



ForeSee Results' E-Government Transparency Index (2010 Year in Review)

Quantifying the Impact of Transparency

February 22, 2011

by Larry Freed
President and CEO of ForeSee Results



Introduction

[“Transparency and Open Government”](#) has been one of the buzz-phrases of President Barack Obama’s White House, an ambitious and sweeping objective to transform government departments and agencies into entities that reflect the democratic ideals of openness, democratic participation, and collaboration. Now, two years after a memorandum was disseminated to the federal government instituting such an organizational renovation, many are wondering if the goal has taken root and, if so, how successful it has been. In the meantime, political power has changed hands, we’re in the middle of a contentious budget season, and the focus on transparency as a government-wide priority is uncertain.

This report, the fifth of its kind, gives us the opportunity to look back over 2010 and assess a full year of transparency. In the first quarter of 2010, 23 federal sites participated in the E-Government Transparency Index. By the end of 2010, participation had increased 35%, bringing the total number of participating websites to 32. Online Transparency scores have been improving for the past two quarters, after a drop in the second quarter of 2010. A chart with scores by quarter for the 32 federal websites currently participating in this Index can be found on page 5.

How to Measure Transparency

At the request of government agencies interested in clear and concise progress data, ForeSee Results developed the E-Government Transparency Index in 2009. The goal was twofold:

- To create an accurate, actionable and precise measurement of citizens’ opinions on government transparency
- To quantify the relationships among online transparency, citizen satisfaction, trust, and the likelihood to participate and collaborate with government agencies

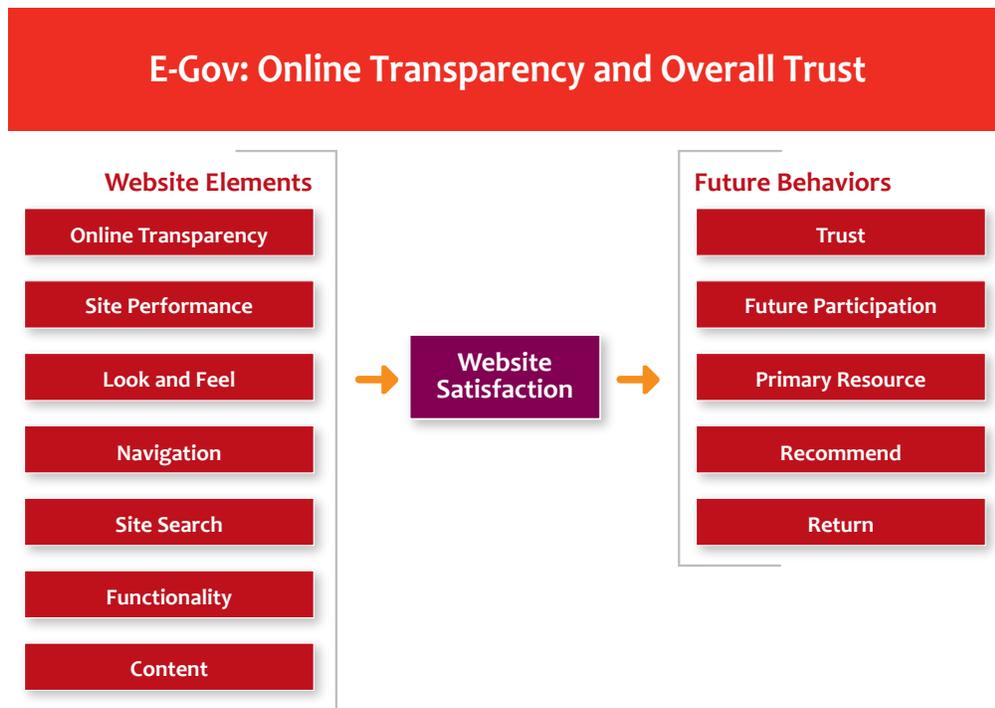
The ForeSee Results E-Government Transparency Index has grown into a vital tool for measuring the success, failure, or progress of government departments and agencies online, providing a clear direction for improvement, and forming a benchmark from which all other non-participating entities can draw instruction and inspiration. After all, you cannot manage what you do not measure. The ForeSee Results E-Government Transparency Index does not count the number of documents that each agency makes public or check which information is available and which isn’t. Using a standard methodology that has been in use in government since 1999 (the American Customer Satisfaction Index), the E-Government Transparency Index measures online transparency according to citizen perceptions. How easy is the information to find? How quickly is it made available? How thorough is it? In a democracy, citizen perceptions define reality, and transparency’s success or failure should be first and foremost defined by citizen opinions.

