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+ MORE WITH LESS: BUILD A WEBSITE YOUR CITIZENS WILL USE

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More With Less: Build a Website Your Citizens Will Use

Hanging out with public servants, as we have for more than a decade now, we at CivicPlus know that the elected officials and staff who keep the wheels from falling off in local governments are, by and large, creative and innovative people. You're open to new ideas, you want to connect with citizens and you need to do more with less. (*Because you're also practical and can understand the real-world implications of budgets better than the average bear.*)

But let's be honest. Cities and counties have an image problem. They're not generally thought of as risk-taking or groundbreaking enterprises. Just the opposite, in fact. Slow to change. Cautious. Entrenched, even.

Some of this perception is because the realities of going about the people's business can get in the way of advancements — let alone revolutions — in service delivery and connectedness.

- Election cycles that drive public priorities.
- Budgets that hamstring innovations.
- Antiquated public communication forums that can shut out, shout down or turn off a broad swath of your citizenry.

City staff and elected officials often find themselves in a very tricky catch-22. To wit: Research by CivicPlus shows that 70% of citizens want to be able to make public posts and join in online conversations about community improvements, which is terrific. Michigan's Center for Local, State and Urban Policy reported in 2013 that 64% of local government leaders want citizens involved. Also great.

However — wait for it — according to a study by the Center for State and Local Government Excellence, more than a quarter of municipal governments are planning layoffs in 2013. So there will be fewer staff members to carry out the work of many cities.

All of which means that communities are looking at doing more, for more people, with fewer personnel resources. We're pretty sure you've heard this song before.

Can something as basic as a website really make a difference at all?

Yes. Yes, it can. By building a website citizens can actually use, and by helping them help themselves, you can make your city government better and make your citizens happier.

Better Efficiency



Dan Schultz, software analyst with CivicPlus, has a good story to illustrate how a website can help with budget or personnel crunches.

“A team of us was visiting a new client and we noticed that a lot of the questions that the receptionist was answering on the phone were actually answered in the FAQ section of the client’s old site. But people couldn’t find the information. When folks can find answers easily on a site, and phone calls can be reduced, it can free up personnel for other priorities the city would like to focus on.”

Benefits of having CRT™ on your website:

- Decrease the amount of phone and foot traffic
- Improve and streamline workflow
- Maximize employee accountability
- Improve staff efficiency
- Increase citizen satisfaction
- Provide statistics of departments and individuals

This also applies to issues like citizen requests or complaints, which can be managed efficiently with modules that cities can build into their sites. The **Citizen Request Tracker™** module is a case in point.

“Initially, staff may think, ‘Now I have to learn this new Citizen Request Tracker™ system,’ says Laura Stone, Executive Assistant to the Town Manager in Coventry, Conn. “But when you really think about it, if somebody calls with a complaint, you’re on the phone with them for at least 10, 20 minutes. And if you’re using something internally for reporting, you’ve got to turn around and type that call up. So it’s changing the nature of our work, helping us streamline some of it and save time.”

CivicPlus Quinton Randel couldn’t agree more.

“Cities do more with less staff, and job descriptions are getting longer, each and every day. We’re reducing the time commitment to get things done but not the effectiveness. We’re providing the tools folks are clamoring for.

“More people need to be able to access the services and information that’s already there, in their city, without having to actually go to City Hall, or go to a public meeting.”

Dan adds, “Success for us is when a citizen can find what they’re looking for very quickly and efficiently, without getting a headache doing it. And as more citizens get their questions answered online, that’s fewer phone calls and less foot traffic to accommodate.”

Deeper Engagement



Benefits of having Community Voice on your website:

- Increases communication and citizen satisfaction within your community
- Showcases projects and initiatives within your community
- Drives traffic to your site

But of course, there's a deeper level on which citizens can engage with their community. This is the largely uncharted territory of true, two-way (*or more*) interaction between citizens and local government.

"We'd like citizens to see something on their city's site that's interesting for them, something they'd like to really get involved in," Dan says. "Instead of saying in a general way, 'We need your input about your city,' cities can make the content more local and specific. Doing this will make the site more participatory. Which will bring broader input in terms of demographics."

Engagement modules like Community Voice™ often turn a citizen's complaint into an opportunity to engage and involve that person.

"We had someone recently use Community Voice™ to ask why there weren't any bike trails in town, when in fact there are," Laura recalls. "There's a committee right now doing a whole bike trail mapping project. So we were able to write back to that individual and say, 'Hey, here's what's going on — we've got these trails right now, we're working on XYZ initiative, and would you like to be involved?' And that's been great!"

"Lots of times, when people find out there's a way to be involved in an issue that's near and dear to their heart, they step up and volunteer. So we're seeing it as a conduit for greater involvement and volunteerism."

Using the CivicPlus citizen interaction tools, local governments can take the residents' temperature on just about anything that's going on. For instance, another city that uses the Community Voice™ module posted all the potential amenities and features of a new park on their site. Citizens commented and micro-voted and dreamed online together, truly crowdsourcing the process and giving the decision makers a lot of creative input.

"Our functionality can really help communities be more transparent and forward thinking, and help a lot of people get involved in decision making a lot earlier," Dan says.

So...the phone call is free. Give us a jingle or drop us an email. Let's chat about how we might be able to **solve a few problems for you, make your city better** and keep your citizens happier.



+ ABOUT CIVICPLUS

CivicPlus builds local government websites. But more than that, we create a powerful communication hub — enabling citizens to connect, learn and engage. That drive has made CivicPlus a leader in developing digital community engagement tools, always keeping in mind ease of use and community growth. We find better ways to communicate. For stronger, more engaged communities today...and tomorrow.