

Chapter

Government Public Relations and the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services Website

by

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Introduction

Imagine you are from another country interested in seeking citizenship to the United States. Or imagine that you were already in the United States on a temporary worker or student visa and you needed to extend your stay. Or what if you were already a U.S. citizen looking to adopt internationally?

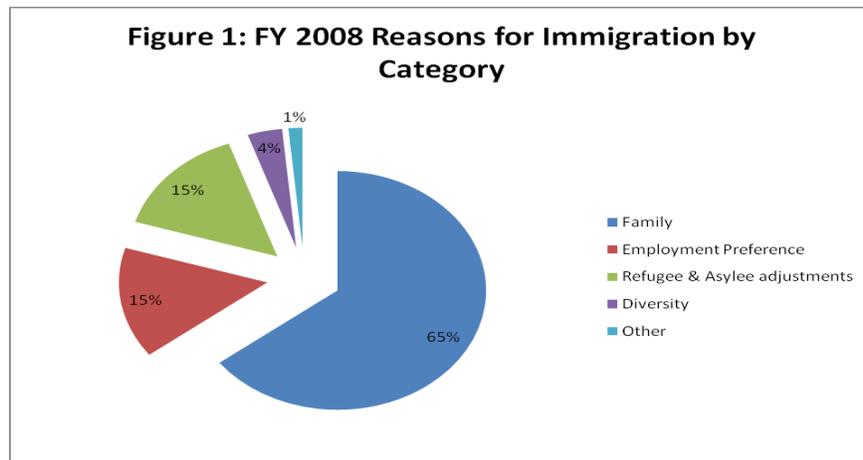
The United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the agency that deals with all these scenarios and more. The following case study examines how good government public relations would serve the USCIS well, via their website: www.uscis.gov. As discussed in a previous chapter, there is a right way and a wrong way to put together a government website, according to *USA.gov*'s "Top Ten Best Practices". For the USCIS, they have a monumental task due to their large constituency base. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that they have a first-rate government website in order to ensure the proper responsiveness and outreach that is crucial to good government public relations.

The Constituency

During the 2008 fiscal year, 1.1 million aliens became legal permanent residents (LPRs) in the United States.¹ According to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, there are four major purposes that make up the U.S. immigration policy: the reunification of families, the admission

of immigrants with needed skills, the protection of refugees, and the diversity of admissions by country or origin.ⁱⁱ What this amounts to is one large and diverse constituency base for USCIS.

From 2001-2008, Mexico had the greatest amount of foreign nationals to become LPRs. In 2008 alone, 189,989 people from Mexico become LPRs in the U.S. Mexico was followed by China with 80,271 LPRs and India with 63,352 LPRsⁱⁱⁱ. In 2008, immediate relatives of citizens made up the largest group of immigrants, totaling 488,483 LPRs. The second largest group was family preference (227,176 LPRs) followed by employment preference (166,511 LPRs) and refugee & asylee adjustments (166,392 LPRs). Therefore family ties accounted for 65% of the 1.1 million LPRs in 2008^{iv}. This information is depicted in Figure 1 below.



Knowing who USCIS's constituency is helps understand how their website should be laid out. Based on this information, it can be identified who will be accessing the USCIS website, and therefore who that website should be tailored to. First of all, although Mexico is the predominate country for people immigrating to the U.S. as of right now, there are many countries contributing to the immigration population of the U.S. Of the top three alone, only one is Spanish speaking.

Therefore, it is crucial for the USCIS website to be multilingual in order to effectively communicate with all its foreign nationals.

Secondly, as was demonstrated, many immigrants are coming to the country for different purposes. Therefore, it is necessary for family to be separate from employment purposes. Also, due to the extensive forms and the confusing nomenclature existing within the USCIS, a glossary or index would be useful. Many of the people who are trying to bring family members over are not schooled in immigration law and keeping up with all the forms can be quite a task. Finally, another constituency base is the immigration lawyers and the congressional liaisons who are trying to assist people sort through all the confusion. The website should provide a way to assist these people as well.