The E-Gov Satisfaction Model

Quantifying the relationship between citizen satisfaction, transparency, and trust is a remarkable step toward making the government accountable for measuring and improving performance. Research has defined the link between online transparency, satisfaction, and trust, giving government agencies the tools they require to measure their success in meeting the open government directives, identify where and how to improve citizens' view of transparency, and drive citizen satisfaction higher. Improved citizen satisfaction is a key result. A targeted focus on what matters most increases citizens' trust in the agency and increases usage of the most cost-effective channel available (the web), all of which leads to a more democratic and cost-effective government.

This model was created and perfected over the previous year by academics and experts who tested the relationships shown in the following diagram. Following a rigorous and extensive proof period, a model emerged that clearly defines and quantifies the relationships between online transparency and overall trust, with online satisfaction as the mediator between the two (as show in Fig. 1).

Figure 1: E-Gov Satisfaction Model



How it Actually Works

Surveys are conducted with randomly-selected visitors to the 32 federal websites included in this Index. About 320,000 visitors who completed surveys over the course of 2010 were asked a series of questions about their experience with and perceptions of various elements of the website, including three aspects of online transparency: how thorough the information on the website is, how accessible it is, and how quickly it is made available. They were also asked about other elements of the online experience such as look and feel, navigation, site performance, etc.

Respondents are asked to rate their perceptions of various aspects of the site experience on a ten-point scale. Citizens' responses are then processed through the ACSI statistical engine, and one result is a set of priorities for improvement. These priorities are not determined by the agencies or even by the lowest-scoring elements, but by the citizens and the ACSI methodology. Thus, we are able to calculate whether transparency is a top priority that could have a large impact on improving satisfaction with an individual website. For some, it is; for others, it isn't.

The 2010 Year-End E-Government Transparency Index

The agencies and departments listed here have agreed to measure and report on transparency as part of an effort to meet the Obama administration's open-government objectives. The scores are calculated within a sophisticated structural equation model based on responses to a set of relevant questions, as is the ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index (which is also released quarterly but includes more than 100 websites since satisfaction is a common e-government performance metric). All online transparency scores are reported on a 100-point scale.

Figure 2: Online Transparency Index Over Time

Time Period	Online Transparency Over Time
Q4 2009	75.4
Q1 2010	76.2
Q2 2010	75.0
Q3 2010	75.8
Q4 2010	76.2



The aggregate online transparency score for the 32 federal sites included is 76.2 on the study's 100-point scale, up nearly half a point since the previous quarter and a full 1.2 points since its lowest point in the second quarter. While it's good news that citizen ratings of online transparency have rebounded, little progress has been made over the last year.

It is important to remember that all agencies on this list have voluntarily submitted their scores. These results measure only 32 federal websites among thousands, although most of the federal government's department sites are represented. Sites that find themselves at the bottom of this Index would certainly score higher than many others in a comprehensive Index of federal government online transparency. As such, each of the entities should be commended for their efforts.

In Figure 2, we have reported online transparency scores over the last year. We've also shown Q4 satisfaction scores for reference because of the close and causal relationship between transparency and satisfaction. The most recent quarterly online transparency score is highlighted.

