![Government Business Council logo]

The Building Blocks of Trust:
Federal Websites and Customer Experience

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Underwritten by:

![WordPress VIP logo]

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the customer experience (CX) is a priority for government agencies, and user-friendly, robust, and secure websites are central to meeting that goal. Between January and March of 2023 alone, there were 5.33 billion visits to federal websites, ranging from tracking USPS packages to accessing the Veterans Affairs online portal to researching financial aid.[1]

Agencies know their websites serve a core function for the public to both access their services and understand their mission. They also know that both citizens and employees expect a smooth experience – as the quality of commercial customer service has improved, 85% of the public expect government agencies to meet or exceed that standard.[2]

Mandating Modernization

Improved customer experiences has been an ongoing focus for the federal government, including several mandates from Congress and the Executive Office.

2012
Digital Government Strategy

2018
21st Century Integrated Digital Act[3]

2000   2005   2010   2015   2020   2025

2002
E-Government Act

2016
OMB Policies for Federal Agency Public Websites and Digital

OMB Circular A-130, Managing Information as a Strategic Resources

2022
Executive Order 14058[4] on Customer Experience

1 https://analytics.usa.gov/
2 https://www.theacsi.org/industries/government/
3 https://digital.gov/resources/21st-century-integrated-digital-experience-act/
4 https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on- transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/

While citizen satisfaction with the federal government rose in 2022, the American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) found that citizen perception of government websites slipped for the third year in a row.[5]

Part of the challenge agencies face are their existing content management systems (CMSs). Many of these systems were adopted years ago and have failed to keep up with technological advancements. Without this core foundation it becomes difficult if not impossible to incorporate the design elements and user capabilities that move public perception and experience. The longer it takes for these systems to catch up with the times, the more technical debt agencies accrue, and the more difficult it can be to catch up with a content and delivery backlog.

As agencies work on enhancing CX, using the right CMSs will go a long way toward improving these perceptions. And ease of use for the citizen does not mean sacrificing the security that is so critical for the government.

U.S. Web Design System

What does it really mean to modernize a federal website? The 21st Century IDEA act requires that public-facing websites and services should follow these eight principles[6]:

1. **Accessible** - be accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with Section 508
2. **Consistent** - have a consistent appearance
3. **Authoritative** - not overlap with or duplicate existing websites
4. **Searchable** - contain a search function
5. **Secure** - be provided through a secure connection
6. **User-centered** - be designed around user needs with data-driven analysis
7. **Customizable** - provide an option for a more customized digital experience
8. **Mobile-friendly** - be functional and usable on mobile devices

5 https://www.theacsi.org/news-and-resources/reports/2023/01/31/federal-government-report-2022/
6 https://digital.gov/resources/21st-century-integrated-digital-experience-act/

THE FOUNDATIONS

The foundation of a positive user experience is a CMS that works for both the public and public servants. Those accessing the website should find a dynamic and responsive platform that has up-to-date information and quick responses to inquiries and needs. At the same time, those using the system – public affairs officers, developers, and technical staff – should be able to focus on doing their job rather than navigating the technicalities of a complicated platform.

A robust CMS should help agencies do the following:

Engage the User

Visiting a government website has become an essential method for interacting with agencies. Visitors expect websites that are easy to navigate, provide smooth interactions, and are accessible across different languages, abilities, and devices. Ensuring site reliability, performance, and rapid public access to important information and resources is all part of offering a seamless user experience that builds public trust in federal agencies.

Empower Employees

Federal employees are the government's biggest asset. Government technology should empower them to serve their agency's mission. End users shouldn't need to be IT professionals, coders, or web platform management gurus just to do their job. They should be able to use the platform to share the expertise that matters like helping the public on tax topics, sharing information with veterans about benefit access, providing education about what's happening galaxies away. This is the mission-critical work, and web platforms should empower, not challenge, these efforts.

Ensure Security

Federal websites must include stringent security and management controls to prevent the disclosure of sensitive government information and constituent personal data. Threats to government websites are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Attacks like DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) events can take websites offline and compromise data through a massive flood of traffic require robust defenses and safeguards to ensure the integrity of the site.[7] There are several federal regulations and guidelines that set out expectations for security. This includes certification by FedRAMP (Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program), a program that encourages adoption of modern cloud technologies and serves as a stamp of approval that platforms are in line with government-wide security standards.