The U.S. Customs and Immigration Services Website

Each month USCIS has a web metrics report completed by Customer Service Web Portal (CSWP) to measure the different components of their website. This report measures aspects like visitor traffic, what visitors are accessing while on the site, how visitors accessed the site, how USCIS ranks in usage in accordance to other government websites.

Some interesting findings from the February 2010 report, published on March 15, 2010, found that user sessions had decreased by 15% from January 2010. The previous month found that user sessions increased 26% from their peak time of August-October 2009 and 49% from their low point of November-December 2009. The 15% decrease in February is contributed to less people accessing the “Haiti Earthquake Response” feature that USCIS added in January^v.

The USCIS website became bilingual September 2009 by adding a Spanish language site. Since then, that site has accounted for 3% of all traffic to USCIS. Furthermore, the main reason people visit the USCIS website is to access the different forms. The report found that out of the total 2,239,017 sessions for the month of February, the forms landing page amounted to 1,092,894 of those sessions. The next highest area of interest was the topics landing page with only 231,684 user sessions.^{vi}

The USCIS website is also significant in comparison to other Department of Homeland Security (DHS) websites. Figure 1 below, shows how traffic on the USCIS website ranks in with other DHS websites. Figure 2 compares USCIS to four other federal websites outside of the federal government.

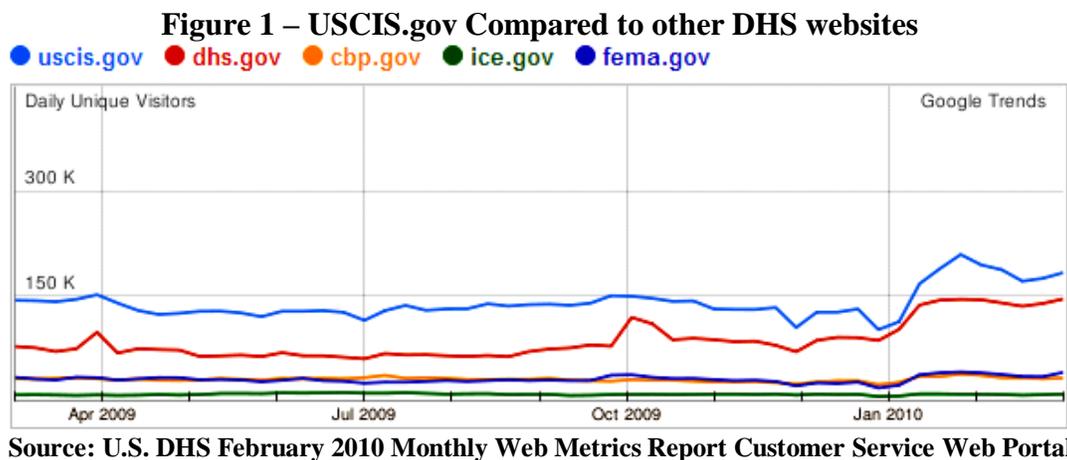
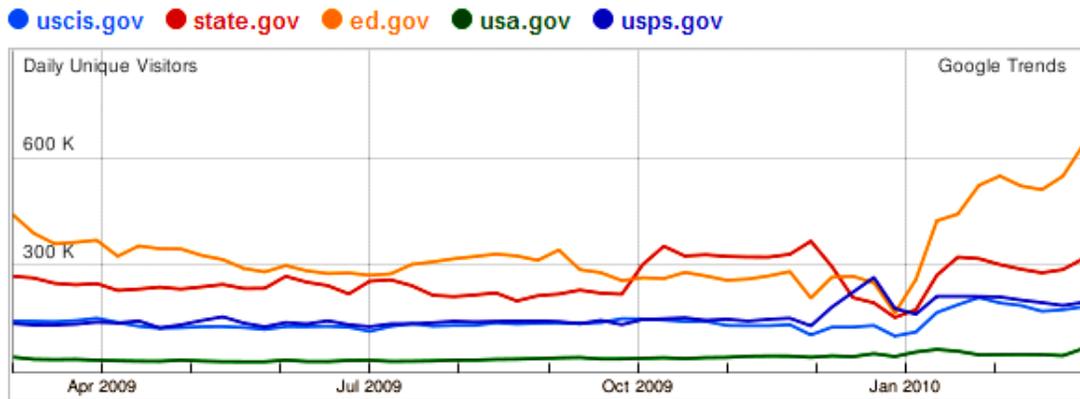


