



# Transforming Your Government Website Into a Digital City Hall

*How to Overcome Community Engagement Challenges*



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# Introduction

A resident's visit to city hall often includes common tasks such as getting a permit or paying a fine, or those more focused on maintaining our democracy like voting and attending public meetings. These real-world actions have merged with more modern forms of digital government, as more citizens opt to skip the trip to city hall and instead complete these activities online when it's convenient for them.

Government websites are the dominant platform for providing services and relevant information to citizens. However, many governments still struggle to meet people's digital demands – falling short in a few key areas related to:



Website technology and design



Digital engagement



Digital tasks and services

The following report examines these common engagement challenges and offers actionable solutions for how to overcome them.



# About the Report

This report is co-written by Jacqueline Lambiase, professor of Strategic Communication and co-director of the Certified Public Communicator Program at Texas Christian University (TCU), and Martin Lind, Vice President of Services and Business Development at Granicus.

The “Research Shows” sections are authored by Lambiase and are based on her 2018 academic study, [\*Searching for City Hall, Digital Democracy, and Public-Making Rhetoric: U.S. Municipal Websites and Citizen Engagement\*](#), which analyzed 200 city website homepages to better understand and evaluate the ways in which city websites invite citizen participation. The “In the Field” sections are authored by Lind and highlight Granicus’ perspective on the research, paired with real-world examples of effective community engagement strategies.



# About the Authors



## **Jacqueline Lambiase, Ph.D.**

*Professor of the Department of Strategic Communication in the Bob Schieffer College of Communication at TCU*

Jacqueline's research focuses on digital engagement, public-sector communication, crisis cases, and media and diversity. In her past life as a practitioner, she served as a spokeswoman for a Maryland-based electric utility and worked as a business journalist and news editor in Texas. Recently, she has consulted for and presented to many organizations including Lockheed Martin, the U.S. Department of Labor, and cities throughout Texas and the United States. With Laura Bright, Ph.D., she co-directs the Certified Public Communicator Program at TCU. For more information or to access her academic study, contact Lambiase at [j.lambiase@tcu.edu](mailto:j.lambiase@tcu.edu).



## **Martin Lind**

*Vice President of Services and Business Development at Granicus*

Martin oversees the development and execution of services and partnerships, with the goal of expanding the ecosystem of offerings that Granicus provides. By offering the industry's leading cloud-based solutions for communications, content management, meeting and agenda management, and digital services to over 4,000 public sector organizations, Granicus helps turn government missions into quantifiable realities. Granicus products connect more than 185 million people, creating a powerful network to enhance citizen engagement. By optimizing decision-making processes, Granicus strives to help government see better outcomes and a greater impact for the citizens they serve. For more information, visit [granicus.com](http://granicus.com).

# Key Takeaways

1

## Most City Websites Take an Internal Orientation

### Challenge

Many government websites are structured like a city organization chart, making it difficult for users to intuitively find information and navigate the site.

### Solution

Implement responsive, search-centric design, easy-to-understand service menus, and accessibility best practices.

2

## Digital Engagement is Lacking on City Websites

### Challenge

Very few government websites provide dedicated spaces for interactive, two-way conversations, and engagement opportunities are often difficult to find.

### Solution

Leverage website technology that supports the creation of dedicated discussion forums and allows users to opt-in for topical notifications. Also, feature information about engagement opportunities in one location on the website.

3

## Optimization Means Putting the Citizen First

### Challenge

While government websites do a good job of providing digital services, it's imperative for agencies to continually optimize services based on citizens' evolving needs.

### Solution

Conduct user-experience research and website data analysis to identify the most common tasks to feature on the homepage, and optimize by device to enhance user experience.

A man and a woman are looking at a window. The man is on the left, looking towards the right. The woman is on the right, looking towards the left. They are both looking at a window that has several yellow and orange sticky notes attached to it. The window is made of glass panes. The background is bright and out of focus.

Finding 1

# Most City Websites Take an Internal Orientation



## Research Shows...

While most of the 200 city websites analyzed contained valuable information, many were based on city structures and organizational charts, rather than how a website visitor thinks about completing a task. Some common pitfalls included:



### Lack of Engagement-Focused Activities

Many websites in the study only provided information regarding city services, often displayed as a “laundry list” of departments at the expense of engagement-focused activities such as interactive discussion forums, citizen feedback surveys, and report-a-problem links.



### Non-Responsive Design

City websites without digital access across various devices fail in delivering useful information, engagement opportunities, and digital services to their increasingly mobile audience.



