



United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

Accounting and Information
Management Division

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July 7, 2000

The Honorable Ernest F. Hollings
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate

The Honorable Ron Wyden
United States Senate

Subject: Internet: Federal Web-based Complaint Handling

This letter responds to your request that we review the use of the Internet to facilitate the submission and resolution of federal customer complaints. As you know, widespread Internet access and interconnected systems are transforming how organizations, both public and private, will operate in the next decade. Thus, the Internet offers the potential to make federal complaint-handling systems more visible and accessible to the public while enabling agencies to analyze and act on these complaints more efficiently and effectively.

Specifically, you asked us to provide information on (1) the type and extent of web-based complaint mechanisms provided by 32 federal agencies which, according to the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, handle 90 percent of the federal government's contact with the public¹ and (2) the status of two federal efforts to develop central Internet-based gateways: *www.consumer.gov* and *FirstGov*. You further asked us to provide, as an example, information on how the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) reports on its use of the Internet to receive complaints concerning consumer products.

CUSTOMER COMPLAINT HANDLING AT HIGH-IMPACT AGENCIES

Most major federal agencies are using the Internet to provide an electronic means for citizens to lodge complaints. As shown in table 1, 21 of the 32 high-impact agencies provide an e-mail link on their web sites for citizens to electronically submit comments or complaints. Seven agencies provided on-line access to structured complaint forms for specific federal

¹The 32 federal organizations, designated as High Impact Agencies by the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, are listed in enclosure I.

programs. Four of these seven allowed citizens to complete and forward the form on-line, while three others had forms that could be downloaded, printed, and mailed to the agency. For example, the Forest Service offered an on-line form allowing the public to rate the quality of services received at its offices, campgrounds, visitor centers, and research facilities.

In addition to offering e-mail links for commenting on federal programs, 28 agencies allowed the public to send e-mail comments about their home pages to the agency's webmaster. Finally, 29 agencies provided postal addresses, e-mail addresses, and/or telephone numbers for federal program contact points.

Table 1: Types of Internet Customer Contact Mechanisms at 32 High-Impact Agencies

<u>Type of customer contact mechanism on agency home page</u>	<u>Number of agencies</u>
Structured form that can be submitted on-line and/or downloaded and mailed to the agency	7
E-mail link for program comments or complaints	21
E-mail link for comments to the agency webmaster	28
List of agency phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and postal addresses	29

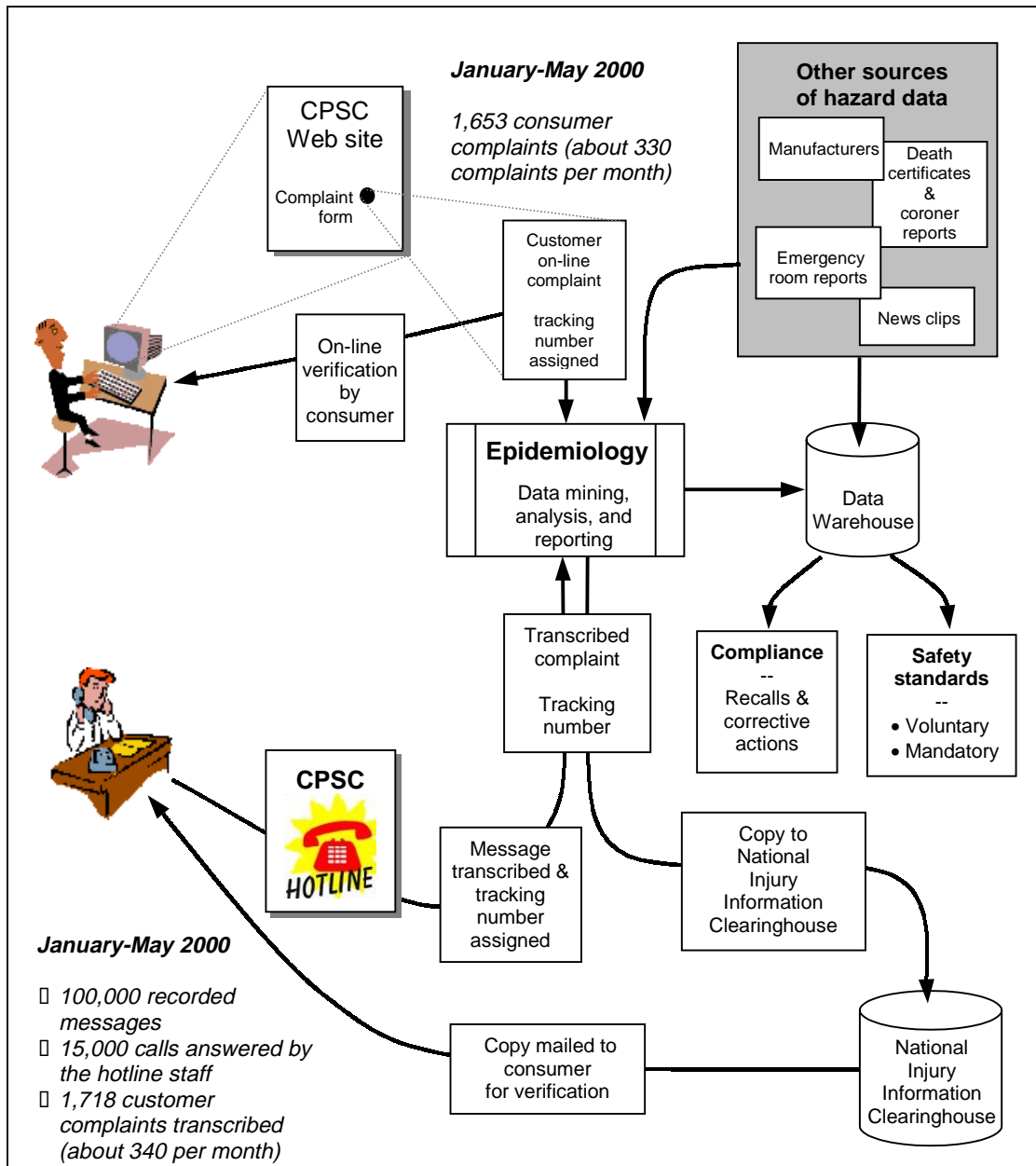
Although 29 of the 32 agencies provided some type of on-line customer contact mechanism or link, these links were not always easy to find. For example, 15 agencies did not offer a link for public comments on its home page, and five agencies required clicking on three or more links before a customer could access the feedback mechanism.

