.com” industry. The sponsors thought that this would fundamentally change how citizens interacted with their government and how government provided services to citizens. A fundamental objective of the *FirstGov* effort was to provide information in a format that was reliable, consistent, and delivered very quickly. The intent was for *FirstGov* to be a wholesale information broker, serving it up to privately owned and operated web sites. That would then allow an entire information industry to emerge, focused on weaving together various sources of information for specific market niches. There was much excitement and activity in this space as *FirstGov* was taking form, but the “dot-com meltdown” during the summer of 2000 effectively eliminated this potential benefit.

Effectively outsourcing the government’s customer relationships to third parties was not considered to be without risk, though. Throughout the effort, great attention was paid to developing and maintaining the “brand” of *FirstGov*. The project sponsors were very concerned that those making use of the information may hide behind the logo and use the pseudo-official status to indulge in activities that were not in citizens’ best interests. After extensive consultation with industry, government, and non-governmental stakeholders, a set of seven conditions were developed to ensure that the brand was protected. They are shown in Box 1.

Box 1.

Commercial portals, as noted, do not share their proprietary information. *FirstGov* is different because everyone shares in it, provided they observe a set of citizen-centric principles. Any commercial web site can have access to *FirstGov* and add value to it, once the commercial site becomes a *FirstGov* certified partner (FGCP). The principles partners must agree to are:

- **Integrity:** FGCPs must use the governmental information “as is,” protecting the integrity and authenticity of the source information.
- **Free Access:** FGCPs must strive to provide uninterrupted, free access to the governmental web pages.
- **Privacy Protection:** FGCPs must not track any individual visitor's movements to or through the governmental information.
- **Positioning:** Wherever the *FirstGov* governmental information is placed on the certified organization's web site, the information on the site must not be positioned or otherwise associated on the screen with other content that is pornographic or sexually-explicit, child-threatening, or contrary to U.S. laws, such as civil rights, gender discrimination, age discrimination, and privacy.
- **No Advertising:** FGCPs must not include any active banner advertising on the screens where a *FirstGov* page is displayed. Only institutional ads are permitted, such as a static logo with or without a description such as "Supported in part by XYZ Corporation."
- **Attribution:** FGCPs must clearly and conspicuously attribute the information to the U.S. Government.
- **Accessibility Compliant:** The section of the web site containing *FirstGov* information must comply with all requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which ensures effective access to federal information on the Internet by persons with disabilities.
- **Feedback Channels:** FGCPs must establish mechanisms for soliciting user feedback.

The actual work of conceiving, creating and launching *FirstGov* was a classic case study of achieving transformational change in a large organization. It began as a seed of an idea within the National Public Radio (NPR), but didn't make much progress until it was adopted and championed by a senior executive and political appointee with exceptional influence, the Administrator of the General Services Administration (GSA). He converted the idea into a compelling vision that captured the imagination of his colleagues across the administration. He convinced his colleagues on the President's Management Council to endorse and fund the effort.

A small staff was assembled in the GSA/Chief Information Officer's office to explore a broad horizon of new search technologies available on the market and to determine how to achieve the launch of a credible site and, more importantly, how to ensure that the information available could be kept current over time. Few people at the time understood the nature of Internet search technology. As a result, while the technical staff were evaluating competing technologies, a major communication effort began to simply explain to governmental and citizen groups how Internet searches are conducted, what the strengths and weaknesses of the existing approaches were, and what may be the implications for tampering with search results or compromises to personal privacy when conducting searches.

During the course of the evaluations and communication, there were others in government and industry who sought to undermine the efforts of the team. Whether it was a matter of others in government attempting to divert the funding for other purposes or industry lobbyists asking Congress to protect their business models built around the difficulty of finding governmental information, a continual rear-guard action had to be conducted to protect the effort. Additionally, the local government-focused information technology press was enlisted by various interests to continually cast doubt on the ability of the team to resolve a wide variety of issues and concerns.

The team's means of dealing with these threats was simply to move so fast that everyone else was always several weeks behind. Everyone essentially worked seven days a week to advance the project as rapidly as possible. The result was that each time a question was raised, the team usually had a solid, well-developed answer. This ability to handle most objections quickly and thoroughly, rather than causing concern to wane, seemed to actually invite more subterfuge.

At one point, the situation became so difficult, that the Administrator of the GSA convinced the president to invest some of his own political capital in the activity by announcing officially that the effort was underway and that it would be launched "within 90 days." (This was actually a shorter timeframe than he had been told, but his speechwriter changed the dates, and the team was then obliged to meet the shorter, nearly impossible timeframe.) With the official presidential announcement, the internal government stakeholders quickly fell in line and began actively supporting the project. The Chief Information Officers Council officially endorsed the project, and staff were detailed from other agencies to provide the requisite program management. A governance board was also created that included members who were either key to the project's success or who had been hampering its progress. The board brought together the right mix of senior executives to deal with the broad cross-agency policy issues, while neutralizing some opposition by giving those people a stake in a successful outcome.

Still, though, the faster the project advanced, seemingly the more opposition there was to it. The president's announcement resulted in much greater visibility for the effort, drawing the attention of everyone from privacy advocates to congressional staff. The fact that the team was working on "Internet Time" and was developing the concept of operations as the project itself evolved resulted in a lot of suspicion about "what was really going on." Again, speed of execution and extensive communications provided the necessary cover to keep the technical team focused on producing

results within the required timeframe. The fact that much of this work occurred during the months of July and August, when many in Washington are away on vacation, was also beneficial.

As the project advanced, there were many other complicating factors, ranging from procurement regulations that were not well adapted to this new approach to the failure of contractors on the project to adhere to the architecture that had been prescribed in the request for proposal. Some of the key issues didn't arise until the final week before the president was scheduled to officially launch the site. Only a concerted effort that included personal and corporate sacrifice by virtually every participant brought the project to fruition on schedule. As a "critical success factor," this willingness on the part of everyone involved to step up and do whatever it took to succeed even when the failure was someone else's problem, cannot be overstated.

On September 22, 2000, exactly ninety days from the president's original announcement, *www.firstgov.gov* was launched in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in a live event broadcast over the Internet. Barely fifteen hours passed before the Administrator of GSA received a summons to appear before Congress the following week to explain *FirstGov* — specifically why the government was providing for free information that was provided on a fee basis by private companies. As citizens began using the service, though, virtually all the suspicions subsided. People began to see it for what it was — simply an easy to use index to governmental web site information.

With the transition to a new administration in January 2001, the fact that it provided such a strong utilitarian and apolitical service was a tremendous strength. The new administration looked to dramatically expand the role of *FirstGov*, drafting plans to transform it into a content management, customer relationship management, and web hosting facility for agencies across the federal government. Congress, however, never funded these plans, and they remain unrealized potential.

FirstGov today is still true to its original objective: an easy, fast place to find government information. Building on feedback from users, many incremental improvements have been made. For example, all state information has been added to the site and there have been significant efforts to ensure that sites providing transactional capabilities are highlighted in a "three clicks to service" model. It's elegance is in its simplicity.