Figure 3: ForeSee Results 2010 E-Government Transparency Index: Department and Agencies Scores Over the Last Year

Dept.	Website	Q1 2010 Online Transparency	Q2 2010 Online Transparency	Q3 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Satisfaction
DHS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Español -- www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis-es	-	85	85	86	85
DOC	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration main website -- www.noaa.gov			84	83	85
DHS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services -- www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis	80	82	82	83	81
DOD	DoD Navy -- www.navy.mil				82	82
HHS	National Human Genome Research Institute -- www.genome.gov	83	82	84	82	80
DOD	DoD Air Force -- www.af.mil	80	79	80	81	80
HHS	SAMHSA -- www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov	81	82	80	80	77
DOS	Bureau of Consular Affairs -- http://travel.state.gov	80	80	81	80	77
DOD	Department of Defense portal - - www.defense.gov	79	75	76	78	76
GSA	GSA main website -- www.gsa.gov	78	78	73	78	75
NRC	U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission website -- www.nrc.gov			76	77	73

Figure 3: ForeSee Results 2010 E-Government Transparency Index: Department and Agencies Scores Over the Last Year (continued from the previous page)

Dept.	Website	Q1 2010 Online Transparency	Q2 2010 Online Transparency	Q3 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Satisfaction
DOS	Department of State main website -- www.state.gov	74	73	75	77	75
FDIC	FDIC main website -- www.fdic.gov			-	77	75
DOS	Department of State blog website -- www.blogs.state.gov			76	75	75
DOC	BEA main website -- www.bea.gov	74	74	75	75	71
Treasury	IRS main website --www.irs.gov				75	72
NARA	NARA main public website -- www.archives.gov	74	75	75	75	74
HHS	Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality -- www.ahrq.gov	77	79	78	75	72
HHS	SAMHSA website -- www.samhsa.gov	76	74	76	74	70
HHS	Heath Information Technology -- healthit.hhs.gov	71	70	71	74	70
USDA	FAS main website -- www.fas.usda.gov	-	72	72	74	72
PBGC	U.S. PBGC main website -- www.pbgc.gov	77	70	71	74	71
DHS	Department of Homeland Security main website -- www.dhs.gov	75	72	73	74	70
DOJ	Office of Community Oriented Policing Services -- www.cops.usdoj.gov	77	76	75	74	76
DOD	Force Health Protection & Readiness Policy and Programs -- http://fhp.osd.mil/	-	73	74	73	69
DOI	U.S. Geological Survey -- www.usgs.gov	76	75	73	73	68

Figure 3: ForeSee Results 2010 E-Government Transparency Index: Department and Agencies Scores Over the Last Year (continued from the previous page)

Dept.	Website	Q1 2010 Online Transparency	Q2 2010 Online Transparency	Q3 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Online Transparency	Q4 2010 Satisfaction
EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency -- www.epa.gov	-	71	72	73	68
DOD	Military Health System main website -- www.health.mil	77	72	73	73	67
DOT	DOT Research and Innovative Technology Administration website -- www.rita.dot.gov			73	72	67
HHS	U.S. Food and Drug Administration main website -- www.fda.gov	71	71	72	72	68
FDIC	FDIC Applications -- www2.fdic.gov				71	69
USDA	USDA Farm Service Agency - www.fsa.usda.gov	69	68	69	69	68



Several agencies have embraced the concept of transparency at a high level and have three or more websites measuring transparency, including the Department of Health and Human Services (measuring transparency on six sites), Department of Defense (five sites), Department of State (three sites), and Department of Homeland Security (three sites). As more and more agencies and departments make online transparency an organizational priority, we should see greater participation in this Index, and higher scores.

Quantifying the Impact of Transparency

The need for transparency in government is not a fad. As much as it is admittedly the current political flavor-of-the-month, our research indicates it shouldn't be: not only does transparency have a significant and quantifiable impact on making government more democratic and cost-effective, it is highly prized by citizens.