Figure 2 – USCIS.gov Compared to leading Federal Websites



Source: U.S. DHS February 2010 Monthly Web Metrics Report Customer Service Web Portal

As these two figures depict, the USCIS website, in terms of traffic, is competitive with other leading federal websites and leading all other websites within the DHS. It is important that the traffic is there, but are they getting the information they need? It is evident that USCIS has a large constituency that uses their website; therefore it is important that they are utilizing this tool to the optimal point for public relations purposes. Otherwise, it would be a wasted opportunity.

Top Ten Best Practices for a Government Website

The *USA.gov* website provides a list of what every public website should do in order to have a successful and responsive website. Below, in Figure 3, is a collapsed description of these “Top 10 Best Practices.”

Figure 3

Top Ten Best Practices for Government Websites	
Number	Best Practice
1	Comply with all laws, requirements and policies for public websites
2	Manage and govern your website
3	Develop, document and implement a strategic plan
4	Focus on top tasks
5	Manage content and use plain language
6	Don't duplicate content
7	Make your website design usable
8	Evaluate your website and make improvements
9	Make sure the public can find your website
10	Create ways the public can interact with your government

Source: *USA.gov* “Top Ten Best Practices”

Several of the “Top Ten Best Practices for Government Websites” published by *USA.gov* cannot be distinguished by a viewer of the website. They are suggestions that are recommended to be implemented, but are not always the most visible to website users. For example, the first practice recommended is to “meet all laws, requirements, policies, and other directives for public websites.”^{vii} These laws, requirements and policies come from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the E-Government Act of 2002, the Paperwork Reduction Act, the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Executive order and many more directives and regulations.^{viii} Some of these suggestions are evident and implemented by the USCIS website; such as having a (.gov) domain and allowing citizens to make FOIA requests. Others are not as noticeable.

One point of where the USCIS could improve their public relations is in regards to this first best practice of providing “meaningful access” to those with limited English proficiency. As stated earlier, the USCIS constituency includes a multilingual population. It only makes sense then, in order to effectively communicate with its constituents, that the USCIS should have a multilingual website. The USCIS did not adopt a bilingual website until September of 2009 and the web metrics show that it has increasingly become more and more popular^{ix}. A suggestion then for the USCIS, in order to better provide “meaningful access” according to the LEP Executive order would be to once again expand their website to become multilingual.

The second best practice according to *USA.gov* is for an agency to fully manage and govern their website. To help others understand what web governance is, and what it includes for an agency, the Web Governance Task Group was created. They went ahead and defined web governance as entailing “the structure of people, positions, authorities, roles, responsibilities, relationships, and

rules involved in managing an agency's website(s)."^x This is another example of when the average viewer cannot easily identify if this best practice has been fully implemented. On the USCIS website, the "About Us" tab allows a visitor to view the history, organizational chart, biographies of agencies' leaders, and where offices are located. However, web governance is not an issue that is discussed^{xi}.

The third best practice is similar to the second in the fact that it is hard to tell if it has been implemented. *USA.gov* advises that each agency "develop, document, and implement a strategic plan that incorporates visionary changes and corrects existing problems."^{xii} *USA.gov* even provides an outline to agencies on how they can go about doing this. What is not evident is whether or not USCIS follows this outline. Part of the USCIS mission is that "USCIS will secure America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system."^{xiii} This mission should have been incorporated into their visionary plan for their website along with a definition of success for the agency. The difficulty with this task is that USCIS has quite a complex method of defining success with the lofty mission that they have established.