CPSC's Handling of Consumer Complaints

An independent regulatory agency, CPSC has jurisdiction over about 15,000 consumer products, from automatic drip coffee makers to toys to lawn mowers. As part of its mission, CPSC receives reports from the public on unsafe consumer products and product-related injuries. CPSC receives these reports in a variety of ways, including a toll-free telephone hotline and the Internet.

As shown in figure 1, CPSC's website www.cpsc.gov includes a structured reporting form that can be completed on-line and then forwarded to CPSC. When a complaint is submitted, it is acknowledged with a verification request by e-mail. At this point, the user is allowed to review and modify the complaint and resubmit it. Upon receipt, the report is then routed internally and added to a database that is analyzed for trends. According to CPSC, when warranted, its staff conducts in-depth investigations of the reports and may initiate product recalls or other corrective action as a result.

Figure 1: CPSC's Consumer Complaint Process



Source: GAO, from data provided by CPSC.

According to CPSC, the agency received 1,653 reports through the Internet from January 1 through May 19, 2000--approximately 330 reports per month. In comparison, the agency stated it received 1,718 reports via telephone during the same period.

FEDERAL CUSTOMER-FOCUSED INTERNET GATEWAYS

There are 1,271 federal web sites registered by the Federal Technology Service in the .gov domain. A GSA official estimated that a large number of additional web sites, probably over 10,000 and perhaps as many as 20,000, are operated by federal departments and agencies and interagency groups. Similarly, he noted that a recent GSA survey showed that about 1,946 of the 2,526 federal web sites did not include description and keyword meta tags on their sites, making them difficult to find and index by most Internet search engines and therefore the public.

Recognizing the need to provide the public with Internet gateways—web sites that would serve as a hub site for a specific expertise area for citizens attempting to access information about federal services or programs—two agencies, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and GSA, among many other agencies and interagency groups, have developed or are developing central customer-oriented Internet web sites.

FTC’s Consumer Gateway

The FTC, an independent agency responsible for enforcing antitrust and consumer protection laws, initiated the *www.consumer.gov* site in 1995 with a budget of \$25,000. Today, the site provides links to consumer information on 168 federal web sites. The FTC actively encourages federal web sites to provide appropriate links to *www.consumer.gov* on their web sites. In a typical month, the site receives 85,000 visits and 130,000 page views by visitors.

Figure 2: Federal Trade Commission’s *www.consumer.gov* Home page



The site uses an innovative approach in presentation: rather than providing links to agencies, it presents the consumer with information and links to complaint forms grouped by topic or subject area—including food, product safety, health, children, and transportation. Thus, a consumer does not have to know which agency to contact to submit a comment or lodge a complaint.

In 1999, the site received the Hammer Award² from the National Partnership for Reinventing Government for providing “one-stop” access to wide range of federal online consumer information.