As the following chart shows, when citizens find a website highly transparent (80 or higher on a 100-point index), they give 85% higher satisfaction ratings than citizens who rate a federal website's transparency poorly (70 or lower). Moreover, based on score differences, citizens who perceive a federal website to be highly transparent also report they are:

- 48% more likely to participate by expressing their thoughts and ideas with that agency or department in the future, offline or online;
- 38% more likely to return to the website in the future;
- 62% more likely to recommend the website;
- 55% more likely to use the website as a primary resource;
- And they express 57% higher levels of trust in the government entity.

Figure 4: The Impact of Online Transparency on Cost-Saving Future Behaviors

Likely Future Behavior	Transparency Scores 80+	Transparency Scores < 70	Point Difference	% Difference
Future Participation	68	46	22	48%
Likelihood to Return	94	68	26	38%
Likelihood to Recommend the Website	94	58	36	62%
Likelihood to Use the Site as a Primary Resource	90	58	32	55%
Trust in the Agency/Department	88	56	32	57%



If citizens perceive an e-government site to be highly transparent, the returns for that agency are significant—visitors are more likely to return to the site, recommend it, use it rather than a more costly channel, and even have higher levels of trust in the government entity.

Trust is one attribute that departments and agencies can never take for granted. Trust implies that a department has proven itself worthy of confidence and reliance. It is one of the few qualities for which citizens are willing to give an agency a second or third chance after a mistake has been made. It involves a responsibility borne from integrity and, as such, both its origins and its reach cannot be underestimated.

These behaviors and attitudes represent the rewards for open, cost-effective, efficient government. Every federal agency and department has access to these sorts of returns—all that is required is a baseline measure (both of transparency and the behaviors and attitudes mentioned in the previous chart) to capture data and point the way toward palpable, effective improvements.

How Much Does Transparency Matter?

Figure 3 reveals a clear and robust relationship between transparency and citizens' attitudes and behaviors. While these figures represent aggregate analysis, it is equally important to examine the role transparency plays for individual websites, and the impact that it can play—great or small—on a website's, and hence an agency's, success.

ForeSee Results does not measure online transparency in isolation, but rather as one of a group of key drivers influencing a citizen's experience with a federal government website, often including navigation, functionality, content, look and feel, and site performance. While different sites naturally have different key drivers of satisfaction, the list below represents the crux of a methodology with the ability to quantify which elements have the largest impact on satisfaction, trust, and a host of desired future behaviors, as listed in Figure 3. The questions in the ACSI model ask citizens about their perceptions of aspects of their experiences on a federal website as shown in Figure 3, and to rate their perceptions on a 10-point scale. Citizens answer multiple questions for each measured element, and our statistical engine allows us to quantify improvement priorities. These priorities are determined not by the agencies themselves or by aggregate benchmarks, but by the citizens' own evaluations of their experience while visiting the site. The ACSI methodology determines the impact of the evaluations on citizens' website satisfaction and likelihood to engage in key behaviors in the future.

It would be difficult to know which element has the largest impact on citizens' trust without utilizing the ACSI methodology to identify the critical opportunities for improvement from a citizen's perspective. As mentioned earlier, the elements vary according to organization.

Some of the website elements measured as part of this study are: online transparency, site search, navigation, functionality, look and feel, site content, and site performance. Sites may have more than one priority that has a large impact on satisfaction, so each site's top two priorities were examined in this analysis. Clearly, for a site to be considered transparent, other elements of the website experience must be performing at an adequate level. Critical content that can contribute to a site's perception as transparent must first be found and accessed before it can be evaluated by citizens to determine what type of information is available on a given site and whether or not it is enough. Without good functionality, navigation, and search mechanisms, a website's efforts at transparency (through sheer availability of content) may remain unnoticed.