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7 https://www.cpomagazine.com/cyber-security/russian-hackers-shut-down-dozens-of-state-government-websites-in-ddos-attacks/

Success through OSS

Federal agencies recognize the creative and innovative potential of Open Source Software (OSS). OSS offers ready-made blocks of available code that make building websites and applications faster, cheaper, and of better quality than if a developer had to create all the code from scratch. Policies as early as 2014 provide guidance on building reusable government code, ensuring agency compliance, procurement from third party systems, and participation in the external Open Source Community. The 2016 Federal Source Code Policy further codifies federal investment in OSS, mandating inter-agency source code sharing, and that at least 20% of in-house source code must be released into the public domain.[8]

Other OSS initiatives include:

Code.gov
Federal platform for sharing America's open source software, helping agencies save money and improve quality through code reuse and engagement with the external open source community.[9]

NASA
NASA has been a leader in the OSS game for decades, and uses multiple public, open source development repositories at SourceForge and GitHub, along with code.NASA.gov. The agency uses the data to address projects and mission needs, accelerate software development, and maximize public awareness of their research and mission.[10]

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
CFPB released its first source code policy and OSS projects nine months after it opened its doors in 2012. The agency has heavily invested in both developing policies and procedures and building repositories; currently the CFPB has over 280 open source code repositories, including consumerfinance.gov and the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) filingplatform.[11]

OPEN SOURCE CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Open source CMSs are a rapidly growing type of OSS within the federal government. These platforms allow for more flexibility, ease of adaptability, feature management, and increased creative control – in short, better building blocks for a customer-responsive website.

WordPress, the CMS system used for 43% of all websites, is a popular choice for government agencies as well. The system is intuitive, adaptable, and scalable, with creative controls that make it easier for agencies to build websites that clearly express their missions and adhere to web design system requirements. The interface also means that federal employees do not need hours of training to work with it — they can easily add or delete pages or make other content changes. Agencies can also use an ecosystem of pre-built functionalities rather than having to develop them themselves.No wonder then that more than 250 government agencies — including the White House, NASA, and the Department of Justice — use it.

Some examples include:

8 https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp- content/uploads/legacy_drupal_files/omb/memoranda/2016/m_16_21.pdf
9 https://www.code.gov/
10 https://www.nasa.gov/open/open-source-development.html
11 https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201204_cfpb_source_code_policy.pdf
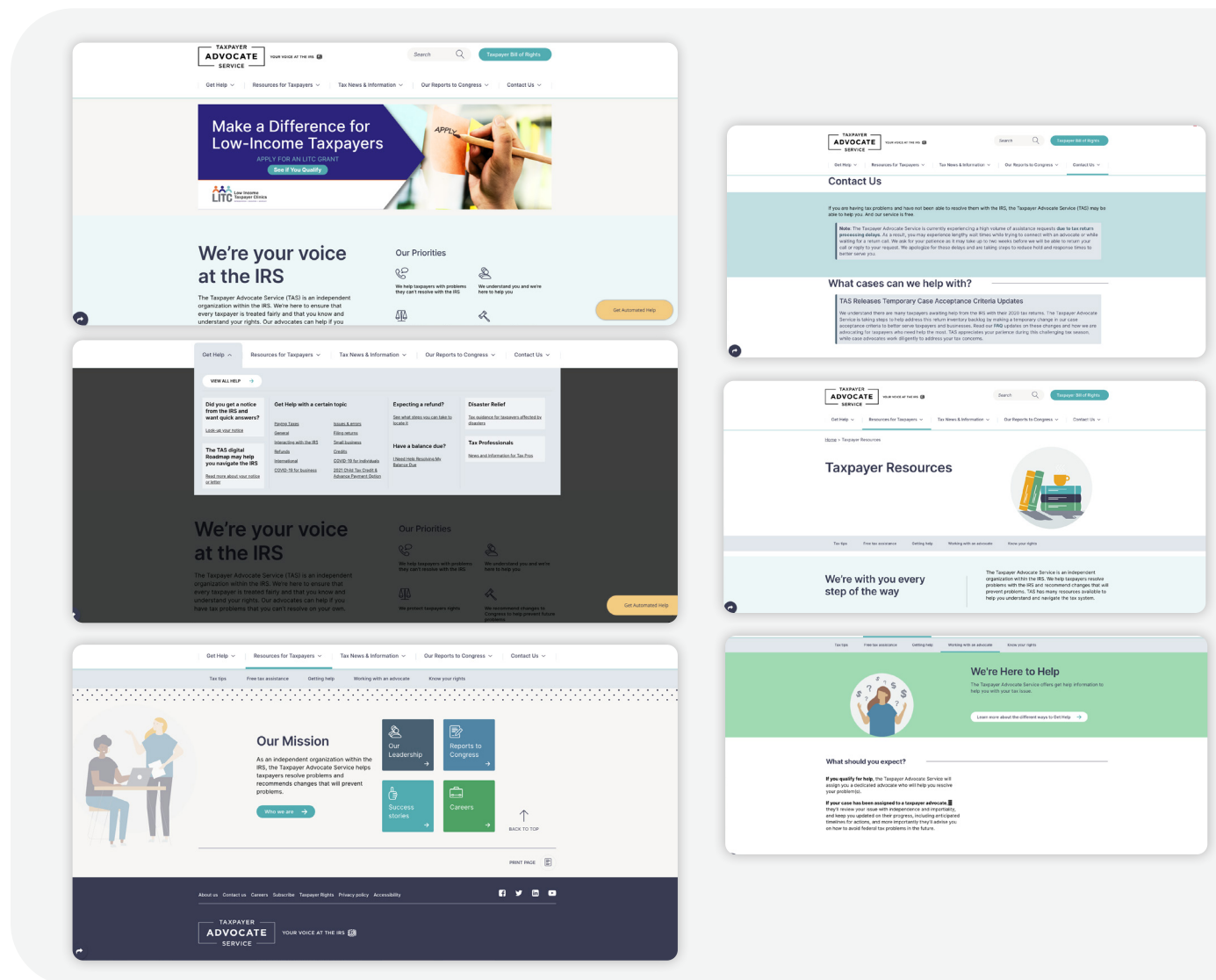
WHITEHOUSE.GOV

