



At Your Service: Research-Based Redesign Transforms Yuma County, Arizona

County governments are uniquely challenged to develop their “brands” and bring personalized services to the large areas they serve. But Yuma County, Arizona, which covers 5,522 square miles and includes two military bases, was determined to keep pace with the expectations of its fast-growing, vibrant community by turning its website into a customer service center.

The Challenge: Redesign with the “Customer” in Mind

After 7 years, Yuma County’s website was due for an upgrade and a new customer-centric design. To begin that process, the County turned to Vision, which developed its previous website. Reasons for the contract renewal included Vision’s advanced technology, a customer service model that stresses service in every aspect of its business, and a website development process that is firmly grounded in research.

According to Yuma County Communications Director Kevin Tunell, his first ah-ha moment came in the research phase of the redesign project. Analytics installed by Vision to take a closer look at the performance of Yuma’s existing website produced heatmaps, which revealed that 90 percent of site visitors ended up viewing just 10 percent of the content.

“Creating a website for a county can be challenging because each department has its own interests and understanding of what a website should be,” said Tunell. “Our previous website was designed around internal perceptions of what citizens want, and we made a series of compromises to satisfy internal stakeholders. Analysis of our existing website and community gave us the user experience data to demonstrate more clearly why we were making certain decisions about design and navigation.”

Yuma County website research showed that people want to do their government business online. They want to get in and get out as quickly as possible and, according to Tunell, the old site wasn’t satisfying that need.

The Solution: Think Like a Customer Service Department

Local government agency websites traditionally have served as online repositories of information for residents and a powerful first impression for visitors. But Tunell and new Yuma County Administrator Susan Thorpe dared to think bigger. They wanted to develop Yuma’s new website as a customer service center.

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Communications Director
Yuma County

“We wanted the website to touch people; to connect with them on a level they totally aren’t expecting,” said Tunell. “I met with Vision in L.A. and gave a presentation on Yuma County. I explained how our form of government differs from municipalities and shared our vision for the new site. I also introduced the idea that we wanted more than just a website; we wanted a customer service center.”

Tunell envisioned four levels of service:

1. Immediate service via online chat
2. Online service request forms with a promise of 24-hour response
3. An online directory giving citizens the ability to contact staff directly
4. Social media pages for ongoing engagement

Tunell’s enthusiasm for the chat feature grew after a visit to Walmart illustrated a powerful service analogy. He realized his experience in the mega store was similar to a customer using a government website. The main door is like the homepage. Department signs hanging from the store’s ceiling are like webpage icons that indicate where various services can be found. And, if you are unsure or in a hurry, the Walmart greeter at the entrance is there to offer personal assistance. That’s where online chat comes in.

“The idea of offering personal assistance through live chat was a turning point in viewing our website as a customer service center,” Tunell explained. “We needed to become the Walmart greeters of Yuma County government.”

The Result: Bringing the Personal Touch to an Online Community

After more than two years of research, discussion and creative thinking, Yuma County launched its retooled website on December 16, 2016 with an online customer service widget including live chat that follows users on every page.

To help people quickly find what they want, the homepage has a giant Google-like search bar across the center, as well as drop-down menus from broad categories at the top of the page. At the bottom of the homepage, three tabs with large icons clearly display links to Popular Services, Meetings & Events, and News.

By studying the analytics, Tunell and his team were able to carry that same level of transparency and customer focus throughout the website. In addition to the homepage Popular Services button, each department has customer

service “widgets” leading to their own most asked for services. Furthering the Walmart concept, all topics for each department or area are prominent on each page.

“If we’re really trying to be transparent and serve the customer, why not do it on every page of the website, not just one?” Tunell challenged. “Part of being a good communicator is looking forward and having the guts to stay up with the technology.”

Every page of the website features an option to live chat with a county staffer. It appears as the top option in the “Online Help Center” overlay on the right of every page. The chat function is supported by Tunell and four other county employees during normal business hours and can relay messages during off hours. For mobile devices, the responsive design feature creates something more like an app menu with a small search bar, buttons taking people to popular destinations and a chat window at the bottom.

Tunell said the new customer service features have been a huge success. For example, more than 2,500 chats were registered during the first month and two more people have been added to the chat team.

“The online chat is extremely popular,” he said. “We’re now working to channel the chats to people in the appropriate departments. It’s much like texting and really no different than answering the phone. Expanding chat to every department will allow citizens to get their questions answered more quickly and completely.”

Tunell emphasized that the chat window is not intended to be used for complaints or to provide the solution to every problem. But during the first week after the site launched, the Yuma team was able to help a Marine in Afghanistan who had forgotten to pay his taxes and accessed the chat feature for guidance.

Better yet, this website conversation is a two-way street. If they notice someone spending an inordinate amount of time on the website, the “help desk” staff can initiate a chat by asking, “Is there anything we can do to help you?” Site visitors can either respond with a question or ignore the message.

“We can point them in the right direction to get the help they need or link them to someone with the authority to address their issue. People are genuinely surprised that we are humans,” Tunell laughed.