

The most important point to keep in mind when evaluating your Web site is deciding whether it is meeting your goals. Refer often to the objectives set for the site. Your most useful feedback often comes from citizens and colleagues.

Public comment

Public comment-positive or negative-can come in many forms, including e-mails, phone calls, or newspaper articles.

One city asks all its Web site visitors to sign a guest book and comment on their experiences. This guest book used a free service that enabled users to post comments about the site and the city.

Internal feedback

Critical insights can come from colleagues inside government. These comments may be "a slap on the hand or a pat on the back," as one participant said. Or these comments may be suggestions for new information or services that can improve the effectiveness of the site.

Counting visits

The Web site itself is a great place to collect data. Statistical programs and counters will keep track of the source and number of times people access various pages, download documents, and perform other activities. Like the guest book, these services are available free on the Internet.

The counties and municipalities we worked with track visits to particular areas of the site. For instance, tourism and economic development departments in some of the counties and cities want regular updates on the number of visitors to specific Web pages.

Assess efficiency and effectiveness

Baseline data is an essential foundation for measuring performance changes. Collect baseline data while your site is in development. Then continue to gather performance and usage statistics after the site is up and running. You'll want to measure the site's efficiency and effectiveness. Consider these questions:

- Does the Web service cost more or less than the traditional version of the same service?
- Does the Web service reach the same or different customers?
- Does the site allow you to provide a service that can't be offered by traditional methods?
- Have phone calls, letters, and visits changed in nature or frequency?

Other ways to evaluate your site

Web feedback forms are another way to ask users to evaluate your site. You may also want to collect data related to service objectives by conducting surveys, gathering cost data, and interviewing staff and customers. Whatever methods you choose, the goal is to get concrete data that tells you how well your site is working for your customers.

Orleans County collects user comments about its Web site.

Refine or revise your service

If evaluation data show that certain aspects of your service are burdensome or too expensive to sustain, you may want to change or drop them. If other parts are very popular or generating savings or revenue, you may want to enhance them. There are many possibilities. Take the time to collect, analyze, and understand the feedback and make your decisions accordingly.

Evaluating the Impact

The local and county governments we met with tend to refine or revise their sites based on feedback they receive from users inside and outside their government. For example, one county put the budget on its site in direct response to citizen requests. Again, participants said they balance the feedback and ideas they receive with the time they have to implement and maintain them.

Tips from colleagues

- "Review site usage statistics and consider the comments you receive to help you determine how to refine the site."
- "Our evaluation is either a slap on the hand or a pat on the back."
- "Think to the future and develop a plan for the site's evolution."