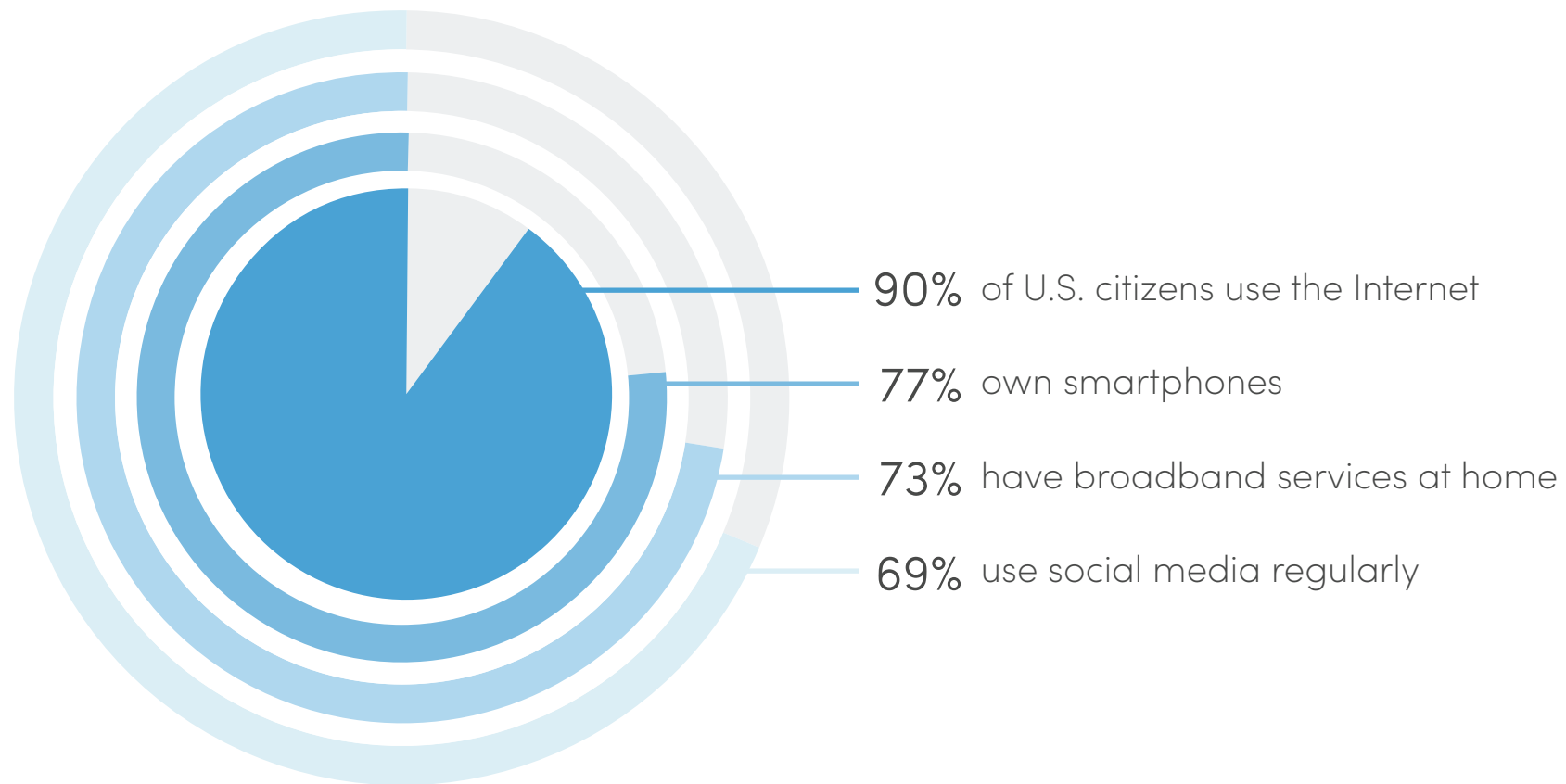
28%

of websites were not designed for mobile use.

## Finding 1 | Most City Websites Take an Internal Orientation

With more ways to connect, governments are now in a position to engage with citizens in new and powerful ways. To keep pace, the most sophisticated agencies are investing in their digital presence, particularly their websites. Unfortunately, many fall short.

