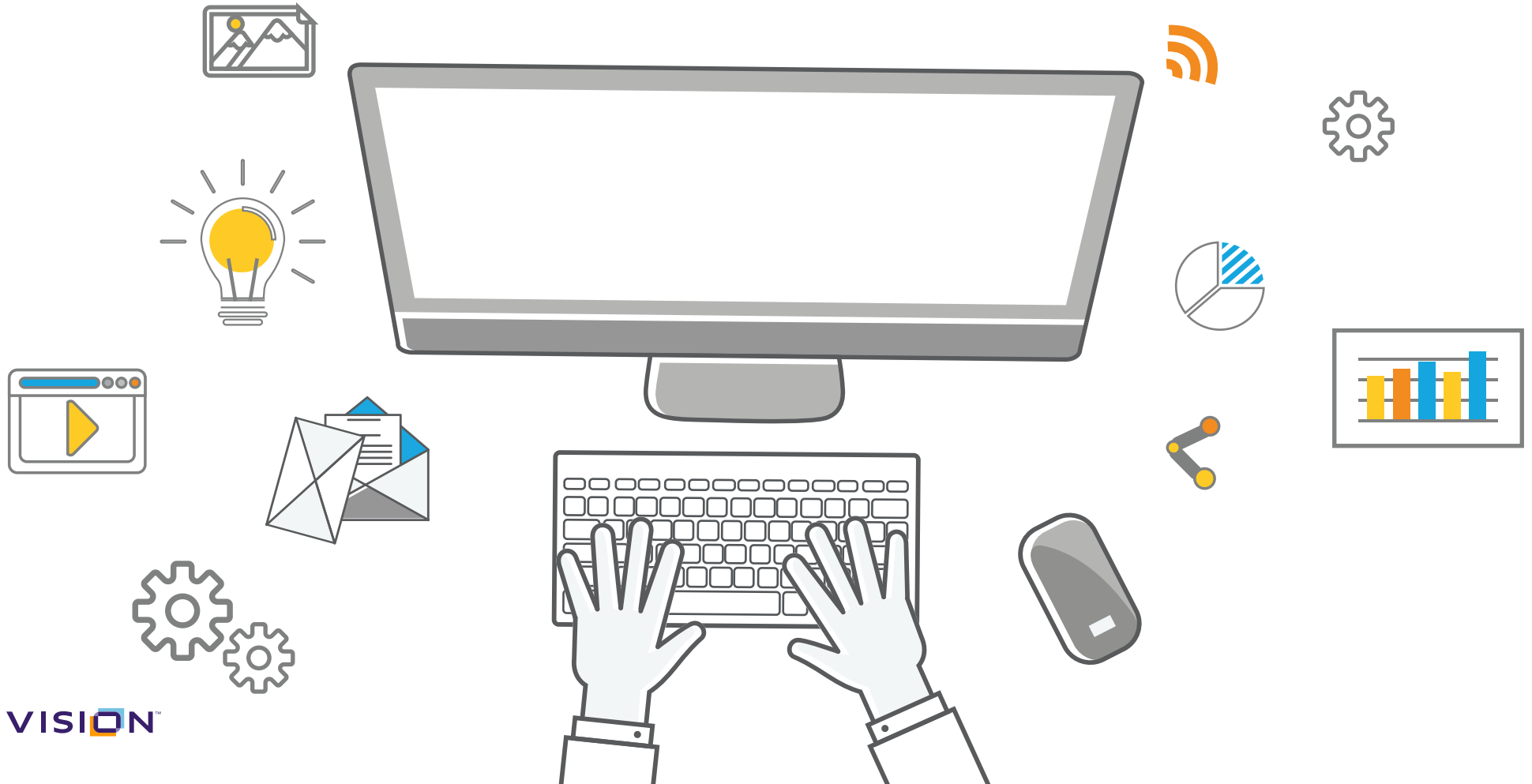


# WHAT'S NEXT IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR COUNTY GOVERNMENT 2017 Edition



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Survey.....	01
Demographics.....	02
Is County Government Obligated to Keep Pace with Changing Technology.....	03
Websites: The Hub in the Wheel of Digital Government.....	05
The Engagement Challenge.....	07
Making County Government Accessible.....	10
Counties Serve Distinct Community Needs.....	12
Analytics and Updates.....	13
Summary.....	14

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

For the third year, Vision commissioned a survey to gauge the current state of digital communications in local government and project future trends. In December 2016, the online survey was distributed to 3,696 local government agencies, including 1,529 counties. Titled “What’s Next in Digital Communications for Local Government,” the survey realized an 11.8 percent response rate, representing 290 municipal and 146 county government entities throughout the United States and Canada. The response rate places the survey confidence level at 95 percent with a +/- 4% margin of error.