Figure 5: Critical Website Elements and Their Importance

Driver of Website Satisfaction	What It Measures	Priority Analysis
Site Search	The utility and effectiveness of the site's search tool	Improving search is a first or second priority for 74% of sites that are measuring this element (27 of 31 sites represented in this research do so). Focusing on improving transparency (in terms of information availability) alone at the expense of improving search may not produce the desired ROI for sites where search is also a priority, if it is an impediment to visitors' success in finding information and, ultimately, being perceived as transparent.
Functionality	The usefulness, convenience, and variety of online features available to citizens	75% of sites in this Index that measure this element (18 sites) register website functionality as a first or second priority. Individual sites may look to balance efforts in more than one area if they have no clear number one priority. Also, for a site to be viewed as transparent, it must have functionality that supports and provides access to the information citizens feel should be available.
Online Transparency	The thoroughness and accessibility of information made available on the website	This research shows that more than half the sites included in the Transparency Index register improving online transparency as a first or second priority. However, for 20% of sites, transparency registers as a low priority for improvement, highlighting the importance of each site measuring its own priorities.
Navigation	The organization of the site and how easy it is to navigate	Navigation is often a challenge for information-rich sites, and this element is often lower-scoring and higher-impact for federal government sites tasked with offering access to broad and deep information resources. One-third of the measured sites register navigation as a number one or two priority.
Look and Feel	The visual appeal of the site and its consistency throughout the site	This element is rarely a priority for individual federal sites, once a certain threshold of consistency in design and removal of any potentially distracting visual aspects is achieved.
Site Content	The accuracy, quality, and freshness of news, information, and content on the website	This element is rarely a priority for the individual federal sites, because the content that is available is often considered adequate. When this element is a low priority, it is usually easier and less inexpensive to address than issues with many other elements. (As compared to transparency, this element focuses on the quality of current content, while transparency evaluates whether what is available is sufficient and accessible.)
Site Performance	The speed, consistency, and reliability of loading pages on the website	Federal government sites generally provide adequate site performance for visitors. If transparency efforts fuel needs for advanced database access on federal sites, this element may become a higher priority.

Often, what an organization does not value is every bit as informative as what it does value. While online transparency represents a top priority for a majority of sites that measure it, there are still those who, despite the administration's initiatives, have higher priorities. The priorities highlighted in this research are determined through citizen surveys and the ACSI methodology, not by the agencies themselves or the Administration. For example, search is a critical priority for most sites that also measure online transparency, but is closely followed by online transparency itself. For sites who register search or some other element as a top priority, focusing on transparency in terms of information availability alone at the expense of improving other aspects of the site experience will not produce the desired ROI, regardless of executive orders and memorandums.

Without the kind of critical information found here, federal websites will have a hard time making the sorts of improvements that will enhance the value and usefulness to citizens. If every website follows the Obama Administration's mandate to focus on transparency by providing additional content alone, many sites will be misplacing some of their resources. As this sampling of federal websites shows, the diagnosis and prescription for increasing trust (and a whole host of other attitudes and behaviors) differ from site to site.

About The Author

Larry Freed is an expert on government web effectiveness and web customer satisfaction. He is President and CEO of ForeSee Results, a market leader in customer satisfaction measurement on the web, which utilizes the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

About the Research Team

Rhonda Berg, Research Manager at ForeSee Results, leads the research team that produces the quarterly E-Government Satisfaction Indices and the quarterly E-Government Transparency Indices. She also serves as an internal consultant regarding statistics, methodology, and survey design. Rhonda has been a research professional for 20 years in a number of industries and holds advanced degrees in business and sociology.

About ForeSee Results

As the leader in customer satisfaction measurement, ForeSee Results captures and analyzes voice-of-customer data to help both private-sector and public-sector organizations increase loyalty, recommendations and marketing value. Using the methodology of the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), ForeSee Results identifies improvements across all channels and touch points that drive satisfaction. With over 58 million survey responses collected to date and benchmarks across dozens of industries, ForeSee Results offers unparalleled expertise in citizen satisfaction measurement and management for the federal government.

ForeSee Results, a privately held company, is headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan and on the web at www.ForeSeeResults.com. Connect with ForeSee Results at www.ForeSeeResults.com/connect.html.