

Human-Centered Communication to Increase Service Uptake in New Jersey

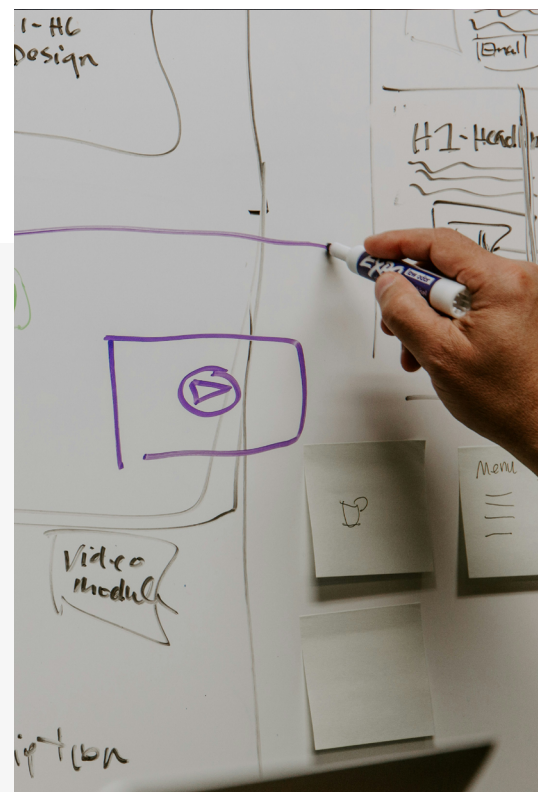
A Digital Service Network Spotlight

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.

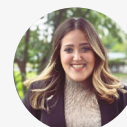
Background

Residents often miss out on services or benefits available to them—or those to which they are entitled—because they aren't aware such services exist or don't believe that such services are right for them. The State of New Jersey's (NJ) Office of Innovation (OOI) sought to tackle these challenges by launching a Communication + Engagement (C+E) Lab: an in-house team focused on deploying both traditional and digital consumer marketing strategies to help residents become aware of—and ultimately take up—services and programs available to them.

The Beeck Center's Digital Services Network (DSN) spoke with the director of the C+E Lab, Katie Fiore, and OOI chief of staff, Kai Feder, to learn more about the C+E Lab and its ongoing role in shifting the State's approach to using marketing to better connect residents to programs and services.



Contributing Authors



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Building a team of in-house marketing experts

The C+E Lab is housed within OOI and works in partnership with agencies across State government. The Lab's staff conduct user research, create marketing and activation strategies, and support external media contracts with vendors.



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KAI FEDER

Chief of Staff, New Jersey Office of Innovation

As OOI sought to invest in new marketing capacity for the state, Feder emphasized that the Lab's composition and balance was crucial to its success. “We took time to research and evaluate potential team models. We developed an initial team profile of team members with expertise both in marketing and user-centered design. We wanted the team to bring professional marketing skills alongside a desire to change how government communicates. We also ensured that those professionals were working alongside experienced public servants that could advise on the dynamics of government work,” Feder shared.

OOI first recruited Fiore to lead the C+E Lab, who brought experience leading performance-driven marketing campaigns for major global brands in the private sector. “It was appealing for me to try to unlock the ways we could implement the same tools I was using in the private sector in service of better connecting residents with state programs, benefits, and services. I wanted to think about things from residents' point of view and understand what they care about,” Fiore shared about her motivation to join the Lab.

“Coming from the private sector, I find state agencies a different type of stakeholder. Having a person who understands state agency dynamics to collaborate with and help navigate government dynamics is really important. Being able to tap into the expertise of colleagues with that experience is critical to the Lab's success,” Fiore added about their consulting with experienced government practitioners.

Building the C+E Lab's credibility: [Business.NJ.gov](https://www.business.nj.gov)

Fiore knew that the first project the C+E Lab took on would likely have an outsize impact on whether agencies would trust them and seek out their expertise going forward.



Since the stakes were so high, we chose to launch our work by using a product internal to OOI as a test case. This allowed us to showcase our capabilities to other agencies and have a small but very quick win that demonstrated our value-add. It paved the way for other agencies to open up to the idea of working with us, and gave us a successful track-record to stand on.”

KATIE FIORE

Director, New Jersey Office of Innovation’s Communications + Engagement Lab

Because she also anticipated that agencies might be hesitant to work with the Lab before it had proven its value, the team decided to work first on Business.NJ.gov. “Since the stakes were so high, we chose to launch our work by using a product internal to OOI as a test case. This allowed us to showcase our capabilities to other agencies and have a small but very quick win that demonstrated our value-add. It paved the way for other agencies to open up to the idea of working with us, and gave us a successful track-record to stand on,” Fiore said.

Plan: 6-week topical, multi-channel campaign, supported by key partners, targeting “start a business” audience

	DATES	FOCUS	CTA	DESTINATION
Week 1	2/7 - 2/11	Thinking about starting a business?	Get started today	https://business.nj.gov/
Week 2	2/14 - 2/18	Live Chat	Talk to a live person now	Live Chat app (home page)
Week 3	2/21 - 2/25	Funding your business	Learn about available funding	https://business.nj.gov/funding
Week 4	2/28 - 3/4	Contracting with the state	Become a vendor with the state of NJ	https://business.nj.gov/pages/government-contracting
Week 5	3/7 - 3/11	Exporting goods/services	Expand your business with exporting	https://business.nj.gov/pages/exporting
Week 6	3/14 - 3/18	Navigator	Get your personalized plan	https://navigator.business.nj.gov/



The Lab undertook a six-week “Beta test” using messaging designed to drive users to Business.NJ.gov and create a better understanding of the site’s user-base for the product team. Each week focused on testing a certain topic and message on various channels, including social media, online ads, and emails. The team learned which messages resonated most with Business.NJ.gov’s residents and leveraged those learnings, along with additional audience research, to develop a marketing communication strategy for an expanded campaign supported by paid media.

