# FIVE DECISIONS THAT
# MAKE (OR BREAK)
# THE SUCCESS OF YOUR WEBSITE

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# INTRODUCTION

A recent Accenture digital government study found that "improved digital services would positively change citizen attitudes toward government." In fact, 65% of the respondents reported that better digital services would positively impact the following beliefs:

- My government is forward thinking
- My government is efficient
- I have confidence and trust in my government
- Overall, I am satisfied with my government

With this in mind, how do you ensure that your website can meet and even exceed expectations – expectations that have grown with the widespread adoption of mobile devices, apps and advanced features?

# MAKE THE REDESIGN A PRIORITY

In the busyness of day–to–day operations of local government, it can be easy for your website to become an afterthought. However, few projects have as much potential to touch every department, every elected official and every resident the way the website does.

## Include Key Staff

As you build your team, think about whose involvement could make the biggest impact on its on–going success. Perhaps an elected official who has expressed interest in community outreach? Or the department head who tends to be negative about new projects? Involving them in discussions early can help build buy–in, both during the redesign and after — not to mention alignment!

## Dedicate Resources

While working with an outside website developer will certainly streamline the process, a successful website project will still require your input. Make sure to dedicate the time to review recommendations, coordinate your internal staff, and gather the information that will become your site's content. Your effort in creating your website will set the stage for its future success. Show that it is a priority!

# DEVELOP A
# CONTENT STRATEGY

The most often overlooked and undervalued part of your website is arguably the most important: **Content.** Even a visually stunning website will not be effective if the information within it is difficult to find and understand.

Content strategy involves planning for the creation and governance of your content, so that it gives residents the right information in the right amount at the right time. When looking at your site, start by asking yourself the following questions. If you don't know the answers, look to your website analytics or consider asking your citizens directly through a website survey.

1. Who visits my agency's websites? Include both demographic info (age/income/ education) as well as interest (resident/ tourist/business owner).

2. What's most important/necessary to visitors?

3. What's the best way to deliver what they need?

## Governance & Planning

As you execute your content strategy, make sure to keep your departments aligned, rather than relying on a decentralized "everyone does their own thing" approach. Content should not be a "set it and forget it" element of your site – it's the core communication vehicle that connects to your visitors.

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# USE HIGH-QUALITY PHOTOS



You could have a perfectly executed content strategy and website framework, but if you populate your site with poor quality images, it will look incomplete. Today's website designs leave a lot of space for photos to tell stories about your community. Will yours say, "we're a scenic location, rich with bounty," or "we're not too tech−savvy"? The City of Reno's photos definitely convey the former.

To ensure your community is representing itself effectively, take the time to assess your photos before you put them on your site.

1. Are they high resolution?
2. Are they the right size for the container, or will they be stretched/squeezed?
3. Are they attractive?

## Leverage Your Own Experts

Even if you don't have the budget for a professional photographer, consider reaching out your community's best amateurs to submit photos. You can do this with a contest or simply the offer of a photo credit on your site. Reno's fantastic photos have all been submitted by residents, providing an engaging, home−grown way to show off the city.

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# SET MEASURABLE GOALS

Your community website can provide many benefits to residents and to leaders, but you won't know if it's effective without measurable goals. It pays to set benchmarks for performance and to track your progress.

For many communities, the website has a small handful of key goals like engaging residents online versus by phone, reducing complaints, and raising awareness about important events. These are all things you can measure with a combination of website analytics, like Google Analytics, and with customer surveys.
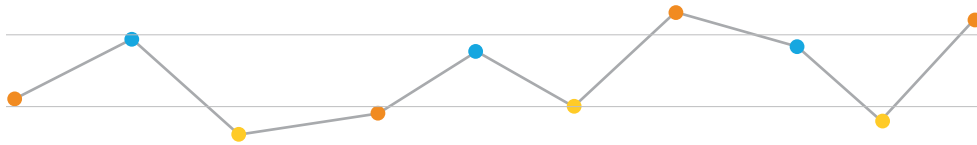
## Here are some possible metrics to capture:

1. Usage of key features like online bill payment

2. Number of website visitors

3. Number of online viewers for meetings

4. Engagement with social channels

5. Number of calls received for specific tasks compared to similar tasks completed online

## Take Action

After your team identifies goals and gets benchmark data, you can begin developing strategies to improve results. Leverage good content strategy principles or even hire an outside vendor to help craft a more effective user experience. Concentrate on tactics that address your users' needs, rather than internal stakeholder opinions. In the end, your users will determine the success of your approach.
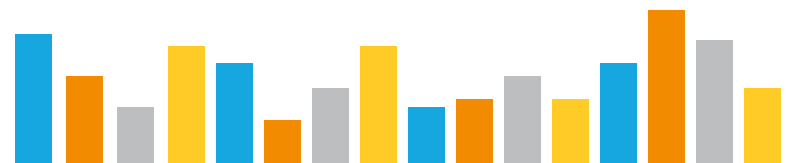
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# FOCUS YOUR EFFORTS
# ON YOUR RESIDENTS

Recently, the Vision team sat down with a room full of city leaders planning a website redesign. They knew their government inside out – and had a lot of ideas about what information should be showcased prominently on the home page.