A good cross-section of population sizes, functional responsibilities and geographic diversity is represented in this year’s survey response data. Quantitative and qualitative input is summarized in this report.

## COUNTIES ARE DIFFERENT

While counties and municipalities work hand-in-hand on many fronts, each has its own roles and responsibilities when it comes to serving the needs of residents. Counties are integral to building healthy, vibrant and safe communities through their innovative management of justice and public safety systems, economic development and infrastructure programs. This report will highlight responses from county government agencies, and key similarities and differences in terms of their progress toward digital transformation.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

2017 survey respondents represent a broad spectrum of county population sizes:

- Less than 10,000 (4.7%)
- 10,000 to 24,999 (12.9%)
- 25,000 to 49,999 (15.3%)
- 50,000 to 99,999 (20%)
- 100,000 to 249,999 (27.1%)
- 250,000 to 499,999 (7.1%)
- 500,000+ (12.9%)

Information Technology and Administration officials represented the largest groups of County respondents (both at 27.1%) followed by Public Information & Marketing professionals at 21.2 percent.

# IS COUNTY GOVERNMENT OBLIGATED TO KEEP PACE WITH CHANGING TECHNOLOGY?

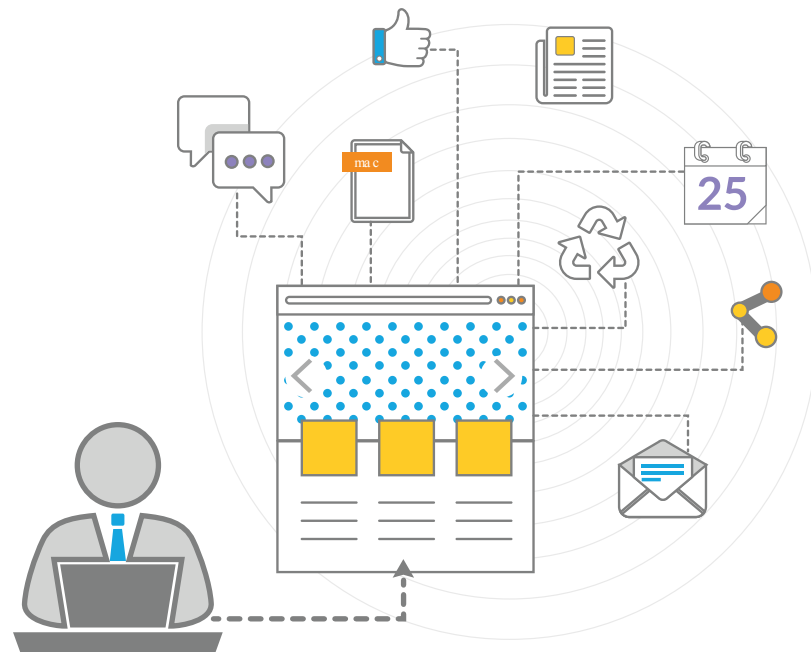
“

*It's a changing world that involves using technology. Local government must be willing to change.*

**- County Magistrate, Kentucky**

”

Like their municipal counterparts, the overwhelming majority of county government leaders believe that, yes, local governments have the responsibility to keep pace with ever-changing technology. That's how more than 97 percent of county survey respondents answered this forward-looking survey question in 2017.



As in prior years, this question generated a large number of write-in comments including:

“  
*As technology evolves, so does communications. We have to keep pace with the changing environment or the message gets lost.*  
”  
**- County Council Member, Alberta, Canada**

Others took a more pragmatic view of technology.

“  
*It's important for local governments to look for efficiency while providing services, as they spend other people's money!*  
”  
**- County Commissioner, Minnesota**

“  
*The Federal government says if you don't, you will not be eligible for grant money.*  
”  
**- County Emergency Management Coordinator, Texas**

# WEBSITES: THE HUB IN THE WHEEL OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

For the third year in a row, 9 out of 10 of the local government participants describe their agency websites as “integral to their overall communications and public service strategy.” Municipal respondents, however, placed slightly higher importance on their agency websites than their county counterparts. Ninety percent of county respondents said their websites were “essential” or “important” to their overall communications and public service strategy compared to 96 percent of municipal respondents.