Building on the learnings from the Beta test, the C+E Lab launched a “Success Starts Here” paid media campaign that worked to drive awareness of Business.NJ.gov and test the ability of paid media to reach diverse and underserved audiences. As a result, Business.NJ.gov users increased +71 percent. Growth was driven by underserved communities (+102 percent) and Spanish speakers (+2,602 percent).

The effectiveness of the campaign’s creative assets also changed Business.NJ.gov’s audience’s perceptions of their businesses’ likelihood to succeed (+6 percent) and satisfaction with State support (+26 percent). New business formations on Business.NJ.gov increased by +126 percent—despite new business formations in the state of New Jersey remaining flat. The campaign contributed to the creation of new businesses in New Jersey and economic growth, counteracting a state-wide decline.

In June 2024, The Drum—a leading advertising industry publication—awarded the C+E Lab’s Success Starts Here campaign as the best marketing strategy, Government or Public Sector campaign of the year.

Expanding the Lab’s reach: state libraries

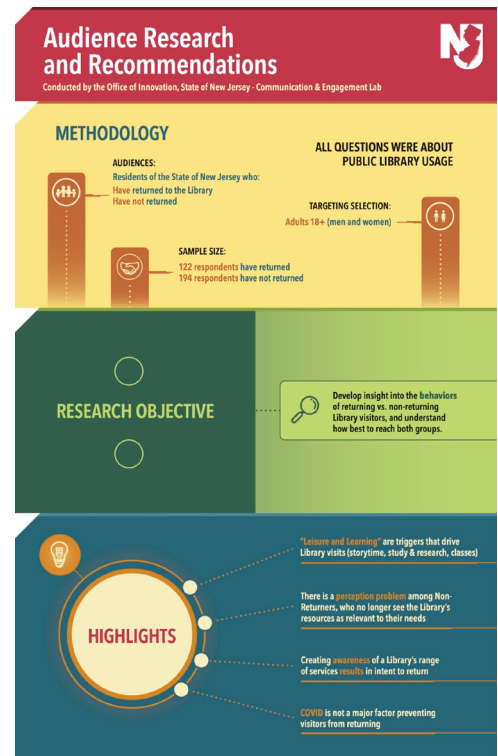
Their successful early-stage work on Business.NJ.gov communications opened an opportunity for the Lab to collaborate with the state library system on encouraging library users to return to in-person programming after attendance dropped during the pandemic. The Lab first conducted [targeted, human-centered research](#) to identify why users were slow to return.

The Lab’s research revealed interesting perceptions and information gaps among users who had yet to return to in-person library programming, for example that COVID was no longer a barrier to returning and that some people thought library programming was no longer relevant to their needs.



“Our process is similar to peeling an onion: every layer is different, and the more you peel, the more you learn and discover about the true nature of the issue,” Fiore said about the C+E Lab’s research approach.

Building on these insights, the state library developed a [new marketing campaign](#)—“Life Happens at the Library”—rooted in the human-centered research findings to drive users back to the library. The campaign generated thousands of interactions across the state, and was recently awarded the best statewide marketing campaign by the New Jersey State Library Association.



The Lab’s growing portfolio

Since its launch, the C+E Lab supported a media campaign for the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education designed to connect residents with the state’s [Some College, No Degree’ initiative](#). The C+E Lab also worked on rebranding the NJ Department of Labor’s [Lifelong Learning Account initiative](#). Through in-depth qualitative research and data-based validation, the C+E Lab identified the most effective tagline as “Fund My Future,” which is now used to market the program.

The C+E Lab is currently engaged in a number of projects, including a campaign to drive uptake of additional higher education financial assistance programs and increase enrollments in New Jersey higher education institutions, consultative work to increase usage of the State's summer EBT program, and more.

In order to help their State agency partners and other government innovators across the country benefit from the C+E Lab's learnings, the team recently published a beta release of a [playbook](#) to help government communicators and program managers better connect with their audiences. The playbook documents the C+E Lab's step-by-step process to help practitioners uncover and validate an approach that will move their audience to act.

Lessons learned

New teams should expect to educate and prove their worth. Government teams advancing new ways of doing things should anticipate a healthy skepticism about their work and prioritize educating existing agencies on their approaches. Give them time to build trust in your team. Finding opportunities for “quick win” projects to demonstrate the value of your team's approach is a worthy investment to gain partnership buy-in from other agencies.

Support those new to government with access to savvy public servants. Incoming talent from other sectors will benefit from the deep insights experienced public servants can provide into how government works. This helps set the new team up for success, as veteran practitioners often have a keen sense of the organization's politics and dynamics and can aid in developing clever strategies to advance new ways of working.

Resources and artifacts

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

- + [C+E Lab's beta release playbook](#)