The fourth best practice according to *USA.gov* is for an agency to identify, improve, and feature top tasks.^{xiv} According to the web metrics compiled by CSWP, forms are a predominate reason for why people access the USCIS website^{xv}. This makes sense, since there are over 94 different forms that a person has an option of submitting during their time with the USCIS^{xvi}. It is important then, that a visitor can easily access the forms they are looking for and have an

understanding of why they would want one form over another. To assist with this, the USCIS has the first tab at the top of their website dedicated specifically to “Forms.” On this page they have a spreadsheet of all the forms by their title, the form number (this is also the letter-number combination that they are usually referred to), the filing fee, and the edition. A visitor has an option of clicking on each form and getting a further explanation about filing and downloading the forms. This page can also be viewed according to specified forms. Therefore, if you are only interested in getting a Green Card, you would be able to view only the Green Card forms and nothing else^{xvii}. Of all the pages on the USCIS website, this is the most extensive and informative, which is good considering this is what is most needed by the people according to the CSWP web metrics.

For those individuals who are not ready to dive right into the forms section of the website, in January of 2010 the USCIS updated their website to include a “Where To Start Widget.” Placed in the left-hand corner of the site, this allows the a visitor to first answer in a drop-down selection who they are (a student, employer, employee, green card holder, U.S. citizen, foreign citizen, etc...), then choose what they want to do. So for example, if they choose that they are a U.S. citizen, one option that they can choose from is to file an affidavit of support form (I-864)^{xviii}. Or if they choose that they are a foreign citizen they can select to find the visa bulletin or visa bulletin information^{xix}. By no means is this an exhaustive list, but it is a way to point a person in the right direction to completing their task.

While USCIS has a harder time with the fifth best practice of having to “create and manage content effectively and efficiently”^{xx}. Many aspects make up the best practice of managing

content, including using plain language, knowing your audience through doing web surveys and focus groups, keeping content current and always having an “About Us” and Contact Us” page that has certain features.”^{xxi} However, one of the fundamental parts of the managing content page is the “organizing and categorizing content” section.^{xxii} This is where the USCIS had the most difficulty.

There are eight steps to help an agency organize and categorize their website content, which is considered one of the vital parts of any website. They are: “Step 1: Organize content based on audience needs, Step 2: Have a good homepage, Step 3: Use common content, terminology, and placement, Step 4: Use consistent navigation, Step 5: Don't duplicate existing content, Step 6: Manage links, Step 7: Apply metadata, Step 8: Avoid putting employee information on your public website.”^{xxiii}

Step one of listening to what your audience wants has already been discussed, and as stated before, the USCIS has responded to web metrics indicators. Another way the USCIS manages to listen to what its audience wants is by participating in user satisfaction surveys. The USCIS has joined over 100 other federal government websites in implementing the ForeSee Results survey system, on their website. “ForeSee Results is part of the American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) E-Government Index for gauging customer satisfaction and identifying areas of improvement.”^{xxiv} For more information about ForeSee Results, visit their website at www.foreseeresults.com.

Steps three and four of organizing and managing content can work together. Step three asks for consistency among all federal websites and step four wants consistency throughout the individual website. USCIS is fine in both of these regards. Step five will be discussed later as an individual best practice of its own and steps six through eight are not a focus of government public relations.

