THE ADVOCACY

G R O U P

Online On The Hill:

A Survey Of Congressional Use Of The Internet

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Politicians have a long history of embracing new technology to better communicate with the public. For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted his fireside chats to take advantage of a relatively new technology, the radio. Television made its first real political impact decades later in the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates. Today, by simply flipping through a few channels, we can usually find a politician using television to reach his or her constituents.

We are in the midst of another technological revolution -- the Age of the Internet. Unparalleled, in its reach, flexibility and cost-effectiveness, the Internet has already changed the face of communications through the World Wide Web and e-mail. The promise it holds for a more informed public discourse on various issues is boundless.

How are politicians taking advantage of this new technology? How are they using e-mail? Are they making the most of their web site to reach their constituents? This study examines these and many other questions about Congress' use of the Internet. In addition to summarizing the results below, this paper also highlights a number of ways that congressional offices can dramatically improve their online presence.

METHODOLOGY

Over a 10-day period from February 14 to February 24, 2001, The Advocacy Group conducted a survey of web sites for all 540 Congressional Offices in the United States Congress. The Survey included members of the Senate and House, including non-voting delegates from the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Virgin Islands, Guam and Puerto Rico. Each site was consistently and objectively evaluated for the presence or absence of 24 qualitative variables (such as recent content, press release content, or acceptance of electronic mail). Each variable represents a recognized feature or technique for making web sites more effective communication tools. Totals of the number of beneficial site features present were calculated for each office and averaged to make rough comparisons between different categories (e.g., by House, by party, by caucus, etc.). Offices that do not have a web site were included in the study and attributed a total of 0 out of 24 possible site features.

Particularly in the last several years, congressional offices have made important strides toward recognizing the Internet as an important communication tool. Consider the following information:

- 100% of Senate and 95% of the House maintain a web site
- 87 % accept e-mail messages from their web site
- 88% provide constituent service information
- 84% offer press releases online
- 83% offer useful links about their district from their web site

While these are strong percentages, an argument could be made that every congressional web site should contain these elements. In addition, most congressional web sites are missing opportunities to increase their Internet presence. For example:

- Only 32% post recent content (e.g., within two weeks) on their front page
- Only 18% list their legislative accomplishments online
- Only 40% organize their site by issue content
- On average, congressional web sites displayed only 7.57of a possible 24 beneficial web site elements, with scores ranging from 0 – 17.

An effective web site does not need to be an expensive endeavor, requiring an inordinate amount of staff time. Many of the criteria used in this study are simple common sense additions that can be accomplished by an intern, community college students or existing staff members. Additionally, unlike many organizations, congressional offices have ready access to relevant and current online content such as press releases and speeches. It is more a matter of presenting this information in a more efficient manner rather than creating additional content.

While one might expect the larger staff of Senate offices to produce a higher average score than their more modestly staffed counterparts in the House, the difference is not dramatic. Senators average 8.79 out of the 24 recommended web site elements, compared to the House's average of 7.29. Democrats post an average of 7.67, only slightly more than the Republican average of 7.48.

Figure 1: Average Score for Interent Caucus Members and Other Members
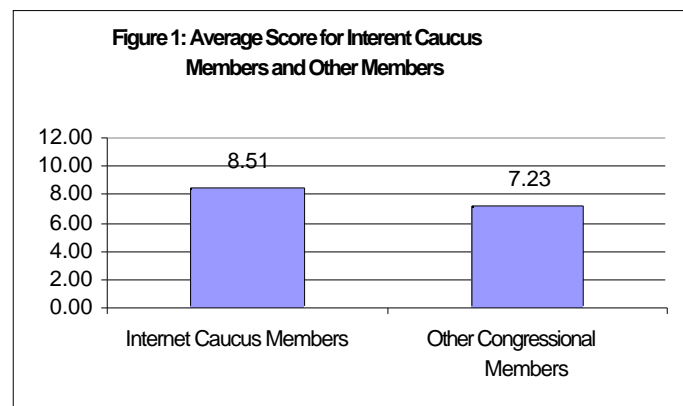
Members of the Congressional Internet Caucus showed leadership in this area, outpacing other members. Caucus members incorporate an average of 8.51 of the 24 recommended site features compared to a 7.23 average for the rest of Congress. There is an opportunity for the Internet Caucus to lead the way in improving the overall effectiveness of Congressional web sites.