At every level, government must focus on its digital presence because [\*that's where their customers are\*](#):



*Pew Research, 2017*

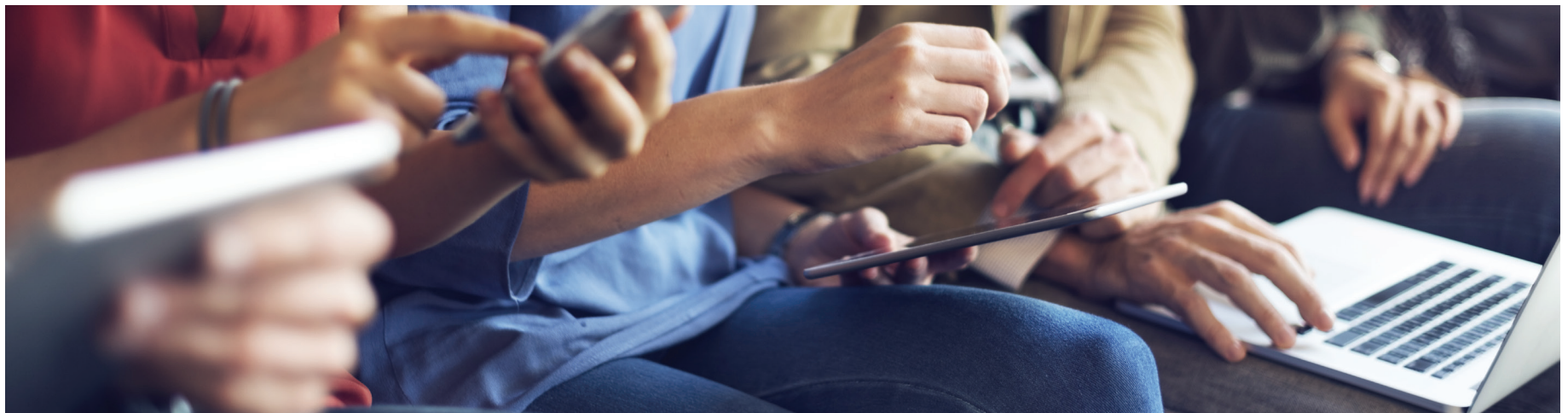
## In the Field...

Website visitors' expectations for government sites are [\*nearly equal to their expectations of the private sector\*](#). Few people visiting your website will excuse poor design, navigation or unintelligible jargon because the site ends in a .gov URL. Governments must meet their customers' digital expectations with better website implementation focused on technology, design, mobile responsiveness, and accessibility.



**Nearly half of all traffic to local government websites comes from a mobile device.**

*Granicus Benchmark Report, 2018*





## Tips for improving user experience on your website:



### Break Down Departmental Silos with Intuitive Navigation

Take a cue from Amazon's website that manages to make an extensive amount of information easily accessible. Consider adding a navigational structure that personalizes the experience – is the visitor on your website there to “work,” “live,” or “play”? A search-centric homepage gives users a direct route to the information they seek, and a service look-up tool can make it easy to find common tasks like “paying a parking ticket.” These are just a few of the many ways to create a more intuitive navigational structure designed around your user vs. your internal organizational structure.



### Implement Accessibility Best Practices

Follow [accessibility best practices](#) like using alt text to describe images, headings to help users navigate, color contrast standards to ensure users with visual impairments can access the content, and closed captions for your videos so visitors with difficulty hearing can follow along. Also keep in mind that the [average U.S. adult reads at an eight-grade level](#), so ensure you are using plain, easy to understand language. For example, instead of “Economic Development” say “Business,” instead of “Solid Waste” say “Trash.”



### Build a Responsive Website

In a [recent study](#), Granicus found that about half of all traffic to local government websites comes from a mobile device. With so much traffic coming from mobile, websites are going beyond responsive to create mobile websites. These mobile websites should emulate the app environment and offer a customized view vs. the desktop view to ensure an optimal mobile experience.

# See It in Action: Intuitive Navigation



## City of Clearwater, FL

The *City of Clearwater's* homepage features bright imagery that reflects the community's beach culture, while personalizing the experience with prominent buttons that provide persona-based navigation to funnel users to the most common tasks based on why the website visitor wants to engage with Clearwater: work, live or play.



### Want to be like Clearwater?

Learn more at [granicus.com/solution/govaccess](https://granicus.com/solution/govaccess)

Finding 2

## Digital Engagement is Lacking on City Websites





## Research Shows...

Of the 200 websites analyzed, the study identified several under-utilized opportunities for interactive engagement, including:



### Online Discussion Forums

Only about 1% of the city websites in the study included full descriptions of digital discussion areas on their homepages. One example of this is [Newport, Rhode Island](#), whose main site is created by Granicus and features a homepage link called “Engage Newport” which goes to a microsite where residents can research and suggest ideas – a great example of how a city can engage citizens by transparently sharing information and requesting feedback. However, this type of interactive engagement space was the exception.



