

GovDocs business grows

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As a way to provide relevant, up-to-date information about foreign service careers and other topics to job seekers, the State Department's Office of Recruitment, Examination and Employment turned to a private e-mail subscription management service.

Since Nov. 24, 2003, when the service was launched, the number of subscription options has risen from two to more than 40, and the number of individual subscribers has climbed from 5,600 to more than 30,000.

The effect is greater interest in working for State, including an increased number of people who have signed up to take the foreign service exam, said Scott Burns, chief executive officer of St. Paul, Minn.-based GovDocs Inc., which provided the e-mail service.

The 5-year-old company also recently began working with the Labor Department, which will launch a similar e-mail service office by office, and company officials are in discussions with several other federal agencies, Burns said.

In fact, business has been so brisk that the company has landed more contracts in the first five months of 2004 than all of last year, according to Burns. GovDocs began by delivering government labor law postings to U.S. businesses via e-mail; it now has about 35 local, state and federal government clients. The company also works with colleges and universities. The University of California at Berkeley recently signed up for the e-mail service, and GovDocs has started marketing services overseas to small cities and counties in the United Kingdom.

Burns said the company can help government agencies ensure that the information they post on their Web sites reaches the intended audience. "You post something and you pray people will come," Burns said. "We're allowing you to do more with the Web site you currently have."

About 70 percent to 90 percent of visitors to government sites are infrequent users, he said. That's because they visit a site for a specific purpose, and whether or not they find the information they're looking for, they don't come back. However, he said those same visitors frequently check their e-mail.

GovDocs inventories a government Web site's content and then offers several options for e-mail subscriptions. For example, transit authorities might alert users to changed bus routes or ongoing transit projects. Cities could provide information related to crime, parks and recreation, jobs and upcoming bids. Minneapolis and St. Paul offer e-mail subscriptions about snow alerts. In Somerset County, N.J., foreclosure information is popular, while the city of Grand Prairie, Texas, uses e-mail to market pet adoptions.

Using GovDocs' approach, Web site usage after a year increases by 20 percent to 50 percent, he said.

The service is hosted by the company, so all agencies have to do is add a link to their Web sites for e-mail subscriptions. When users click on the link, they are taken to another site with the same look and feel as the client's site. They can choose from a list of subscription options; the average user signs up for four to 10. E-mail messages are kept short, and links are included to related information on the client's site. The company has also developed a system to send shorter messages to wireless devices.

When information changes on a Web site, GovDocs alerts the agency's administrator that the changes might be of interest to subscribers. The company monitors client sites every hour through a public domain algorithm, Burns said.

Pricing varies. Cities pay based on their population, while federal agencies pay based on Web site usage. Setup costs range from \$10,000 to \$100,000, and monthly fees range from under \$1,000 to more than \$10,000.

Burns said there really isn't any direct competition for GovDocs' service. Listservs are a good way of sending mass e-mails, but they're not tailored to users. Cities have the option of building their own systems, but he said most cities and other government agencies simply do nothing at all.