What is a focus for good government public relations is step two, and arguably the most important step; have a good homepage. *USA.gov* states homepages are important because “the homepage is the main tool for sending your visitors in the right direction.”^{xxv} From the USCIS homepage it is very easy for a visitor to get lost with all the clutter. The left-hand sidebar alone has options for “Where to Start Widget,” the INFOPASS box, scheduling an appointment, customer tools, and Help for Haiti. Another options bar in the middle of the page gives you the options of why you would come to the website (family, military, permanent residence, etc...) but each of these selections has many more sub-selections underneath them and it can be quite overwhelming^{xxvi}. The *USA.gov* provides the United States Postal Service (USPS) website as an example of how a homepage should look; uncluttered and organized. When comparing the USPS website to the USCIS website it is easy to see how the former is more efficient^{xxvii}.

According to *USA.gov* “web visitors want fast, efficient service. On homepages, they expect to find what they’re looking for with little or no scrolling.”^{xxviii} There is not a great deal of scrolling involved, except for the fact that all this information is cluttered at the top of the page, and then you have to scroll through half a blank page to get to the bottom of the page where links to “Contact Us,” “Careers at USCIS,” and external links to other federal websites exist^{xxix}.

“Research shows that more than half of all web users evaluate websites based on homepages alone. If you have an ineffective homepage, many visitors will immediately be turned off and may never come back to your site”^{xxx} according to *USA.gov*. The one thing that USCIS has in its favor is that no matter how ineffective their website is, it is still the only site people can turn to regarding immigration in the U.S. However, since people are visiting their website due to necessity, it is an opportunity for good government public relations. Unfortunately, their homepage is not helping them with their constituents. It is very easy to get frustrated with all the navigation that the USCIS requires and then in turn become frustrated with the USCIS.

The sixth best practice relates to step number five of managing content; “collaborate within your agency and across government to manage content and eliminate duplication.”^{xxxi} The first example of how the USCIS website can improve in this area is in regards to their contact information. The priority contact information a visitor will want is for a field office, since this is where a person will actually have appointments. However, the “Contact Us” page only contains the same generic numbers which are located under the “About Us” page. In order to access the find the appropriate field offices, it is necessary to do extra digging through the “Contact Us” page or the “About Us” page or even get lucky and stumble upon “Other Services.”^{xxxii}

Another example of duplicate information is with the forms. As stated before, the forms are a major reason people access the USCIS website. And while they do provide people the information they need under the forms tab, it can become too much of a good thing in the sense that on the homepage they have a “Most Searched Forms” section on the right-hand sidebar. This section is also under the “Forms” page and is pertinent there. However on the already cluttered

homepage, is just proves to be a distraction and for those visitors that do come seeking forms, it navigates them away from the actual “Forms” page where they need to be.^{xxxiii} There are numerous more examples of how USCIS duplicates information. One thing that they are accurate about though is that when they do provide duplicate information, it is at least consistent about the message. However, streamlining their website to be less complicated would lower that frustration level of visitors and raise their favorability among constituents.

“Research shows that people cannot find the information they seek on Web sites about 60% of the time. This can lead to wasted time, reduced productivity, increased frustration, and loss of repeat visits and money.”^{xxxiv} This explains the seventh best practice, which is for an agency to continuously make their website as usable as possible for their visitors. Usability.gov is a website established by the federal government to assist in this endeavor^{xxxv}. For government public relations purposes, it is important that an agency make use of this resource in order to be the most responsive to its constituents. However in the case of USCIS, a viewer cannot tell if they availed themselves of the usability.gov feature.

“Evaluate the effectiveness of your website and make improvements based on what you learned”^{xxxvi} is the eighth best practice according to *USA.gov*. This is where it is important for the USCIS to have the web metrics done each month by CSWP and also adjust accordingly to those findings. The new “Where to Start Widget” is a good addition in helping people navigate the website and in its first month this new feature was used 16,741 times.^{xxxvii} The USCIS website also started participating in the social media revolution in April 2009 by allowing visitors to share pages though Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc... The top page that was shared

in February 2010 was the Naturalization Test page.^{xxxviii} A further way to evaluate the USCIS website and respond to what visitors want would be to expand the website into a multilingual website. Since becoming bilingual in September 2009, the Spanish website has grown in use each month. This would suggest that by expanding into a multilingual website, considering the constituency, would only help improve responsiveness and outreach.