When asked how well their existing websites serve their communities, three-quarters of both county and municipal respondents rate their sites as average to good, while fewer than 1 in 10 describe their websites as “outstanding.”

“  
*Our website is like a calling card for the county.*  
– **County Communications Director, Arizona**”

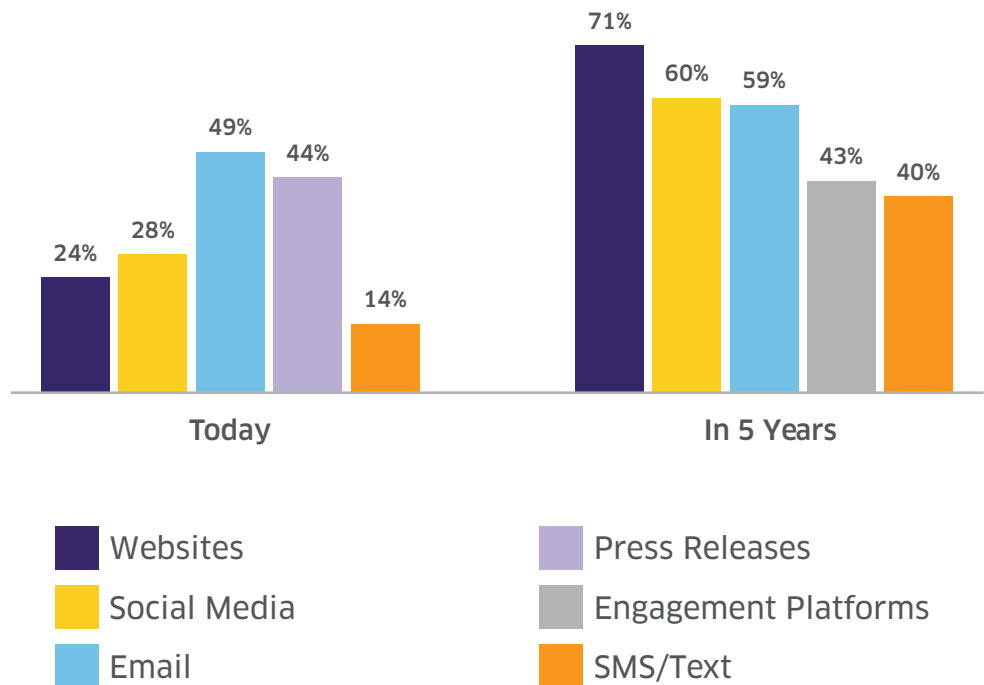
Only one-quarter (24%) of the county leaders surveyed rate their agency’s current website as one of their most “highly effective” channels of communication. Nearly half of county respondents (49%) cited email as one of their most effective channels of communications with constituents today followed by news releases at 44 percent. But almost three-quarters (71%) believe that their websites will be one of their most effective means of communicating with residents in 5 years.

When asked how well their website serves their community in terms of visitors quickly and easily finding what they seek or conduct business online, 17 percent rate their websites as “below average” or “poor.” Only 9 percent of county respondents rate their websites “outstanding,” while nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) rate their county websites “average” or “good.” These responses mirror the observations of their municipal counterparts.

County and municipal leaders agree on the three biggest issues with their current websites, with

“limited citizen engagement” topping the list. Navigation and mobile-ready design issues rounded out the top three cited by both groups, albeit in different order. The lack of mobile-ready design beat out “difficult to navigate” among county respondents.

### Most highly effective channels of communication





# THE ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGE

What are the digital priorities for county government in 2017? Expanding citizen engagement is a top priority for both county (63%) and municipal leaders (80%) this year. The next three priorities, identified by more than half of all county respondents, involve minimizing cybersecurity risks, integrating digital mobile platforms and employing responsive design to be more mobile-friendly.

*It is critical to keep our systems safe and up-to-date, spending tax dollars wisely. With system/technological age comes expense and vulnerability.*

**- County IT Director, Utah**

*Technology is evolving rapidly in many areas, one of the most important is mobile technology, which has seen the most change in the past 10 years. To provide services for the communities that the local governments oversee they need to continue to evolve with that technology.*

**- County GIS Office, Minnesota**

Forecasts of the average annual investment needed over the next 5 years to allow county IT/Communications budgets to keep pace with technology ranged from 0 to 100 percent or more, with the greatest percentage (41%) of county respondents predicting the need for an annual increase of 10–19 percent. Overall, counties forecast slightly lower investment than municipalities.

