

NEW JERSEY ON-LINE



Overview/Methodology

This report is a summary of the feedback provided from five **Focus Group** sessions that were facilitated for citizens and business interests who use New Jersey State government services. The focus groups were scheduled at the request of Rutgers University Center for Government Services as a component of their **Proposal to Analyze Electronic Government: New Jersey State Government On-Line**. CAM Consulting Services assumes no responsibility as to how the information contained herein is disseminated.

The three-hour sessions were held regionally throughout New Jersey at four Rutgers University locations on October 20, October 31, November 6, November 7, and November 10, 2000. A total of 34 people participated in the discussions.

The report is divided into five sections:

- Overview/Methodology**
- Report Narrative/Summary**
- Data Compilation**
- Participant Profiles**
- Focus Group Evaluations**

Throughout each session, the focus was on obtaining responses to the following questions:

- *What contacts have you had with state government?*
- *What types of state government services and/or information have you accessed on the Internet?*
- *What types of experiences, if any, have you had using the Internet? (novice users only)*
- *What types of state government services and/or information would you like to see available on the Internet?*
- *What design features would make the state government websites easy to access and use?*
- *What concerns, if any, do you have about accessing state government services and/or information on the Internet?*

Responses to these questions are summarized in the narrative. All comments were recorded and can be found in the data compilation section. Those who participated in the discussions were open, insightful, and pleased that the “state/government is listening and asking the right questions.”

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(cont.)

In addition, participants were introduced to a prototype of the New Jersey Internet Portal. In the first two focus groups, representatives from the state presented an overview of the planned site. The participants' reactions were generally positive but not recorded. In the remaining three sessions, feedback was requested from the participants and subsequently documented for this report.

The individuals completed participant profile forms to provide background data. The composition of the focus groups and highlights of data from their profiles are shown below:

October 20, 2000 Rutgers University, New Brunswick Pilot Citizens Group (7)
Participants felt their interaction with state government and familiarity with computers were above average. The majority indicated 3-5 years of experience using the Internet from home and office.

October 31, 2000 Rutgers University, New Brunswick Novice Citizen Users (11)
Participants generally felt they had limited interaction with state government and average familiarity with computers. Experience using the Internet covered the spectrum from never to 1-2 and 3-5 years. Where there was access to the Internet, it was primarily at home or other locations.

November 6, 2000 Cook College, New Brunswick Experienced Citizen Users (6)
Participants had varied ranges of interaction with state government and generally above average familiarity with computers. Most indicated 3-5 years of experience using the Internet from home and office.

November 7, 2000 Rutgers University, Camden Small Business Interests (4)
Participants were evenly divided with above average and limited interaction with state government and generally had average familiarity with computers. All indicated 3-5 years of experience using the Internet from home and office.

November 10, 2000 Rutgers University, Newark Large Business Interests (6)
Participants had above average interaction with state government and generally had above average familiarity with computers. All indicated 3-5 years of experience using the Internet from home and office.

At the conclusion of each session, participants completed a focus group evaluation form. Its purpose was to give them an opportunity to share their views on how the meeting met its objective, provide suggestions for improvement, and learn what was most beneficial to them. Each evaluation can be found in the Focus Group Evaluations section, but overall, the focus groups appeared to be a

positive interesting experience for the participants. They found most beneficial the opportunity to

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(cont.)

learn about the variety of state services and ways to access them through the Internet. It was enough to make one individual write, “Made me want to take the computer lessons offered at our Senior Resource Center.”

The State of New Jersey has constituents who would welcome the ability to access government services on-line in a quick, easy, and secure manner. However, the input from these Focus Groups clearly highlights the fact that most people are unaware of the types of government services, information, and products that are available electronically. A public awareness campaign is necessary to ensure the success of this endeavor.

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Narrative

What contacts have you had with state government?

Even though all the participants were consumers of state services in some manner, it was interesting that there was limited recognition as to which departments and agencies were the supplying providers. In addition, it was considered a challenge to find assistance when information or service was needed from the state. The most success was achieved by networking and asking, "Who do you know?" as a starting point. There is no central print or electronic resource directory for reference. Several mentioned using the blue pages in the phone book.