I. Location, Location, Location: The Importance of Your Internet Address (URL)

At the most basic level, in order for a web site to be effective, constituents have to actually find it. The more relevant and intuitive a website name the better. Companies and organizations will pay top dollar for a personalized web address because of its marketing value (for example, www.fedex.com or www.amazon.com).

While there are obvious differences between corporations and congressional offices, the goal is fundamentally the same – to make the site accessible to visitors. Only 15% of Senators, and less than 2% of Representatives, actually chose a personalized URL (such as http://clinton.senate.gov/ or http://www.demint.house.gov/). The vast majority of congressional offices followed the standard provided template for web site names (www.house.gov/lastname or www.senate.gov/~lastname). Anytime you add length or unfamiliar symbols like the (~) to your website name, it is less likely that a constituent will find or remember your site. A personal URL is particularly important for encouraging repeat visitors to the site and for offline marketing efforts.

Figure 2: Personal Web Site Name (URL)
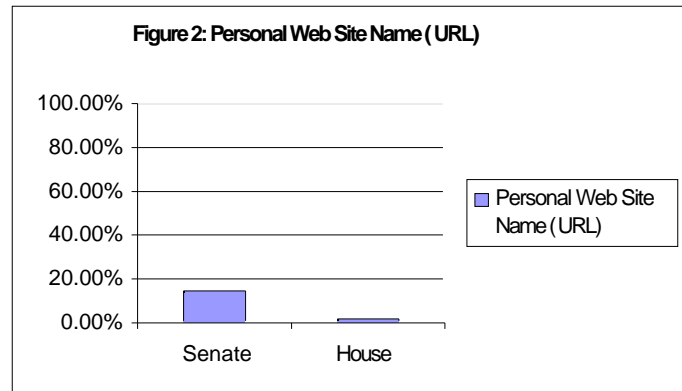
Registering a personal name for your website is relatively easy and inexpensive. It can be done in about 15 minutes and cost little as $35. Simply check to see if the desired web address is available through an official site registry (such as http://www.register.com) and follow the easy instructions for registering the URL.

II. First Impressions: The Importance of Your Front Page

Your front page (the first page of your web site) is the most important part of your site since it is the one page that you can be sure that all visitors will see. An effective front page for a congressional office should keep a constituent's interest, entice them to easily explore other parts of the site, and allow them to easily find what they are looking for. There are three key tools that can be employed to help achieve these goals:

Recent Content – The biggest draw to any site on the Internet is fresh content. Not only will more visitors be attracted to a site with updated information, they will come back regularly to see what is new. This makes websites extremely powerful as a communication tool between congressional members and their constituents.

Unlike many organizations, a congressional office consistently produces recent content in the form of news releases, floor statements and speeches. For the most part, however, House and Senate offices have not taken advantage of the opportunity to distribute this content on their web sites. Only 48% of Senators post recent content on their front page. In the House the percentage drops to just 28.51%.
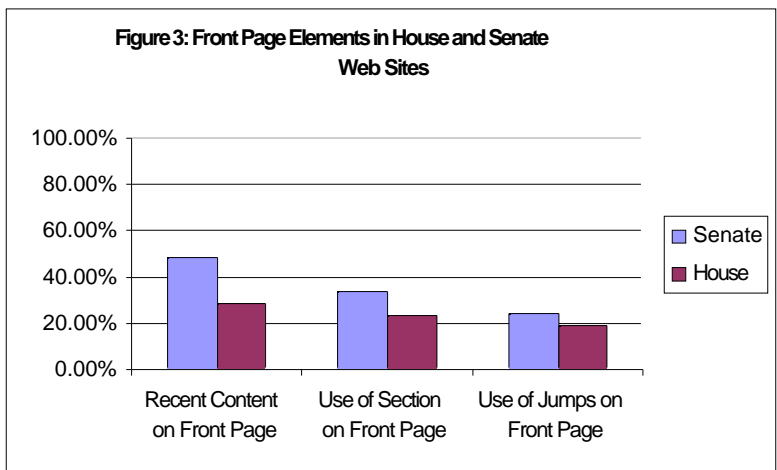
Sections & Jumps – In most cases, visitors come to congressional web sites for information. Therefore, it is important to present and prioritize the information that you want them to see. Using sections in the body of your front page (such as Recent News, What's New) to highlight important content items helps guide the site user. This technique is similar to how a daily newspaper is organized. A number of top news stories begin on the front page, directing the reader to a later page for more in-depth information on the subject.

