

NEWS+ANALYSIS Social Butterflies

By Elizabeth Newell enewell@govexec.com *Government Executive* February 1, 2009

Agencies are spreading their wings and exploring social media outlets from YouTube to Twitter.

Federal agencies don't have a reputation for being hip when it comes to Internet outreach, but more government leaders are starting to see the upside of using social media to deliver their messages and connect with taxpayers.

"Of course it does run the gamut and there are pockets of resistance [to sharing information online], but we ignore that stereotype," says Bev Godwin, director of USA.gov and Web best practices at the General Services Administration's Federal Citizen Information Center. "And that's why we like to point out where things are being done around government, because it shows people overcame the barriers."

From the GSA-run blog GovGab to the Defense Department's almost daily roundtable with military bloggers to the long list of agencies posting on the microblogging site Twitter, a quick scan of the Web shows that agencies are going outside their comfort zone to disseminate information across a range of platforms. While getting on board with these new media tools has taken a culture change, agency leaders have begun to realize that when citizens search for information from the government, they want to use the same avenues they do in their everyday lives.

"The whole goal is to get information out where the people are going," Godwin says. "They're going to YouTube, not government video sites. They're going to Facebook, so we're trying to get there. We need to syndicate government content so we can put it where people already are. The public should be able to choose what channel they use."

Despite the growing enthusiasm for social media, some uniquely governmental barriers remain. For example, GSA has been working for months to establish a federal government channel on YouTube, but has struggled with certain aspects of the terms of service. Many social media sites like Facebook and Twitter require users to sign an agreement that allows advertising and establishes legal jurisdiction and indemnity, among other things. These agreements can be problematic for government users, who operate under their own rules and policies.

"There's a different risk tolerance in every agency - for security, legal issues, different interpretations of those laws," Godwin says. "But as we're building government space online, there are still some issues. We can't sign away indemnity nor can we say that if there's an issue California law will prevail, because if a federal agency is involved, it's always federal law."

When it comes to defense and intelligence information, there are obvious concerns about security as well. "The free flow and sharing of information is diametrically opposed to some of the security things people are obligated to protect," says Maxine Teller, the Defense Department's new media strategist. Despite this apparent conflict, Teller says the intelligence community is among the most progressive in using Internet tools. She points to Intellipedia, its version of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, as a good example. "If the intelligence community can do it, the rest of government probably can too," she says.

Government communication and technology leaders are extremely optimistic about the effects the Web-savvy Obama team could have on the use of social media. Teresa Nasif, director of GSA's Federal Citizen Information Center, says her interactions with the transition team have convinced her it is committed to services, citizen engagement and transparency. "We just think that everything we've been working on over the last few years is going to be expanded and accentuated under the new administration," Nasif says.

Many are hopeful that the Obama administration's pro-new media attitude and familiarity will bring policy changes. Scott Burns, chief executive officer of GovDelivery, a St. Paul, Minn.-based firm providing software and services for government-to-citizen communication, says he expects security and privacy rules to be updated so agencies can take advantage of free offerings such as YouTube and Google maps. "It's very clear that they'll be engaged in updating some of the rules and regulations so the federal Web managers, who are clamoring to use these tools, will be able to use them more easily," he says.

Rule changes certainly would ease agencies' ability to use social media, but Godwin believes a firm go-ahead from the top would spur things along: "We really hope . . . the White House from its bully pulpit says, 'This is OK,' and gives agencies the comfort level to make that leap of faith."