As the digital face of the presidential administration, it is crucial that the website is clear and accessible for visitors. The user experience of whitehouse.gov has been praised for its minimalistic yet high-quality design and ease of navigation, allowing communication and messaging to remain uncluttered and clear.[12]

12 https://www.symsoftsolutions.com/ux-design/7-government-websites-with-the-best-ux-design/
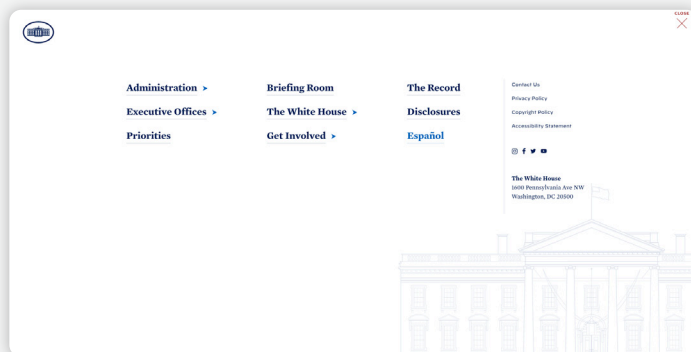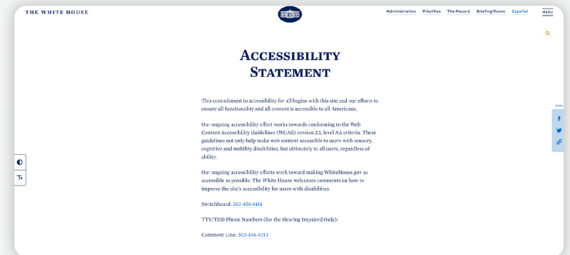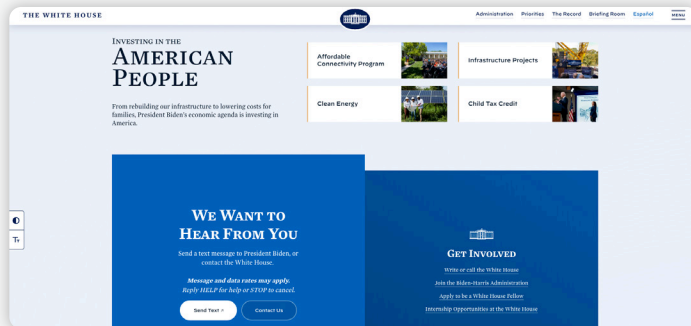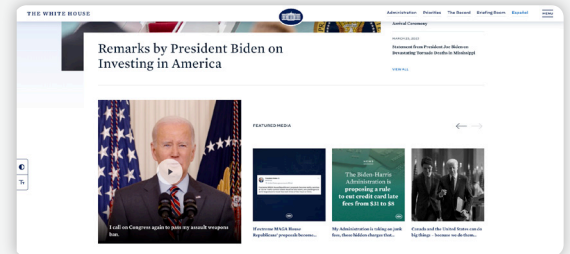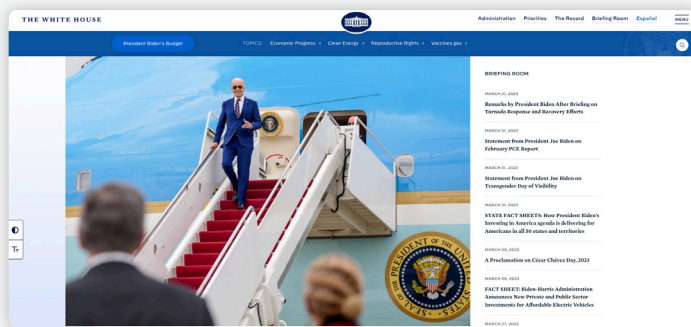
TAXPAYER ADVOCATE (IRS)