### Easy Access to Engagement Portals

Only eight city websites out of 200 had hyperlinks on their homepages to discussion spaces for residents and citizens, where they could interact with others on dedicated discussion topics. Some cities included hyperlinks to discussion spaces in the footers of their homepage, which could be missed due to size and placement of the link wording. Others featured links to engagement spaces within a homepage carousal of rotating images, which may be ignored due to its similarity to a website banner advertisement. However, these interactive discussion spaces, although sometimes difficult to find, are important for cities to have available as they experiment with new ways to engage stakeholders through any topic that attracts interaction.



### Clear Directions for Contacting Local Government

Not everyone wants to – or is capable of – completing their task on a city website. However, if a resident needed to visit or call city hall, 73 out of 200 cities in the study did not provide an address on the homepage, and many did not provide a phone number. If residents or businesses wanted to contact elected officials directly, only 10 included that information on the homepage itself, though 115 cities had that information available on another webpage one click further in. Seventy-five city websites forced residents to click at least twice to find addresses or phone numbers for city hall.

## Finding 2 | Digital Engagement is Lacking on City Websites

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While cities struggled to provide easy access to dedicated discussion spaces and contact information, they successfully engaged website visitors in several other ways, including:



Invitations to get involved, attend meetings, and to interact with city leaders



Access to agendas, live streaming, video recordings, and minutes of council meetings



Bidding and request for proposal opportunities for businesses

More than 80% promoted upcoming events or city council meetings and featured links to social media pages for further engagement; however, less than 40% offered opportunities for users to provide direct feedback or report non-emergency issues like potholes, snow removal, or graffiti.

Overall, people living and working in more than half of the studied cities would find it hard to contribute ideas, to get involved in their communities, to locate city hall's address or phone number, or to contact elected officials through these websites.



**Only 4% of city websites had direct links from their homepage to city-owned discussion spaces.**

## In the Field...

Most every agency wants a website to build community engagement. They aspire to create a space where their customers can connect with local leadership, find information, and participate in civic discourse. While research shows that digital engagement is still an area that governments need to work on improving, technology is making it easier to achieve.





## Best practices to boost citizen engagement on your website:



### Create Dedicated Discussion Spaces

Promote engagement and community feedback through dedicated discussion boards within your agency website. [Engagement technologies](#) make it possible for website managers to post discussion topics, invite commentary, and moderate the discussion to provide two-way communication and assure users that their opinions have been heard. Further encourage participation through use of inclusive, conversational language to make government feel more approachable.



### Offer Notification Opt-Ins

Integrate a [notification solution](#) that allows citizens to subscribe to topics that matter most to them. The alerts will drive the customer back to the website to get more information and, if appropriate, provide feedback to the agency on the topic.



### Take a Multi-Channel Approach

To truly reach customers wherever they are, agencies must use a variety of digital communications channels – from email and social media, to text messaging and video. However, make sure every tweet, post, and message links back to the agency website for more information. This will establish your website as the trusted voice of authority.

# See It in Action: Discussion Forum



## City of Culver City, CA

[Culver City](#) promotes citizen engagement in several ways, most notable with its “Get Involved” page – a dedicated [discussion forum](#) where the city can post discussion topics and solicit community feedback. Website visitors can post comments and reply to others’ comments to create a public discourse and subscribe to the topic for ongoing updates. The city’s moderator can monitor comments to ensure the feedback is kept civil.



Ready to build a dedicated discussion forum?

Contact us for a free consultation at [info@granicus.com](mailto:info@granicus.com).

## See It in Action: Information-Rich Footer



### Columbia County, GA

To make it easier for people to engage with government, take a cue from [Columbia County](https://www.columbiacountyga.com/) and ensure you have a good footer that includes pertinent contact information and other key links. Users intuitively look to footers for addresses, phone numbers, social links and other opportunities to connect.



Want to be like Columbia County?

Learn more at [granicus.com/solution/govaccess](https://granicus.com/solution/govaccess)



Finding 3

## Optimization Means Putting the Citizen First





## Research Shows...

Although the majority of city homepages lacked capacity for citizen engagement, they did more often address their residents as customers by highlighting digital services — which is still an important aspect of building trust and supporting more informed and active communities. These homepages guided users to a wide range of services, including:



Text Alerts and Newsletters



Maps



Tax Information



Building Permits



Snow-Removal Schedules



Library Services



Trash and Recycling Collection



Bill Paying

For those customers who prefer to complete their tasks over the phone or in person vs. on the city website, nearly 65% of sites offered easy one- or two-click access to department or city employee contact information.



