



St. Louis Park's new site understands residents seek transactional government.

When the city of St. Louis Park, Minnesota launched its new website earlier this year, the page count was cut down from 2,845 to 500—evidence of “customer-first” content strategy refocused on plain language writing.

The city, which has nearly 50,000 residents just west of Minneapolis, originally hired a web coordinator to rebuild the site inhouse, but that person left after several months, leading officials to put out a request for proposals for a new content management system instead.

El Segundo, California-based developer Vision Internet won the contract with its promise of in-person user testing and four hours of content coaching for 35 site contributors ranging from city inspectors to police officers.

“We knew that we really wanted to revamp all of the content on the site,” said Jacqueline Larson, St. Louis Park communications and marketing manager.

Using data from Google Analytics, resident surveys and recorded focus groups the city quickly identified that users wanted the site to be more transactional for easy payment of a utility bill, lookup of a recreation program or pickup of an old mattress.

Bureaucratic language and policy explanations often get in the way.

“Sometimes government falls into that trap of thinking people want to know all that, when really they just want to know the bottom line,” Larson said.

A resident in need of a recreational fire permit doesn't need an explanation of the ordinance requiring it. He or she just wants the permit application, and moving it to a more accessible location on the site is what's needed.

Officials must also be mindful that as many as 30 percent of site visitors could be outsiders who aren't aware of the city landmarks being referred to on a particular page.

Putting the city clerk's agenda at the top of a web page might seem eye-grabbing, but the data told a different story that mostly government employees were referring to the information.

“That's a really hard thing for someone in City Hall to tell the city clerk without having the math behind it,” said Martin Lind, Vision vice president of services and business development.

Getting staff buy-in was also helped by trainings in everyday business writing, exercises that get primary content creators thinking about their audience and make the site easier to maintain.

Site information wasn't deleted so much as tightened and consolidated, using data to determine the most visited pages on the old site.

While a city doesn't need a company like Vision to evolve its content strategy, streamlining does need to happen internally.

“Making a website accessible is no longer an option,” Lind said. “You have to have content that people understand.”