Figure 3: Front Page Elements in House and Senate Web Sites

Also remember to put the information "above the fold" just like a newspaper. Make sure that the information you want to highlight appears in the initial screen view of your web site. For example, the upper right hand corner of a front page might have a "What's New' section listing a summary of the three most recent press releases followed by a "Click Here for More" that jumps to the entire release. The effect of using sections and jumps on a front page is to make more information accessible to all site visitors and entice them to explore other parts of your site. Less than 34% of Senators and less than 23% of House members use sections or jumps on their front page. For examples of good uses of this technique check out the following web sites: http://www.senate.gov/~thompson/ and http://www.house.gov/boehlert/.

III. Connecting With Your Constituency: Making Your Web Site Interactive

Communication is a two-way street. Combining the use of e-mail with your web site will help you develop a strong community-based following. The strength of e-mail is that it is quicker, less expensive and easier to use than other types of correspondence. Most Internet users are also familiar with e-mail. The following features can make a congressional site more effective both for the member as well as his or her constituents:

Accepting E-mail – Perhaps the most basic addition to any web site is to accept e-mail messages in addition to listing the more traditional contact information (i.e., mailing address, phone and fax). Most offices provide this opportunity, whether through a public e-mail address or an online web form like House Write Your Representative feature. However, 11% of the Senate and 13.17% of the House do not allow site visitors to contact them via e-mail.

E-mail Newsletter – 15% of Representatives and 12% of Senators take the next step by offering an e-mail update or newsletter to interested site visitors. Visitors sign up on the site by giving their e-mail address and/ perhaps specific issue interests. Then the newsletter is sent out every week or month to the appropriate list. Care must be given to the appropriate amount of information to send out and how often.

Figure 4: Interactive features on House and Senate Web Sites
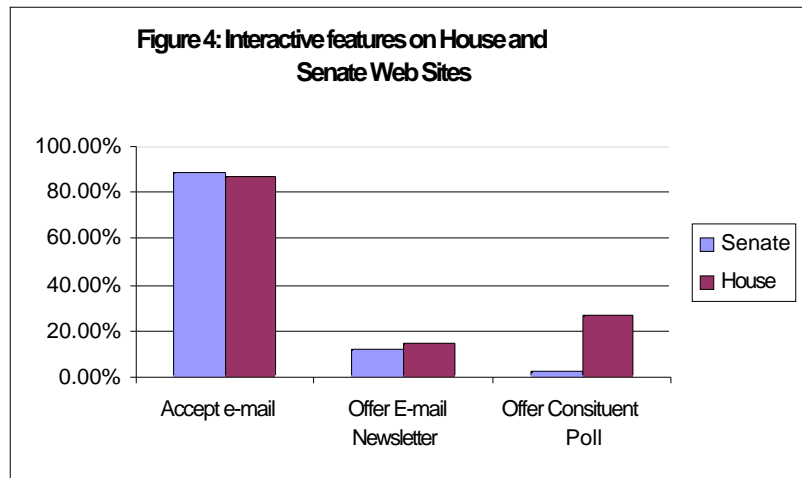
E-newsletters can use jumps that link from the e-mail back to a specific section of the web site for more information. E-mail allows offices to inform constituents about important news right away, instead of relying on them to visit the site. For good examples of sites that offer well-designed e-mail updates visit http://www.senate.gov/~feinstein/ or http://www.house.gov/bass/.

For many organizations, providing recent and relevant content is the biggest problem in producing an e-mail update. However, Congressional offices have a steady stream of such content through press releases, speeches and floor statements. Many congressional offices write weekly updates and post them to their web site but do not provide this content through an e-mail newsletter.

Constituent Poll – Getting feedback from constituents is one of the most important tools for any elected official. In addition to the hundreds of phone calls, faxes, e-mails and letters received by offices on a weekly basis, the Internet can provide a focused way to take the pulse of your constituents on specific issues of interest.