Personally, the contact that was acknowledged most frequently was the Division of Motor Vehicles for licenses, registrations, and car inspections. Taxes, rebates, lottery, parks, and recreation sites were also discussed. Others included the state police, senior services, state library, schools, casinos, and E-Z Pass. Most interactions were by phone, mail, or in person. Those are the most common means of contact with the state entities. Even those with more computer familiarity had limited success with the location, quality, and level of on-line data.

Professionally, use of the Internet was more frequent, but not as efficiently as desired. Here there was recognition and frustration that the state conducts business primarily through paper, telephone, and in-person operations. Opportunities for electronic communication abound but need to be implemented. Individuals and businesses are looking for the ability to widely use e-mail and search easily for quality, relevant, and current data.

Depending upon business interests, interaction varied with different departments and agencies. Those mentioned often were Community Affairs, Pension Division, Rutgers University, Human Services, Treasury, Purchasing, Banking & Insurance, Commerce, Law & Public Safety, Labor, Health and Senior Services, Education, Transportation, and Environmental Protection. The represented regulated industries had substantial state dealings in many ways.

From the business standpoint, there is the perception that the state is not readily open to new ideas or operational methods. Information sharing between departments and agencies appears limited and causes duplication of effort. Cumbersome processes and a "paper mentality" add to this picture.

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Narrative

What types of state government services and/or information have you accessed on the Internet?

For personal interests, some participants searched the Internet for recreational and entertainment pursuits. Others checked train schedules, registered their motor vehicles, signed on for E-Z Pass, and learned how to obtain a birth certificate. They filed taxes and rebates on-line.

Business interests interface with many state departments and agencies for administrative reporting, in addition, to those respective to their particular industry. Several sites mentioned were Labor, Transportation, Community Affairs, Environmental Protection, Treasury, Health & Senior Services, Purchasing, Port Authority, Legislature, Commerce, and State.

Representative input regarding several websites follows. The website for Purchasing received high marks for bid notices and its "Red Alert" feature; however, one observation was that RFPs were posted with too short of a lead-time for response. The Labor website was used primarily for research data and was judged to be generally good with need for greater variety of information. Even though the Legislature site provided immediate access to status of bills and office holders, a point was raised about the timeliness of the data. The concern was great enough for the company to use a private enterprise to provide the service. The Pension Division website was accessed to compare plans and differences among associations. Health and Senior Services was visited for right-to-know information and updated regulations.

Website formats and contents differed among departments and agencies. Some provided e-mail addresses with automatic links; others did not. On some, forms could be downloaded, printed, and mailed. Many could not accommodate interactive on-line form completion and submission. Electronic signatures are not yet accepted. Quality and accuracy of content were questioned.

Based on the above, there is strong indication from both private citizens and business consumers of their desire for more interactive electronic access to state government services and information.

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Narrative

What types of experiences, if any, have you had using the Internet? (novice computer users)

The participants' experiences were varied, but directed primarily towards personal interests. Sites were visited for travel, weather, health, and financial information. The Internet was used to register for E-Z Pass, look for directions, and review real estate demographics.

Several in the group used the computer more frequently for work purposes. Examples given were visits to the Pension Division site to compare plans and associations, Legislature for status of bills and office holders, and Purchasing for bid and contract information.

Students participating from Rutgers University used the Internet to obtain graduate school applications, visit websites for professors and majors, search for scholarship and financial aid sources, conduct research, and send e-mails.

As a result of the discussions shared during the session, one individual "wants to buy a computer and use it." The state has an opportunity to capitalize on this enthusiasm.

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Narrative

What types of state government services and/or information would you like to see available on the Internet?

All participants were looking for good, quality, current data and assistance from the state. Everybody wanted an easy way to learn who does what and how to contact them. The types of information requested covered personal to business interests. During the sessions, many just wanted to know what is available now. Consistently, throughout all the groups could be heard, "I didn't know that was on the Internet." This reinforces the need for consumer education.