Customer satisfaction is, perhaps unsurprisingly, generally low with the IRS. As part of the agency's multi-year IRS Modernization Plan, and their newly established Taxpayer Experience Office, come a number of initiatives surrounding digital customer service improvements.[13] Cohesive and cogent designs, clear navigation tools to what users need, integrated search utilities and an easily scalable platform that can respond to sudden bursts of traffic (like those during tax season) are all key considerations that can build trust in the IRS.[14]


13 https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-modernization

14 https://federalnewsnetwork.com/commentary/2022/04/irs-has-opportunity-to-improve-customer-experience-by-embracing-
   digital-services/

STATE DEPARTMENT

With diplomacy and strategic messaging at the heart of its mission, the State Department needs a website that is equally polished and communicative. The website makes navigation simple, to find information about policy issues or on specific countries or regions, as well as providing live streams of press briefings, news updates, and spotlights on cultural events. The effect is engaging, informative, and clearly communicates the agency's mission and values.[15]

15 https://www.state.gov/
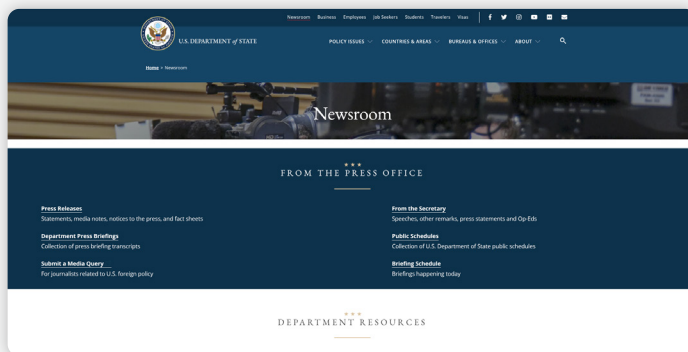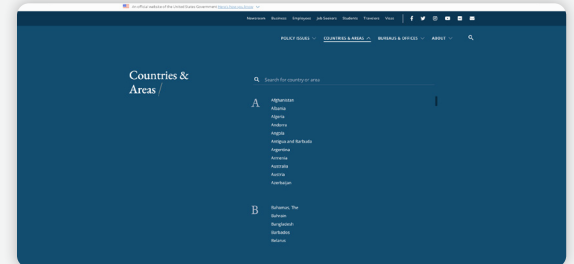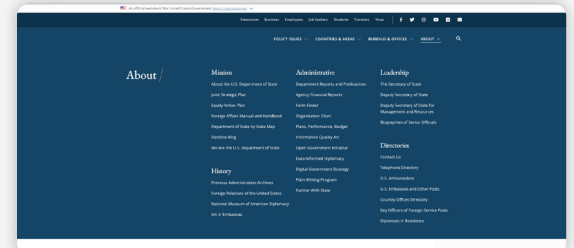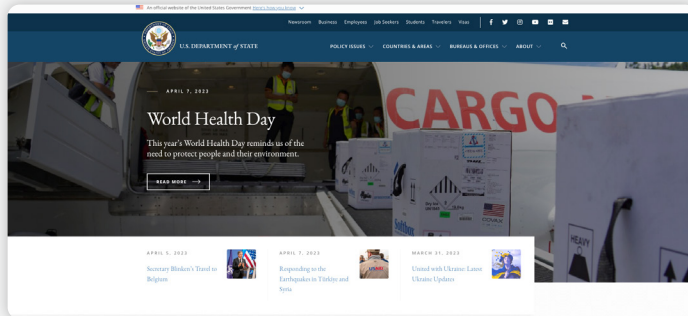
BEST PRACTICES