An online poll question on a web site can allow a member to ask a question or set of questions on a variety of issues. From the visitor perspective they represent a fun and easy way to weigh in on important issues. A handful of sites in the Senate (just 3%) offer an online poll question on their site, while a significantly larger percentage of House members (over 25%) made use of this feature.

Once again, adding a constituent poll to your web site is not necessarily expensive. For example, a number of online businesses like Pollcat.com (http://www.pollcat.com) offer a chance to do free basic online polls as well as higher service options for a fee. For examples of congressional sites that have used online constituent polls visit http://www.house.gov/isakson/ or http://www.senate.gov/~feingold/issuearea/forum.html.

IV. Where's the Beef? Packing Your Site With The Right Content

The most basic consideration for any web site is content. This is, after all, the information that you want to communicate to constituents. As we might expect, most congressional offices incorporated many of the key content areas on their sites (See Figure 4). For example, nearly 90% of both the House and the Senate include constituent service information (i.e., case work information, flag requests, etc.). Over 80% in both houses include press releases online. Additionally 84% of House members include links to useful websites in their district, compared to 78% of Senate Offices. Offices providing links to federal government sites and information are also well represented.

However, in three other key areas, offices missed an important opportunity to communicate basic information to their constituents. Only 56% of Senators and 36% of House offices significantly organized their site around specific issues. Congressional offices should divide information on their site around various issues, such as tax policy, the environment or social security. There is no better way to organize information you want to share with constituents. While useful in their own right, links to issue-based content on committee web sites or from other organizations does not have the same impact. For an example of sites that are effectively organized by issue visit http://www.senate.gov/~reid/ or http://bernie.house.gov/.

Also surprising, is that only 15% of the Senate and a little over 19% of the House clearly list their legislative and political accomplishments on their website. A good politician never misses an opportunity to talk about a positive record on various issues. Why not use a congressional web site to relay this positive information? No more than 6% of Senators or House members offer direct links to their voting records on various issues.

Figure 4: Content Elements in House and Senate Web Sites
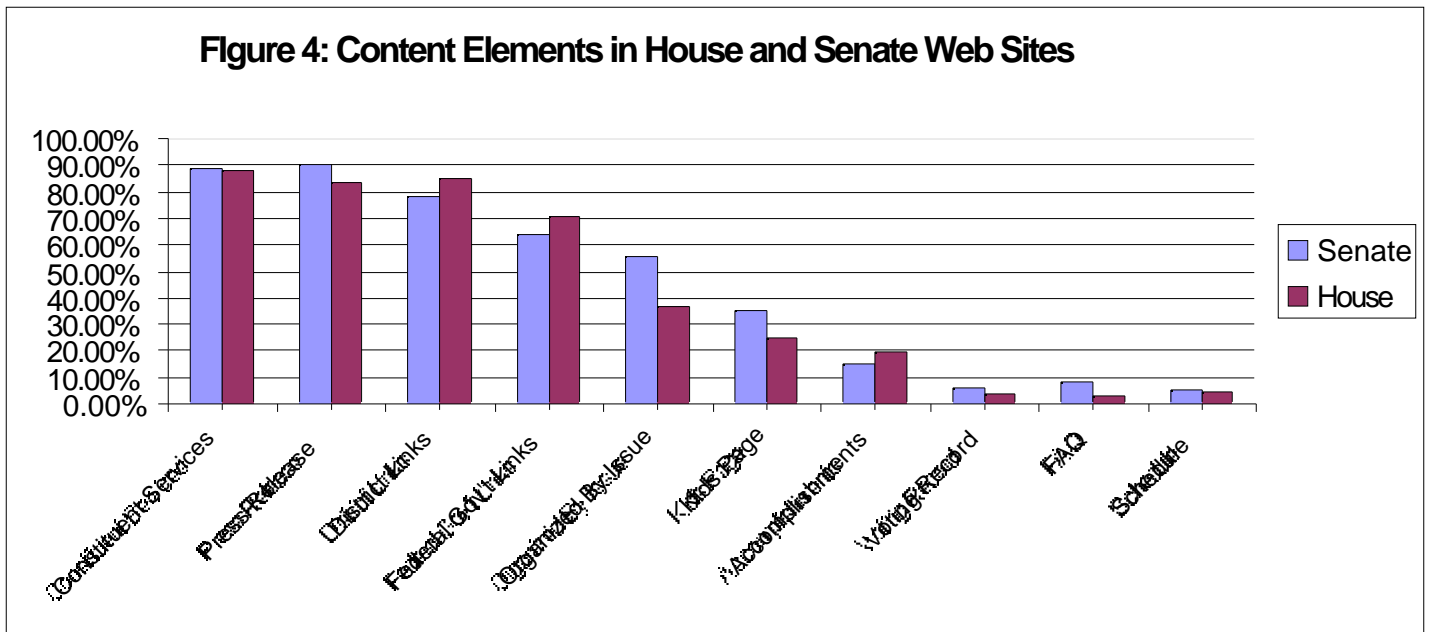
A minority of congressional offices have included useful and creative content on their web site. For example, 35% of Senators and nearly 25% of House members include a page designed specifically for kids. Roughly 5% of offices in both Houses post the member's schedule, highlighting speaking events, appearances, and committee hearings. Only 8% of Senators, and less than 4% of Representatives, include a section of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) as a user-friendly guide to answering the most common inquiries of constituents.