**The majority of city websites offer digital services, and 65% feature quick links to departments and employees.**

## In the Field...

While cities are getting better at treating their websites as digital service portals, there's always room for improvement. Sophisticated governments can take it to the next level and enhance customer experience through more intuitive navigation and unique routing options for different types of users, while providing more personalized experiences based on persona and device, and continually optimizing website design from the users' perspective.



## Tips to better serve your community:



### Get to Know Your Audience

To identify the digital services that are most relevant to your community, start by conducting user experience research. This can include Google Analytics and heatmap data to identify areas of interest to users; a community survey or focus group to get more direct citizen feedback, and user testing, in which you observe a person trying to complete a common task on your website, to identify points of confusion. The aim of all this research is to build a website that is tailored to meet the unique needs of your community.



### Optimize Digital Services by Device

Look at your website analytics and you'll see that some services are more commonly accessed on certain devices. Once you understand how your customers use your website, be sure to optimize tasks by device. For example, consider building a customized mobile homepage (different from the desktop homepage) that features mobile-specific tasks.



### Build a Digital Service Portal

Remember that people often come to government websites to accomplish tasks, so consider how you can make it as easy as possible for them to find what they are looking for with intuitive navigation and minimal clicks. Feature the [most commonly requested tasks](#) directly on the homepage with easy to understand service menus, like "I Want To..." or "How Do I...", to help users find what they need in one digital location. This could include links to discussion forums, agendas, contact information, bill pay, etc. An engaged citizen looking for these items will then find other connections for engagement.

# See It in Action: Personalized Digital Experience



## Yuma County, AZ

On a mission to create a digital service portal, [Yuma County](#) built an interactive live chat feature within their website to provide a more personalized digital experience and help users quickly access services and complete tasks. By clicking online chat from any page within the website, the user initiates a conversation directly with county staff. From there, a Yuma County representative can answer questions, help the user complete tasks, and direct them to information and services.



Ready to create a personalized experience for your audience?

Contact us for a free consultation at [info@granicus.com](mailto:info@granicus.com).



# See It in Action: Mobile-Optimized Service Portal



## Calcasieu Parish Police Jury, LA

To engage its highly mobile community, [Calcasieu Parish Police Jury](#) built a customized mobile homepage with an app-like display featuring the most common mobile tasks so smartphone users can easily report an issue or access services with a single click.



**Ready to optimize?**

Learn more at [granicus.com/solution/govaccess](https://granicus.com/solution/govaccess).

# Summary & Recommendations

Research suggests that local government still has work to do to improve community engagement on their websites. As a primary space for idea exchange that is visible to all citizens, successful government websites must use technology and design that invites community engagement, with a focus on citizen-centric content, accessibility, and mobile responsiveness.

To better understand citizens' digital needs and expectations, governments must embark on digital customer experience studies, as much as they attend to face-to-face meetings or phone customer service.

Additionally, governments should feature a dedicated citizen-engagement page on their websites, with links to:



Real-time digital discussion forums



On-going citizen surveys and resident polling



Calendars of upcoming meetings with agendas



Minutes and videos of past meetings



A directory with contact information and locations for elected officials and department leadership



Social media channels



Report-a-problem links



Customer service information



Events calendar

## Summary & Recommendations

Local government leaders must develop and prioritize a coordinated digital strategy. Though challenging, agencies must foster an environment of digital experimentation, pilot projects, and well-planned engagement strategies focused around the content and services on their websites. This coordinated effort means the promise of digital citizen participation may finally be realized.



### Ready to transform your government website into a digital city hall?

Learn more by visiting [granicus.com/solution/govaccess](https://granicus.com/solution/govaccess), or contact us today for a free consultation at [info@granicus.com](mailto:info@granicus.com).





# About Granicus

Granicus provides technology and services that empower government organizations to create seamless digital experiences for the people they serve. By offering the industry's leading cloud-based solutions for communications, content management, meeting and agenda management, and digital services to over 4,000 public sector organizations, Granicus helps turn government missions into quantifiable realities. Granicus products connect more than 185 million people, creating a powerful network to enhance citizen engagement. By optimizing decision-making processes, Granicus strives to help government see better outcomes and a greater impact for the citizens they serve.