The ability to choose a home page dependent upon private citizen or business interests surfaced frequently. From that page, the ways to search and locate information were important. Links to related sites, local governments, etc. were deemed necessary.

The word, "centralized," was heard frequently. The wish for a centralized directory of state publications was mentioned. A centralized government (state, county, local) directory of resources, with addresses (mail and e-mail), phone numbers, and contact names would be valuable. A centralized source for all RFPs by department and industry would eliminate having to also read the newspaper for new or renewable bids. A centralized state data center would create a "one-stop shopping" experience for consumers. A centralized directory of trade associations, shows, and business resources would be helpful for professional interests. A centralized listing of administrative codes would be welcome.

In every group, but especially those representing businesses, the ability to submit and file forms, filings, etc. on-line was high on the list. An option to scan and download forms, as needed, should also be considered.

Those participating from the large regulated industries would like more efficient ways of conducting business with the state. They felt it was time to get away from the cumbersome paper processes of the past and begin to accept technological means of transactions. It would make the state appear to be more business friendly. The ability to use e-mail, submit forms on-line, download and print bids, sign and notarize documents, assign power of attorney, and record deeds were several areas proposed.

Digitized picture licenses for private and commercial drivers would eliminate an on-site visit to Motor Vehicles. To renew or apply for registrations and licenses, on-line would be a timesaver. It was interesting for many to learn that car registrations are now on-line. This was another example about the lack of public awareness.

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Narrative

What types of state government services and/or information would you like to see available on the Internet? (cont.)

Real-time traffic reports, road construction alerts with alternate routes, police accident reports were requests. The ability to vote on-line was proposed along with posting election results.

Some individuals felt that report cards for school districts and towns, ancestry registration, and driver's license history would be useful. In every group, sites for recreation areas (parks, beaches, etc.) and special events were of interest. They should include hours of operation, ticket arrangements, and licenses required, etc. along with making reservations, and completing registrations on-line.

Tax information (calculations, account information, assessments, etc.) should available on the Internet. The option to file business, real estate, sales, and income taxes on-line was attractive.

There appears to be positive movement by the state in support of electronic offerings. As one participant wrote, "The New Jersey site in general is getting better and more functional. It makes me want to keep checking it out."

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Narrative

What design features would make the state government websites easy to access and use?

Every group stressed that all audiences (novice and experienced computer users) should be considered when designing state government websites. The ability to choose a home page relevant for professional/business interests or private citizens was preferred. Also, attention should be given to equipment capabilities and modem speeds necessary for downloading and retrieving information.

Commonality, continuity, and consistency of formats were deemed important. This would contribute to the ability to locate information quickly and easily. The quality of data needs to be ensured. Sources and dates of most recent updates would contribute to data integrity.

Readability and legibility of design contribute to usage. Many said, "Minimize the clutter." Red and blue type are difficult to read. Controls should be clean and simple. Symbols and icons need to be clearly understandable. A choice of picture/graphics or text-only pages would address preference issues and alleviate download time. By supplying a "Go Back" button, it would be easier to return to the home page. Being able to easily toggle back and forth smoothly between sites would be beneficial.

The ability to search for data easily by using key words was a request from all groups. Allow for "intelligent indexing" (cross-indexing), since people think about information in different ways. The goal is to make it easy and attractive for people to find the information they want in a timely manner. References and links beyond the basic information requested would be useful. Searches should go from broad categories to narrow specifications. When trying to locate information on a particular topic, a suggestion was made for a "Start Here" button that would lead to all types of relevant data and links.

There was universal interest in more widespread use of e-mail to conduct state business. An established expectation of getting an e-mail response by next business day or within 24 hours would increase usage of this communication mode. Sending automatic e-mail notifications regarding bids and website updates would be helpful.

Directory assistance for state departments and agencies on-line would be a valuable resource as long as it was maintained. Organization charts, e-mail addresses, and complete information for key departmental and agency contacts would be useful.

On the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) site, include timelines, requirements, and contacts for applications, bids, etc.