V. Bells & Whistles: Useful Features for Any Web Site

In addition to content, a number of other features can make a site more attractive, informative and user-friendly. Consider the following site features:

Motion Graphics – 32% of the Senate and 28% of the House take advantage of using motion-oriented graphics or other types of movement to make their site more interesting. Done well, this technique can be used to highlight important content and add flavor to a web site. However, too many graphics can be distracting and make a site difficult to load, alienating constituents with slower computers.

Audio/Video Components – 56% of the Senate include audio/visual content on their web sites, compared to just over 9% of the House. Some examples included a video welcome message from the member, an audio file of a radio address, or a video of a recent speech or press conference. Audio/video content is popular on the web. However, to view these files requires additional software that many visitors may not have installed on their computer. It is useful to include a link to RealPlayer, Quicktime or Windows MediaPlayer, to download the software. Be sure to place audio/video content in an optional manner to avoid frustrated users who are unable to download these files. Audio and video files have to be put in a digital format for downloading onto your site, something that is usually outsourced.

Figure 5: Useful Site Features on House and Senate Web Sites

Site Search Function – Many constituents may come to congressional sites looking for specific information. For example, perhaps someone is looking for information on a member's views on tax issues. An easy and intuitive way to accommodate such visitors is to add a site search feature to your front page. These take up very little space and can usually fit in the left or right hand column of your site. Only 39% of Senators and roughly 20 % of Representatives include a search feature on their site. While a number of others included a site map as a navigational tool, this is generally less intuitive or not as useful to most visitors.
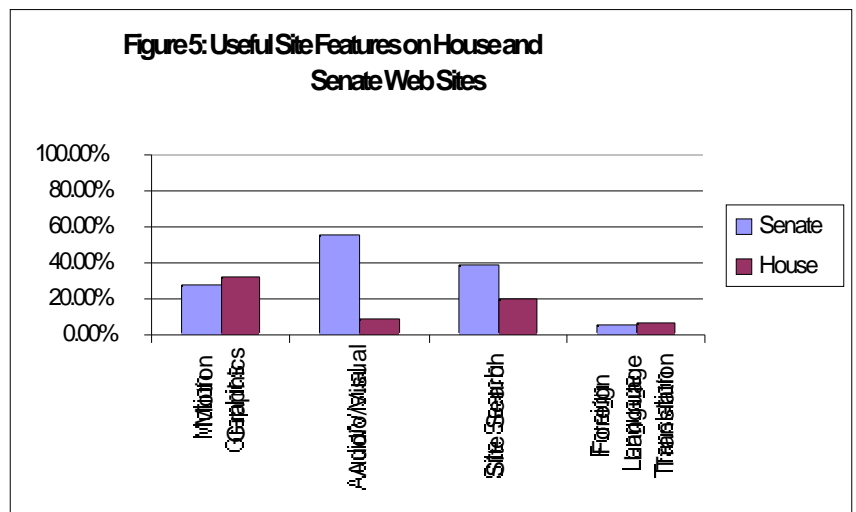
Once again this does not have to be expensive. To add a search function to your site, take a look at one of the many vendors that offer these services.