The ninth best practice is to “make sure the public can find your content.”^{xxxix} The USCIS does not have a problem with this at all. Figure 4 below depicts that when certain immigration terms are searched through Google, Yahoo and Bing search engines, what number the USCIS website pops up on the search page. These three search engines account for 95% of all external searches^{xl}.

Figure 4: Ranking of CSWP Pages in Search Requests on Three Top Search Engines

Search Terms	Google	Yahoo	Bing
uscis	1	1	1
uscis.gov	1	1	1
immigration	1	1	1
immigration and naturalization services	1	1	1
immigration forms	1	1	1
citizenship	1	2	1
ins	1	1	1
naturalization	1	1	1
green card	1	1	1
asylum	2	7	3

Source: U.S. DHS February 2010 Monthly Web Metrics Report Customer Service Web Portal

As Figure 4 depicts, the USCIS website is the website the shows up first almost all the time for the most common immigration search terms. Therefore, they have succeeded in implementing the ninth best practice.

The tenth and final best practice includes the formatting of “Contact Us” pages. This practice states, “create opportunities for the public to interact with their government.”^{xli} As stated before, this is an area where USCIS is lacking. Not only is the contact information confusing on how some of it can be accessed, but other guidelines for contact pages are missing as well. First, it is recommended that if you call the page “Contact Us” on the homepage, then you should continue to call it that throughout the website. The USCIS website does not follow this guideline. It has a “Contact Us” link on the bottom of the homepage, which takes you to the “About Us” page, not to the “Contact Us” page. Also, if you click on the “About Us” tab, the contact information is not the primary focus of that page. Furthermore, there is also no information on the “Contact Us” page in regards to the USCIS protocols of responding to emails, which is also recommended by *USA.gov*^{xlii}. For good government public relations, it is important for an agency to be responsive to its constituents. In order to properly do that, the constituents need to know how to contact the agency and the constituent needs to know when to expect an answer from the agency. This is another area that the USCIS could improve their website and have a positive impact on their public relations.

Conclusion

The reason the USCIS website was chosen for this case study, was due to the nature of its constituency. As stated before, the USCIS’ constituency is very large, without a central location and with diverse needs. Also the USCIS does not have any competition; if someone is interested in an U.S. immigration issue, they are the agency that has to be dealt with. Furthermore, the

majority of the constituents of the USCIS needs can only be met through their website and this is not necessarily a bad thing considering many of the constituents do not reside in the U.S. and therefore their only outlet is the USCIS website.

With all this being said, the USCIS provides a perfect opportunity for a government agency to implement good government public relations through the medium of their website. Through the analysis of the “Top 10 Best Practices” as set by *USA.gov* for public websites, it is evident that the USCIS website is not perfect by any means but it is also not a complete failure. There is room for improvement in the areas content management and organization, especially in the specific fields of the homepage and the “Contact Us” page. Duplicate information is a problem, and it would be better if the website was available in more languages than just English and Spanish.

Though the USCIS website does need improvements, they have worked to advance in many areas. They added the “Where to Start Widget” to help people focus on top tasks and they are interested in what their audience is using, having measured this through metrics and surveys. As long as they continue to improve their website and enhance their responsiveness and outreach to their constituency, the USCIS will be able to truly exhibit good government public relations.

ⁱ CRS Report RL32235, *U.S. Immigration Policy on Permanent Admissions* by Ruth Ellen Wasem

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v DHS CSWP report – Figure out how to cite

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} USA.gov

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} DHS CSWP report

^x USA.gov

^{xi} USCIS website

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- xii USA.gov
xiii USCIS.gov
xiv USA.gov
xv DHS CSWP Feb Report
xvi USCIS website
xvii Ibid.
xviii Ibid.
xix Ibid.
xx USA.gov
xxi Ibid.
xxii Ibid.
xxiii Ibid.
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