Looking more closely at future plans, citizen engagement topped the list of areas identified for expansion or investment by counties in 2017. It was cited as a priority by nearly half of all county participants (46%). The integral role websites play in successful engagement strategies most likely accounts for the fact that website upgrade was second on that list.

- 1 Citizen engagement
- 2 Website upgrade
- 3 Social media
- 4 Data and analytics
- 5 Disaster recovery/continuity of operations



Social media, cited by 41 percent of county respondents, came in third among county expansion or investment priorities for 2017. Responses from county participants suggest that county government has been slower to integrate social media tools than municipalities. Seventy-eight percent of county leaders said social media is impacting their operations today, compared to 90 percent for municipal respondents.

This may explain why none of the county leaders participating in the survey ranked their agency as “outstanding” in effective citizen engagement. Overall, 39 to 40 percent of both county and municipal leaders see their current effectiveness in engaging citizens as merely “average.”

“

*Social media may be used less often by counties because we have fewer upcoming events and activities to promote. Cities provide services that are closer to home and often of more immediate interest to local residents. Also, citizens probably identify themselves more with their city than their county and, as a result, they may follow their city more than their county on social media. Counties have a little more static content because there's not as much in the way of rotating events and local promotions. We're more focused on providing services and connecting those services to our citizens when they come to our county website.*

**- Developer-County IT Services, Minnesota**

”

# MAKING COUNTY GOVERNMENT ACCESSIBLE

*Public service is the backbone of our society. We should make every effort to provide services to the public in the ways they prefer.*

**- County Commissioner, Missouri**

Federal mandates calling for the removal of barriers that prevent interaction with or access to websites by people with disabilities are a growing concern for both county and municipal government leaders. New rules on Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) website compliance will be issued in 2018 and existing guidelines such as ADA, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 and Section 508, increasingly are being enforced.

The good news is county leaders are acutely aware of their responsibilities in this area; however, many lack the specific knowledge required to satisfy the accessibility mandates. Eighty-two percent of county respondents cite “web accessibility” as the top issue impacting county government operations today. Yet, one-third of county leaders surveyed say they have “no knowledge” of Federal web accessibility requirements. Another 60 percent described their knowledge as “weak” or “moderate.” Unfortunately, the current level of knowledge is similar on the municipal level.

**60%**

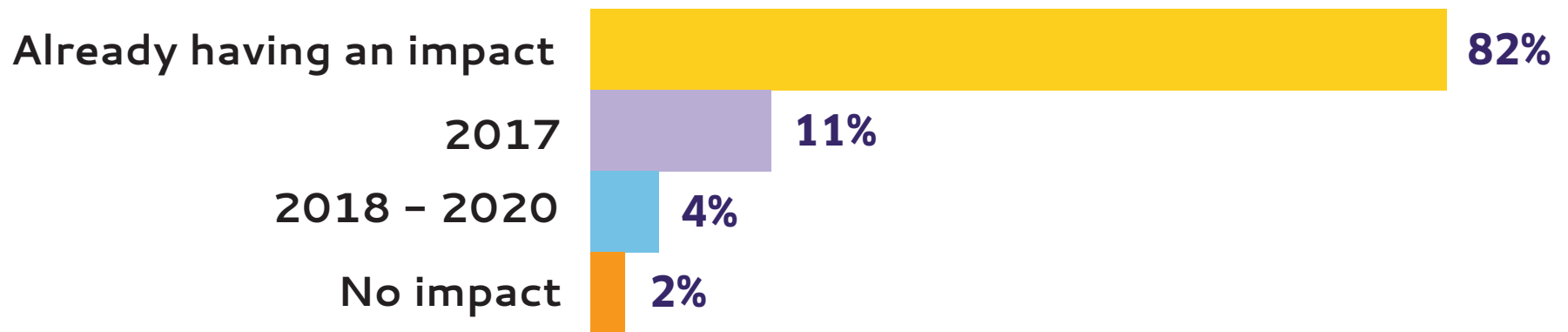
report having moderate, weak or no knowledge of Federal web accessibility requirements

**98%**

believe web accessibility will have a “significant impact” on local government by 2020

For some, staffing challenges and procurement obstacles continue to be barriers to expanding government technology and accessibility.

## Respondents predict when web accessibility will have a significant impact on local government operations



“

*We try our best to keep citizens aware, making information available, yet it all still takes some staff time and energy for all of these issues. Many smaller governments cannot afford to invest what is required.*

- County Commissioner, Minnesota

”

# COUNTIES SERVE DISTINCT COMMUNITY NEEDS

When asked to rank the topics they believe their citizens care about most, both county and municipal survey respondents cited job opportunities as the top area of interest. Beyond that, however, their views of what citizens expect from each level of government differ. After jobs, county respondents say citizens most often are looking for information on planning and zoning issues, followed by emergency notifications. Municipal leaders find community members are more interested in special events and parks & recreation news.