Using an OSS CMS can be a game changer for federal agencies' ability to serve their public, but agencies must make wise decisions that respond to both the needs of their constituents and the components of their mission. Some key characteristics of a highly functional website include:

Accessibility

Websites need to be clear and readable for everyone. Nearly one quarter of all visitors to government websites exclusively do so via mobile device, and particularly from lower-income households, making it important that government websites function as well on mobile devices as they do on a desktop.[16]

Traffic Management

Government websites need to be able to manage large volumes of traffic, but it is especially crucial that they can handle major spikes that can happen during emergencies or crises. Service disruptions during these critical moments can have potentially catastrophic effects for both agencies and individuals that rely on that service. These issues can also damage agency credibility or public trust, as demonstrated by the bad press around the crashing of websites built for vaccine distribution and unemployment benefits in 2020.[17] Agency CMSs should easily be able to scale up and down during moments of high traffic, quickly adjusting to meet demand and ensuring that agencies are ready and available when it is most important.

Security

Government websites are tempting attack surfaces for state actors and other malicious parties. Groups like pro-Russian hacker group Killnet have claimed responsibility for multiple cyberattacks that have targeted websites of American states and NATO; in January 2023, CISA, the NSA, and the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center released a joint warning of increasing hacks on the federal civilian executive branch.[18] These threats make it more critical than ever that agency websites prioritize security.

Strategic Partnerships

Choosing a solution provider that works to ease burden on employees and improve experience for the customer will lead to a better experience for all. Intuitive platforms that have easy-to-understand functionalities as well as robust security controls will help agencies meet the needs of their audiences and provide positive user experiences. Ensuring that this partner is compliant, including FedRAMP authorization, is also crucial for agency security and transparency.

16 https://cdncom.cfigroup.com/wp-content/uploads/CFI-Government-Websites-Report-21-22.pdf
17 https://www.govtech.com/opinion/government-websites-still-unprepared-for-traffic-surges
18 https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/significant-cyber-incidents

CONCLUSION

Government agencies need technology that helps them become more effective and efficient, rather than adding to their workload or raising security concerns. Public servants deserve tools that support their creativity, innovation, and efficiency. Continued federal investment in OSS-based CMS tools will be central to delivering services and engaging digital experiences that address and meet their customers' expectations. Platforms like WordPress make information sharing easier, build adaptability and resilience, and open creative possibilities — all of which are the building blocks of the next generation of federal customer service.

A NOTE FROM OUR SPONSOR

As agencies migrate from unwieldy CMSs, they're turning to WordPress because staff of different skill levels understand how to use it. WordPress delivers the functionalities agencies need without requiring the level of training and support from technical staff that other products require. Ease of use, the ability to make changes quickly, and the ability to add in functionality as needed leads to websites that provide the CX constituents expect.

Security is the primary concern for any technology solution in government. What agency users don't typically see, however, are the controls that keep data safe and agencies in compliance with mandates. That means government websites must be built on solutions with security at their core.

WordPress VIP provides a solution tailored to the needs of the government. It is the only managed WordPress platform to achieve a FedRAMP Authority to Operate (ATO) and other required certifications for government. Our team facilitates and delivers training to help ensure compliance with security baselines. We can also develop and support customer disaster recovery plans and procedures and tailored RCA as needed in partnership with the agency, all while meeting our commitments to continuous monitoring, FedRAMP authorization, and annual recertification against NIST standards.

ABOUT

Government Business Council

As GovExec's research division, Government Business Council (GBC) is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis, insight, and analytical independence. An extension of Government Executive's 50 years of exemplary editorial standards and commitment to the highest ethical values, GBC studies influential decision makers from across government toproduce intelligence-based research analysis.

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WordPress VIP

Founded in 2006, WordPress VIP is the agile content platform that empowers marketers to build content both faster and smarter so they can drive more growth. We combine the power of WordPress with the security needed to run websites for major government agencies. Our customers — including Al Jazeera and Whitehouse.gov — use content to create powerful and high-performing digital experiences for customers. We empower content and development teams with the flexibility and ubiquity of WordPress — the agile CMS that powers more than 43% of the web — while ensuring the security and reliability organizations need to operate at enterprise scale. Because of its robust security controls, WordPress VIP is the only WordPress platform to achieve FedRAMP Authority to Operate (ATO).