GSA’s Proposed *FirstGov* Gateway

GSA is developing an Internet gateway called *FirstGov*, formerly known as *WebGov*. According to GSA, an early prototype was developed in 1998 and currently a functioning pilot version, shown in figure 3, is maintained on a contractor website.

Figure 3: Prototype of GSA’s *FirstGov* Home page



²The Hammer Award is presented by the Vice President to teams of federal employees who have made significant contributions in support of reinventing government principles.

Currently, the prototype site provides links to about 2,500 federal web sites. This version modeled after the popular *www.yahoo.com* website, initially links to web sites and does not have a link to agency complaint forms yet. But, according to the GSA official responsible for developing the site, links to all kinds of agency forms, including complaints, are likely to be included in the next update to the system.

GSA is using the pilot to clarify the functional requirements of the system so that the agency can let a contract to build the initial stage one public launch version of *FirstGov* search service. GSA estimates that it will need \$5 million to \$7 million annually to publicly launch the project, which is to be contributed to by other federal agencies. GSA is in the process of developing a project plan, which will include a schedule for launching the project and sustaining the service annually.

On June 24, President Clinton announced a name change of *WebGov* to *FirstGov*. According to this announcement, Eric Brewer, the founder of search service Inktomi, is to personally establish a nonprofit organization that will search all federal web sites on a regular basis and then house the results in a publicly accessible database. This proposed service is promised for launch in the fall of 2000. *FirstGov* will access the database as one component of its governmentwide portal. The text of the announcement and related materials are located at www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/html/internet2000-06-24.html.

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During the course of our work, we conducted a search of the 32 high impact agencies' web sites to identify customer contact mechanisms. In addition, we interviewed officials responsible for the development and operation of the CPSC website and reviewed the contents of that site. Finally, to obtain status information on *www.consumer.gov* and *FirstGov*, we interviewed officials at the General Services Administration (GSA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and reviewed these proposed and operational Internet gateways. We conducted our review in May and June 2000, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We requested and received oral comments on a draft of this letter from CPSC, FTC, and GSA officials, and we have incorporated their comments as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of the report earlier, we will not distribute it until 30 days from its date. At that time, we will send copies to Senator John McCain, Chairman, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation; and to Tom Bliley, Chairman, and John D. Dingell, Ranking Minority Member, House Committee on Commerce. We will also send a copy to the Honorable Jacob J. Lew, Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Copies will also be made available to others upon request.

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Please contact me at (202) 512-6240 if you or your staff have any questions. I can also be reached by e-mail at koontzl.aimd@gao.gov. Key contributors to this letter were Mike Dolak, Bill Isrin, Dr. Robert Norris, and Jamie Pressman.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda D. Koontz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L" and "K".

Linda D. Koontz
Associate Director, Governmentwide and Defense
Information Systems

Web-based Customer Complaints at 32 High Impact Agencies

	On-line structured complaint form	Download structured complaint form	E-mail link for program comment	E-mail Link for webmaster comments	Phone or mail information
Federal Organization					
Department of Agriculture					
Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service				✓	✓
Food Safety & Inspection Service				✓	✓
Food & Nutrition Service				✓	
Forest Service	✓		✓		✓
Department of Commerce					
Bureau of the Census			✓	✓	✓
U.S. & Foreign Commercial Service			✓	✓	
Patent & Trademark Office				✓	✓
National Weather Service			✓	✓	✓
Department of Defense					
Acquisition Reform				✓	✓
Department of Education					
Office of Financial Assistance			✓	✓	✓
Department of Health and Human Services					
Food & Drug Administration			✓	✓	✓
Administration for Children & Families	✓			✓	✓
Health Care Financing Administration			✓	✓	✓
Department of the Interior					
National Park Service			✓	✓	✓
Bureau of Land Management			✓	✓	✓
Department of Justice					
Immigration & Naturalization Service					
Department of Labor					
Occupational Safety & Health Administration	✓			✓	✓
Department of State					
Bureau of Consular Affairs			✓	✓	✓
Department of Transportation					
Federal Aviation Administration		✓	✓	✓	✓
Department of the Treasury					
Customs Service			✓	✓	✓
Internal Revenue Service			✓	✓	✓
Office of Domestic Finance/FMS	✓		✓	✓	✓
Department of Veterans Affairs					
Veterans Health Administration			✓	✓	✓
Veterans Benefits Administration		✓		✓	✓
Independent Agencies					
U.S. Postal Service		✓	✓	✓	✓
Environmental Protection Agency			✓	✓	✓
Federal Emergency Management Agency			✓	✓	✓
General Services Administration				✓	✓
National Aeronautics & Space Administration			✓		✓
Office of Personnel Management			✓		✓
Small Business Administration				✓	✓
Social Security Administration			✓	✓	✓
Total	4	3	21	28	29

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