1

**Job  
Opportunities**



2

**Planning &  
Zoning Issues**



3

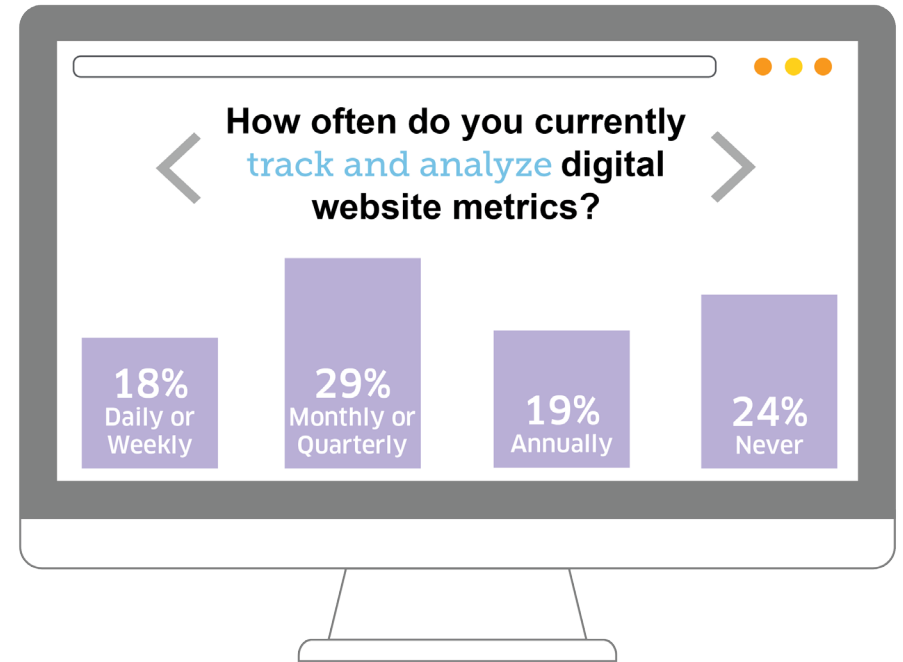
**Emergency  
Notifications**



# ANALYTICS & UPDATES

The majority (66%) of 2017 county survey respondents track and analyze their website metrics, including identifying their most visited web pages, at a minimum of once per quarter. Eighteen percent analyze their county website traffic weekly, however, nearly 1 in 4 counties said they “never” track their website analytics. When asked if they adjust their web strategy and update their homepage based on those analytics, 22 percent said “yes”, and more than half (52%) said “sometimes.”

As one county leader explained:



*It's important to know what's keeping people engaged on the site and what content they want to dig into deeper. Analytics allow us to get into the heads of the people who use the site. We've made modifications to the homepage and other areas of the site based on what we learned from analytics.*

- Developer-County IT Services, Minnesota

# SUMMARY

It's clear that county government IT and Communications professionals recognize their responsibility to provide citizens with digital services with the same level of accessibility, transparency and efficiency they enjoy in the private sector.

Results of this 2017 What's Next in Digital Communications for Local Government survey indicate that county leaders will continue to be faced with accessibility, cybersecurity and mobility challenges as they work to serve and protect the public interest.

The challenges are great, but the opportunities to increase citizen satisfaction, build trust and foster engagement on the county level are greater than ever.





## ABOUT VISION

Headquartered in El Segundo, Calif., Vision is a national leader in government website development with more than 700 government, non-profit and education clients in U.S. and Canadian communities with populations that range from less than 1,000 residents to more than 5 million. For more than 20 years, Vision has created cost-effective solutions that increase government efficiency, transparency and interactive communications with citizens. The company's powerful, easy-to-use visionLive™ content management system continues to evolve with feedback from hundreds of municipal clients. In 2017, Vision was named for the second consecutive year to Government Technology magazine's GovTech 100, a listing of leading companies developing innovative or disruptive offerings to improve or transform government. For more information please call 888.263.8847 or visit [visioninternet.com/inforequest](http://visioninternet.com/inforequest).

[info@visioninternet.com](mailto:info@visioninternet.com)  
[www.visioninternet.com](http://www.visioninternet.com)

© 2017 Vision. All Rights Reserved.