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Narrative

What design features would make the state government websites easy to access and use?
(cont.)

Documents and forms that are downloadable should be made available in Word, WordPerfect, PDF, and HTML formats.

The suggestion to have a “favorites” site is due to become reality with My New Jersey.

Quick, easy, and timesaving features contribute to design success. As one individual wrote, “The sessions provided validation that my frustrations or difficulties with accessing New Jersey government on-line are not out of the ordinary.”

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Narrative

What concerns, if any, do you have about accessing state government services and/or information on the Internet?

Foremost is the need to create a sense of comfort for current and potential Internet users due to the relative newness of this technology. There is the perception of danger with the unknown. Strong assurances of confidentiality, security, and privacy protections are needed. Many felt that the government already knows too much.

Consumer protection was stated repeatedly. Secure controls are required to eliminate misuse of information by secondary means. Concerns about the state selling data were raised. Tracking devices to provide feedback on site visits were suggested. Business interests expressed concerns about safeguarding proprietary information and maintaining the security of reports, filings, etc. Within the state, the level of security between departments and agencies in the sharing of information needs to be clarified.

All do not want to be recipients of junk e-mail. Requests for personal information in exchange for obtaining data is discomfoting. Several mentioned terminating the transaction at that point. Anonymity was preferred; however, the more experienced computer users did not want to have deal with too many passwords to access data.

Viruses, credit card protection, and identity theft were also discussed. Some liked using the credit card electronically for purchases, reservations, and registrations; others still remain hesitant, even though the same risks remain over the phone, etc. Several retired individuals mentioned a lack of ownership of a credit card, which illustrates the necessity of choices for business transactions.

The issue of system reliability generated input around having multiple avenues available to access state data and services via the Internet and other means.

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Narrative

What is your reaction to the prototype New Jersey State Internet Portal?

Feedback from the groups was favorable and even enthusiastic regarding design and content. A strong message to make the portal attractive for people to use it came through clearly. The presentation helped inform the participating citizens and business interests on the state's position regarding technology. As one person wrote, "It was beneficial to learn the status of where the state is in terms of moving into the 21st century." This highlighted the need to educate all audiences in terms of what services, information, and products are available on-line from the state. This should also address the ways in which they may be accessed.

General comments regarding the visual designs were as follows: Dark blue colors were good; light blue hard to read; orange/gold not liked. Several noticed the boxes (icons) but not the words in them. Clearer descriptions needed for icons on home/main pages.

Participants were asked to share their interpretations of several topical headings. The title, *Celebrate Life*, generated meanings such as life events and fun things. The consensus was to find another title to illustrate senior services. The heading, *Education*, was preferred over *Learn More*. The title, *Your Business*, was wide open regarding meaning. The need for more clarity with headings and descriptions was evident.

Home Page

Since this is the main state website, requests were made to place a link to Purchasing, emergency information indicator alerts, maps, and train schedules on this page.

Citizen Page

Consideration about meeting the needs of diverse audiences was raised. Caution was stressed about the use of government jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms that may not be understood. The ability to search for information easily and quickly in plain language was discussed. Links to other sites are important. Several suggested links were those to medical societies, associations, governing bodies, and officials (state, county, and local levels).

Business Page

Many felt that the goal should be to reduce paperwork, forms, and correspondence. Automatic links from regularly visited sites to the personalized My New Jersey page would be timesaving. In addition, links to local government entities would be helpful. An avenue to share business success stories would be welcome. For new businesses, it would be advantageous to learn demographics, tax incentives, contacts, and requirements (WBE, MBE, SBE) from this site.

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Narrative

What is your reaction to the prototype New Jersey State Internet Portal? (cont.)

My New Jersey

The capability to personalize a page was well received, as long as it could be done easily and quickly. Automatic links from favorite sites to this page were requested for future reference. The ability to tailor content channels and headings to meet particular interests would lead to users visiting the page more often. It would be an individual's own design and, consequently, more relevant and interesting. Suggested everyday channels were lottery numbers, traffic reports, construction updates, and emergency warnings. Many felt it would be even more effective to have separate My New Jersey pages for private citizens and business interests.

