Ensuring government is only one search away: Implementing the Sitemap protocol

As many as four of five Internet users reach government websites by using Google and other search engines.* These websites provide trustworthy sources of information in education, employment, health, housing, and public safety--web services that can be critical to a citizen's well-being. Yet government agencies, in the US and other countries, often inadvertently structure their websites such that the information they contain cannot be included in search engines. The most common barrier is a web-based database that is inaccessible to a search engine's "crawlers." The result: Information that is intended for public dissemination can be effectively invisible and citizens seeking their government through a search engine go underserved.

As part of Google's ongoing efforts to help make information more accessible to Internet users, we're working with government agencies to implement a simple technical solution: the Sitemap protocol. First introduced by Google in 2005 and widely adopted by the search engine industry in 2006, this technical standard provides a website owner an efficient mechanism for communicating to a search engine the location of all pages on a website, including records in a database. The Sitemap protocol does not require redevelopment of a website; in fact, depending on the size of a web resource, implementation can take a matter of hours and no more than a few days.

While this technical standard has been widely embraced by web publishers in the private sector, government is farther behind. Our internal research indicates that, because of technical barriers, the information in part or all of upwards of 2,000 US federal government web services cannot be crawled and included in search engines. But there are also success stories. A number of US federal government agencies and US state governments have pioneered the implementation of the standard and are observing a dramatic increase in the visibility of their web services in search engines like Google. For more success stories and information on this effort to make government more accessible to citizens, see: *http://www.google.com/publicsector*.

*ComScore, July 2006, internal research