But, when residents were surveyed about what would make the site useful for them, everyone got quite a surprise as they expressed VERY different opinions about what should be most prominent. This misalignment wasn't because the leaders acted in bad faith; their daily immersion in all of the functions of city hall diminished their ability to see their website through fresh eyes.

Imagine if they hadn't taken that extra step and left things as they thought they should be. The very residents they sought to serve through the website would have come away frustrated because what **they** really needed/wanted would not have been easy to access.

## Begin with Data

As you seek to make decisions from your residents' perspective, it can help to refocus the conversation on data-based facts. Who is visiting your website? What are the most frequently visited pages? How are most visitors entering and existing your website?

How do you get the data needed? There are multiple sources such as website analytics, user surveys, focus groups and user testing that a specialist like Vision can facilitate.

Taking this extra step during the redesign and after can help keep your website community-focused and effective.
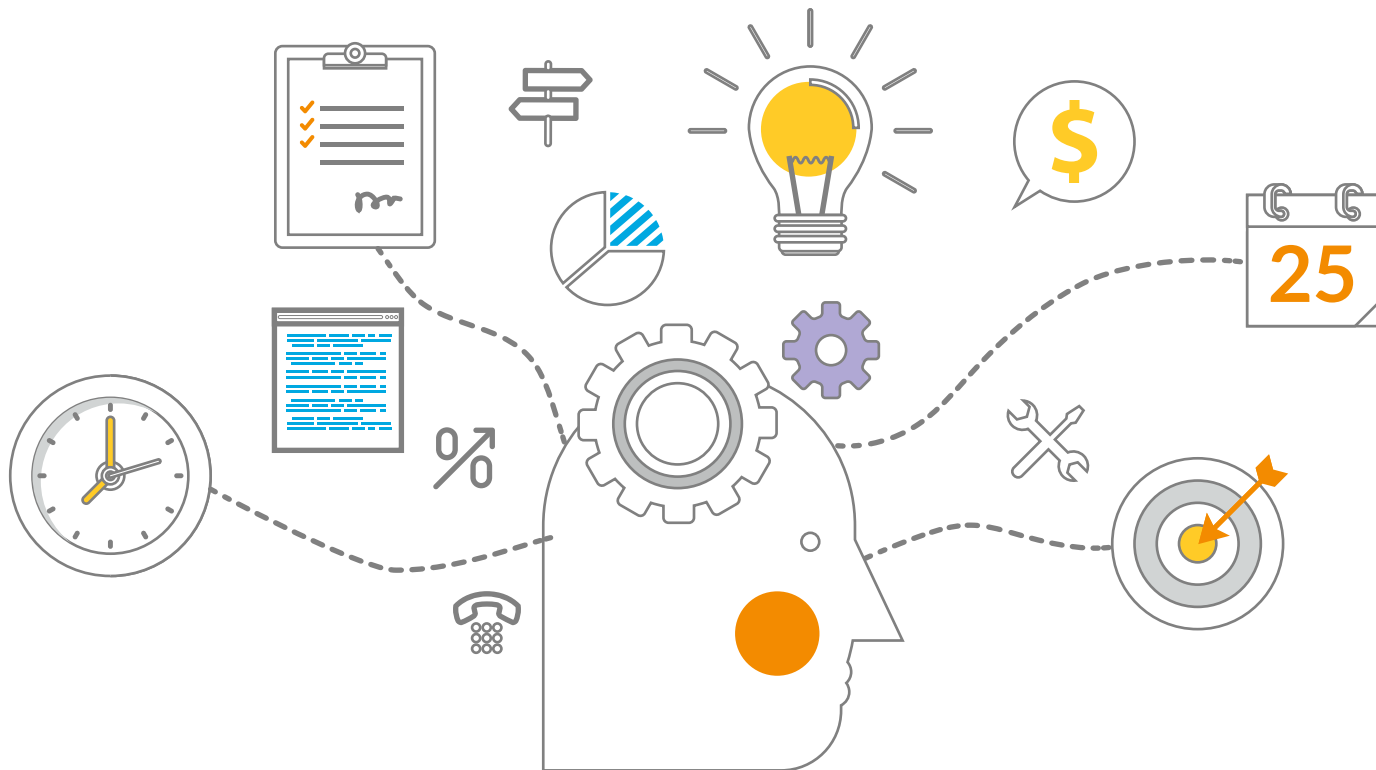
# CONCLUSION

Every agency has its own unique shape, personality and organizational structure. But regardless of their make-up, effective digital communicators have several things in common. They make their website a priority, they create content strategically, they invest in quality imagery, they set measureable goals to gauge their success, and they focus on resident needs to guide their decisions.

With these key factors in place, local governments can put their energy into creating websites that serve, represent and delight visitors — creating more engaged and satisfied communities.

## ABOUT VISION

Headquartered in El Segundo, Calif., Vision Internet 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 2016, Vision was named 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

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