Foreign Language Translation – A handful of offices (just over 6%) included a feature to translate either their entire site or specific portions of it into a different language. This may be particularly useful for members of Congress with non-English constituents.

Providing this service is not as difficult as one might think. For example, you can simply link to Alta Vista's translation site (http://babel.altavista.com/translate.dyn), which allows any visitor to type in any web site address and translate it into another language for free. An example of a congressional site that has used this technique is http://www.house.gov/meehan/. To establish a direct link to your site translated into another language visit http://w4.systranlinks.com/ which allows you to view a demo before registering a dedicated link of your translated site on their server. Depending on the service, prices range from $0 to $999 a year. For an example of a congressional web site that uses this service visit http://www.senate.gov/~collins/.

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Appendix A: Congressional Web Site Performance Data

Each of the 540 House and Senate offices was evaluated for the presence or absence of each of 24 recommended web site features. All Senate offices maintain a web site while 23 Representatives did not offer a web site (e.g., they did not have a URL web address). Percentages of offices that used each feature are provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Congressional Web Site Performance			
Web Site Feature	*Total Congress*	*Senate*	*House*
Personal Web Address (URL)	4.44%	15.00%	2.06%
Accept E-mail From Web Site	87.22%	89.00%	86.82%
Offer E-mail Update/Newsletter	14.44%	12.00%	15.00%
Recent Content on Front Page	31.85%	48.00%	28.18%
Online Press Releases	83.86%	90.00%	82.46%
Online Speeches/Floor Statements	23.74%	35.00%	21.18%
Kids Page	26.53%	35.00%	24.60%
Schedule	4.26%	5.00%	4.09%
Site Search Function	23.70%	39.00%	20.23%
Privacy Policy	35.56%	34.00%	35.91%
Federal Government Links	68.52%	64.00%	69.55%
District Links	82.96%	78.00%	84.09%
Organized by Issue	39.81%	56.00%	36.14%
Audio/Video Content	17.96%	56.00%	9.32%
Motion Graphics	31.30%	28.00%	32.05%
Use of Sections on Front Page	25.19%	34.00%	23.18%
Use of Jumps on Front Page	20.00%	24.00%	19.09%
Accomplishments	18.33%	15.00%	19.09%
Foreign Language Translation	6.48%	6.00%	6.59%
Voting Record	4.26%	3.86%	4.26%
Counter	4.44%	10.00%	3.18%
Online Constituent Poll	22.41%	3.00%	26.82%
Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) Section	87.59%	89.00%	87.27%
Constituent Services	87.59%	89.00%	87.27%

Appendix B: Average Score Comparisons Between Groups

Rough comparisons can be made by various sub groups (i.e., by party, by house or by caucus. Tables 2-4 present the average score for various sub populations of the study.

Table 2: House Vs. Senate Average Score Comparison	
	Total Congress
Total Congress	7.57
Senate	8.79
House	*7.57*

Table 3: Republican Vs. Democrat Average Score Comparison			
	Total Congress	*Senate*	*House*
Republicans	7.48	8.38	7.25
Democrats	7.67	9.20	7.31

Table 4: Internet Caucus Vs. Non Caucus Members Average Score Comparison			
	Total Congress	*Senate*	*House*
Internet Caucus Members	8.51	8.96	8.36
Non-Internet Caucus Members	7.23	8.74	6.89

Appendix C: Top Performing Web Sites

A number of Congressional Offices used more of the recommended site features than others. A rough score was calculated for each office based on one point for the presence of each recommended feature for a total possible score of 24. A list of the best scoring offices in the House and Senate are presented below in Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 5: Top-Scoring Senate Web Sites		
Senator	*Score*	*Web Site*
Diane Feinstein (D-CA	17	http://www.senate.gov/~feinstein/
Fred Thompson (R-TN)	17	http://www.senate.gov/~thompson/
Harry Reid (D-NV)	15	http://www.senate.gov/~reid/
Jay Rockefeller (D-WV)	15	http://www.senate.gov/~rockefeller/
Craig Thomas (R-WY)	15	http://www.senate.gov/~thomas/
Robert Bennett (R-UT)	14	http://www.senate.gov/~bennett/
Barbara Boxer (D-CA)	14	http://www.senate.gov/~boxer/
Christopher Dodd (D-CT)	13	http://www.senate.gov/~dodd/
Patrick Leahy (D-VT)	13	http://www.senate.gov/~leahy/
Mary Landrieu (D-LA)	13	http://www.senate.gov/~landrieu/
Joe Lieberman (D-CT)	13	http://www.senate.gov/~lieberman/

