

The City of Santa Ana's Website Overhaul

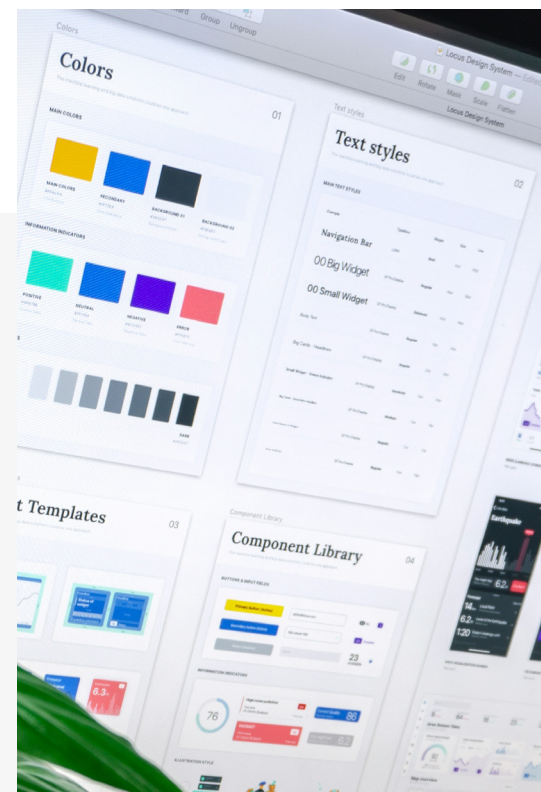
A Digital Service Network Spotlight

DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

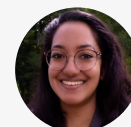
Background

In 2019 the City of Santa Ana, California, website needed an overhaul due to reported difficulties with sharing information, limited capacity for editing and creating content, and no single point of ownership or lack of responsibility for the site's overall efficacy. Daniel Soto, principal management analyst at the City of Santa Ana, noted these challenges and, beyond his assigned duties, analyzed the scope of the old website's issues. After clearing a number of bureaucratic obstacles, Soto led a website overhaul for the City.

Soto's proactive leadership is an example of how digital service innovation can occur in government organizations without formally codified or centralized digital service teams. The Beek Center's Digital Service Network (DSN) spoke with Soto to learn more.



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Santa Ana’s website challenges

As of 2019, there were three key operational and delivery challenges with the City of Santa Ana’s website:

- + It was a challenge to update old or share new information promptly for users because staff were heavily reliant on Information Technology (IT) Department staff to support them in editing content and making changes to the site;
- + Costs to build and maintain the custom-built website were high; and
- + There was no single steward of the site’s success, which compounded issues like update delays or user-interface glitches.

Because of his prior government experience in digital design, Soto’s colleagues shared anecdotes with him about their challenges with the site. Around the same time, elected officials and external users began complaining publicly about their experiences navigating the site. Soto’s role within the City Manager’s Office did not include responsibilities like “digital delivery” or “website analysis,” but Soto took the initiative to address the problem. Given his previous experience working on several iterative, user-centered digital delivery projects in government, Soto felt confident that he could spearhead a similar effort to overhaul Santa Ana’s website.

Gaining buy-in with demos

Soto began with the anecdotal challenges he had been hearing about, documenting these complaints and following up with a broader survey of website users. Then, Soto built a demo site to demonstrate how a site could focus on accessibility, ease of use, and proper navigation, all of which were key challenges he had documented.

In 2020, Soto presented the working demo to the city manager. “Just with a very minimal, bare-bones prototype site, [the city manager was] blown away with the differences in the ease of use and navigation on the prototype site compared to the then-current site,” Soto shared. Based on the demo’s success, the city manager empowered Soto to take up the responsibilities of product owner for a website overhaul initiative—contingent upon securing approval from the IT director.

It took a year for Soto to get IT buy-in due to the department’s reservations about the scale, security, and cost of such an organizational change. But Soto worked diligently to assuage any fears, again using the demo website as a key tool of persuasion. By late 2021, Soto secured IT’s endorsement.