A good summation would be using the words of one participant, "It promotes a feeling of being connected to the state." Additional input offered elsewhere in this report should also be considered in the design and implementation of the new portal.

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Summary

Collectively, we learned from all the Focus Groups that opportunities for electronic communication between state government and its constituents abound and would be welcomed. In the groups with private citizens, the requests for information on-line were more targeted towards personal preferences; in the business groups, a broader range of needs regarding state services was discussed. However, all groups shared a common interest in having fun and wanted to access recreational, travel, and special event sites in New Jersey.

From the discussions, it was evident that participants from all the groups are still learning how to more effectively use technology. On-line tips, sites, and search techniques were exchanged informally. For the novice computer users, the learning curve on accessing information electronically will be longer; the more experienced users, from the private and business sectors, will make the transition to electronic communications with the state immediately.

There is a strong indication from private citizens, large, and small business users for the ability to widely communicate through e-mail and interactive electronic services. The business groups would like e-mail notifications of bids and website updates sent automatically.

All groups, but particularly those representing businesses, want the ability to complete and submit forms and filings on-line with an option to scan and download forms, as needed. The business groups also wanted electronic signatures accepted.

A state home page from which to easily locate citizen or business interests was often cited by all groups. Links to related sites and local governments were deemed helpful. Feedback was generally positive regarding the prototype New Jersey Internet Portal which is taking this request into consideration.

All want to search easily for quality, relevant, and current information. The ability to search “intelligently” (cross-indexing, key words) is a strong preference for all. “Centralization”, as in directories, publications, data, and codes was a frequent request. Both experienced and novice computer users felt that sites must be easy to use if the state wishes constituents to interact with various departments via the Internet. Those from business interests want to search easily and quickly for data due to time constraints.

Both private and business concerns felt that attention should be given to user equipment capabilities and modem speeds when designing websites. Graphics, pictures, etc. should not slow the downloading process. Text-only options should be available. Controls should be simple; symbols

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Summary (continued)

and icons must be clearly understandable. Commonality, continuity, and consistency of formats between state departments and agencies were felt important by all.

The need to have all information's timeliness verified was requested by all groups, but particularly among the research and business groups. It is this latter sector who want definite assurances of data integrity.

The sharing of information between departments and agencies, while of marginal concern to some private citizens, would be a welcome efficiency to businesses. The centralization of data would eliminate the need for businesses to submit duplicate information to various state entities. The business groups tempered this request with the need to safeguard proprietary data even within the state.

Strong measures to protect confidentiality, security, and privacy are needed by all, but most often requested by novice users and large businesses. The novice users were wary of technology, the experienced users felt that the government already knows too much, and businesses want to protect proprietary information, reports, and filings. All groups were concerned about consumer protection, and the sale and/or misuse of information by secondary sources.

In particular, representatives from large businesses were concerned about system reliability. They want the state to have multiple avenues available to access data and services via the Internet and other means.

In conclusion, the message from the Focus Groups is that the state's departments and agencies must collaborate, share, and embrace technology to better serve their consumers. The demand for state services and products from the private and business sectors continues, but the delivery methods have to change to meet today's higher expectations. As a result, the state needs to refine or implement policies to allow for the dissemination of information, acceptance of transactions, and electronic communication over the Internet. Throughout this process, the public must be educated about the resources and methods available to obtain government services and data easily over the Internet.

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Summary (continued)

Thank you for the opportunity to work on a project to technologically advance the ways in which the State of New Jersey delivers products, services, and information. It was rewarding to work with the participants in the Focus Groups who volunteered their time to help move the state forward. One person wrote, "It is encouraging to know that somebody is thinking about these broad organizational issues. Also got a couple of good data-searching tips on a purely selfish level."

Due to the interest in the prototype New Jersey Internet Portal, it may be advantageous to schedule follow-up Focus Group sessions with hands-on experimentation in a computer lab. It would be my privilege to continue our association.