Table 6: Top-Scoring House Web Sites		
Representative	*Score*	*Web Site*
Bernie Sanders (I-VT)	17	http://bernie.house.gov/
Bob Barr (R-GA)	16	http://www.house.gov/barr/
Richard Pombo (R-CA)	16	http://www.house.gov/pombo/
Heather Wilson (R-NM)	16	http://www.house.gov/wilson/
Mark Green (R-WI)	15	http://www.house.gov/markgreen/
Asa Hutchinson (R-AR)	15	http://www.house.gov/hutchinson/
Collin Peterson (D-MN)	15	http://www.house.gov/collinpeterson/
Frank Wolf (R-VA)	15	http://www.house.gov/wolf/
Earl Blumenauer (D-OR)	14	http://www.house.gov/blumenauer/
Chris Cannon (R-UT)	14	http://www.house.gov/cannon/
Tom Delay (R-TX)	14	http://tomdelay.house.gov/
Nick Lampson (D-TX)	14	http://www.house.gov/lampson/
Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-CA)	13	http://www.house.gov/cunningham/
Peter DeFazio (D-OR)	13	http://www.house.gov/defazio/
David Dreier (R-CA)	13	http://dreier.house.gov/
Johnny Isakson (R-GA)	13	http://hillsource.house.gov/isakson/
Carolyn Maloney (D-NY)	13	http://www.house.gov/maloney/
Marty Meehan (D-MA)	13	http://www.house.gov/meehan/
Thomas Petri (R-WI)	13	http://www.house.gov/petri/

Appendix D: Innovative Web Site Features and Content on Various Sites

The content presentation and design of congressional web sites varied quite dramatically. While some simply put up a basic template, others added unique content and innovative features to their sites. A list of some of the best examples are listed below:

- Senator Blanche Lincoln added a feature on her site called the "Barbeque bandwagon" devoted to highlighting Arkansas' barbeque hot spots. (http://www.senate.gov/~lincoln/)

- Other Members highlighted recent photos of constituents and guests who visited their Washington D.C. offices. See Senator Tom Harkin (http://www.senate.gov/~harkin/) or Senator Orin Hatch's site (http://www.senate.gov/~hatch/) for examples.

- Some Members added regional recipes to their sites such as Senator Mary Landrieu's Oven Jambalaya (http://www.senate.gov/~landrieu/) or Senator Barb's favorite Maryland crab cake recipe (http://www.senate.gov/~mikulski/) or Representative Tom Udall's (http://www.house.gov/tomudall/) tortilla soup.

- Daily features were used by some members, including a "This Day in Oregon history" feature by Senator Gordon Smith (http://www.senate.gov/~gsmith/) and a Daily Trivia testing your knowledge of civics by Senator Fred Thompson (http://www.senate.gov/~thompson/).

- A number of Representatives and Senators allowed site visitors the option to view a high-end version of their site or a more basic (often text only) version for those with slower modems or older computers. For examples see Senator Lieberman's site (http://www.senate.gov/~lieberman/) or Representative Todd Tiahrt's page (http://www.house.gov/tiahrt/).

- Senator James Jeffords (http://www.senate.gov/~jeffords/) offers specific pages on their sites for various constituent groups such as veterans, seniors, parents or small business owners.

- A few members added a section called "The Mailbag" where they posted e-mails from constituents on their web sites followed by their responses. For examples check out the web site for Representative Pete Stark (http://www.house.gov/stark/)

- Representatives Heather Wilson (http://www.house.gov/wilson/) and Richard Pombo (http://www.house.gov/pombo/) an electronic bulletin board on their site where constituents can post their thoughts on issues, ask questions or make announcements.