Building a process for iterative, user-centered design and delivery

After getting the green light for the website overhaul, Soto broke the rebuild process down into six stages:

- 1. Identify and document the problem:** Soto collected firm evidence that the current website was difficult to use, both for residents and for staff, and costly to maintain.
- 2. Identify the desired outcome:** Soto helped forge a vision for the new website as an accessible, easy-to-use digital communications and engagement service that would be used as part of the City’s overarching strategy for resident service delivery. Soto’s role as product owner was to steward this vision throughout development and deployment. “My becoming the product owner was a huge deal, ultimately. I was responsible and accountable for the website and to the website team,” Soto said.

- 3. Procure website services:** Soto helped the City break up its approach to contracting services for the site. They selected one vendor for its content management system (CMS) and one for back-end development. Soto worked closely with the vendors to lead a cross-departmental initiative with a content-first approach to overhauling the website.
- 4. Identify and engage key stakeholders:** Soto made it a priority to involve representatives from all 12 City departments. Soto asked each department director to empower at least one employee to spend three to five hours per week for the duration of a 12-week development sprint. The result was a cross-department, multidisciplinary, empowered team of 20 staff with varying backgrounds and expertise. Together with the hired vendors, Soto met weekly with this group to clear roadblocks and offer upskilling opportunities for staff to enable a democratized approach to sitewide compliance with plain language and accessibility standards.
- 5. Design and deliver:** Throughout development, the team followed a careful set of cross-departmental guiding principles focused on user needs and launched a new site in 12 weeks. The launch directed users on the old site to the new one, alongside a link to solicit feedback.
- 6. Continuously improve:** Soto emphasized that the live launch was not a finish line but rather one step in the iterative design process. He encouraged the team to think of the live launch as an “arbitrary deadline” and to adopt a flexible, iterative mindset rooted in feedback loops to help the team continuously improve the site. “I wanted to change our organizational mindset from our website being ‘an IT project that’s administered by the IT department’ to ‘a digital tool that is easy to use, everyone is empowered to work on, and something we can all work to continuously improve,’” Soto shared.



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DANIEL SOTO

Principal Management Analyst, City of Santa Ana

Launching and maintaining an improved user experience

The launch in April 2022 marked a major cultural shift regarding the site’s management and maintenance, with employees taking greater ownership over the website’s content and design and reporting increased engagement and morale. Staff reported feeling more empowered to make timely updates to the site and build accessible, plain-language website content.

Additionally, the implementation of site analytics enabled staff to start tracking things like page views. Data suggest that after the new site’s launch, users spent more time on the site’s revamped Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, which may have led to the concurrent reduction in time spent answering phone calls. Shifts like these offer evidence that the vision for the website as a core element of the City’s overarching service delivery strategy was being realized through the site overhaul.

To ensure that the site continues to reflect user needs, the team implemented a prominently displayed feedback tool for users to share their experiences with the site. Responses to the form are reviewed weekly, with staff responding directly to all users to thank them, emphasize that their experiences are valued, and update them about changes that result from their feedback. The feedback tool serves as a critical resource to help the website team continue to iterate on the site in a way that is rooted in real user needs.

Lessons learned

It's not just formally designated digital “experts” who can lead and deliver high-quality digital services in government. It is not always feasible for a jurisdiction to fund a standalone digital service team. Exposure to and proficiency with modern digital-delivery best practices, together with the right leadership support, can help high-quality digital transformation scale without a dedicated digital service team. Regardless of their background or current experience level, empowering and upskilling existing staff can enable civil servants with a diversity of titles and responsibilities to spearhead impactful digital-delivery initiatives.

Demos are powerful tools to gain buy-in. Soto's early demo site illustrated the potential benefits of the new website and helped assuage the concerns of those whose buy-in he needed to secure. Demos can make ideas tangible and real for decision-makers and in some cases can more clearly communicate a project's value than, for example, written memos or presentations.

Good digital government products have product owners. Soto made clear the need for product ownership and filled that need himself, creating a single point of accountability for the outcomes of the website. This was a major departure from the status quo, where accountability was fractured across departments and decision-makers, which made changing and progressing the site difficult. Soto demonstrated the power of product management for digital delivery in government, as well as the potential for existing staff to upskill into such a role.

Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the [DSN Resource Library](#):

- + [City of Santa Ana Guiding Principles](#)
- + [City of Santa Ana Done/Doing Updates Repository](#)
- + [City of Santa Ana Website Feedback Form](#)