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Energy Regulatory Commission Web Sites Don't Click

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Site Demographics

ENERGY E-COMM.COM ranked the web sites of 50 state energy regulatory bodies (frequently called Public Utility Commissions), the District of Columbia and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Using its panel of technology and content experts ENERGY E-COMM.COM evaluated the sites based upon its standard evaluation criteria.

Evaluation Criteria

ENERGY E-COMM.COM's evaluation standards consist of approximately 30 criteria that have been determined by its research to be critically important in making a web presence the engine of enterprise growth. These criteria take into account the strategic nature of the site, the current state of its technological features, and the ability to provide a commercially rewarding web experience.

At first glance, you might think that these criteria are not applicable to energy regulatory commissions. We argue that any enterprise that provides products or services to a visitor, i.e., customer base, using a web site needs to take into account the criteria we are incorporating in our evaluation if that web site is to have a market value. Why else would you bother to develop a web site if you are not marketing to a "customer base" – in this case the many parties interested in regulatory proceedings and their potential impacts. ENERGY E-COMM.COM's thesis for website evaluations focuses on the customer's experience --- does the web site provide an experience that will encourage the visitor to return repeatedly to transact with the host? It is the prospect of visitation that creates the value on the net.

Executive Commentary

Like the brethren they supervise, most of the regulatory sites do not provide a web experience that is anything more than informational. While the argument might be advanced that they are not commercial sites, ENERGY E-COMM.COM would argue that they should in effect be responsive to their many audiences which includes the utilities for which they have oversight responsibility, the elected officials to whom they answer, and most importantly, the citizens who in the long run fund the commissions and their web site. Consequently there is a vested interest in providing the potential site visitor with an experience that conveys the message that this is an organization that is current and capable of delivering useful, valuable information in the most up-to-date form of communication, the Internet.

Some of the potential that is yet to be realized would include information that designates the standards for a rate case filing, or a peer ranking for regulated company's based upon pre-defined criteria. Or how about sources of help for consumers and access to advocacy groups where they exist. In these and many other ways PUCs could transform into the information resource for their customers they have the potential for becoming.

While a few Commissions have a passing grade, by far and away most of these sites are not worth the effort of visiting. If you live in such a state, perhaps a kind word designed to move the commission out of the dark ages is appropriate.

These rankings are subject to the disclaimer in our legal notice.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC)

Depending on your point of view, FERC is one of the worst sites in the E&U industry or one of the best. We offer both a customer's and an insider's view.

The FERC Bear - Some might say the FERC site is the Energy Bar Association's lifeline to lifelong employment. How can this be? Well if you're an energy NERD (the FERC equivalent of a techno NERD) the site has lots of information for you to pass the time of day while the client clock runs. However if you are the average citizen or a businessperson interested in understanding the policies and direction of the Federal Government, then the site is nightmare. Not only must you speak and understand a foreign language (FERCeze), but finding content in a reasonably easy manner is next to impossible.

In addition with the problems with regard to what IS on the site, there is the problem of what is simply NOT there. For example, if the point of all this regulation is to prevent monopolies from earning too much money, wouldn't it be helpful to have a listing of the regulated companies and their actual earnings over the last 5 or 10 years? And perhaps, an estimate of how those earnings compare with other large unregulated companies, for example, the customers of the large monopolies who pay the regulated

bills? Or what about a ranking of regulated companies on the basis of customer complaints (and praise) recorded via an online evaluation?

Perhaps this review will start the debate as to just exactly what is the role of the regulators in a rapidly changing regulatory arena.

The NERD's response - The FERC site really stands out as a useful site for the energy practitioner. The reasons are straightforward: the site offers the primary users (which are of necessity the industry insiders), a rewarding experience, enabling them to use the website to substitute for many tasks that were previously done manually. FERC is largely a huge information factory. The input is the tide of paper that flows regularly into the agency: applications, rate cases, interventions, protests, briefs, memoranda, reports, tariff changes, etc. The outputs are the Commission's rules and orders, thousands upon thousands of them every year. Given the complexities of regulating 21st century business under statutes built on 19th century models, it's not surprising that the information is not presented in a manner that ordinary folks can understand. The problem is with the job that the FERC has been assigned, not the website.

Today, the FERC allows access to its own orders (the paper flow OUT of the Commission) through CIPS (Commission Issuance Posting System). The paper flow INTO the Commission is made available on the web through RIMS (Remote Information Management System). While both these systems are available on the web (at <http://www.ferc.fed.us>), there are critically important differences between the two.

Documents in CIPS -- because they are originally generated on the Commission's own computers -- are available electronically as both HTML and as WordPerfect documents. The basic search tool is a "string text" search that is not as robust as the Key Word in Context (KWIC) search capability of Lexis, but is generally sufficient. The user is able to locate documents that are responsive to the search request and then click on marks that will take the user directly to the next appearance of the requested text. The document may be highlighted, copied and pasted into a word processor as a text document (with the formatting and pagination variable based on choice of program, font size, etc.). In addition, the documents may be downloaded as either WordPerfect files or text.

The paper flow into the commission is treated differently. These documents are filed only as print documents. Hence they are scanned by the commission into Tagged Image File Format (TIFF) files, with each page an individual, separate image. This has several implications. First, it is not possible to search within these documents (using, for example, the "find" function of the word processor) since the word processor cannot see within the image. Second, the files are quite difficult to work with because of their size. The limitations are both with regard to downloading the documents (bandwidth limitations) and printing the documents (memory and printer RAM limitations). As a practical matter, the RIMS database is of only limited value to a user that connects with a 56KB modem. The arrival of broadband connects is rapidly changing the situation

however, as DSL and cable connections become available, making it possible to view and download 50 to 100 page documents.

The site brings together in one place the basic regulations that define the agency's responsibilities and the agency's basic policy (with links to "important issuances" including Orders 636, 637, 888, 889, 2000). This functions as a handy "reference desk" for those interested in following the nation's energy policy on gas, power, hydroelectric dam licensing, and oil pipeline rates.

The FERC site can certainly be improved in coming months and years. The move toward electronic filings could be broadened. The Commission could develop approaches and standards for electronic citations via hyperlinks in place of or in addition to citations to printed copies of precedent. Still, on balance, the Commission deserves credit for creating a leading site that rewards the user with a valuable web experience.

The Top 5 Public Utility Commission Sites

Florida Public Service Commission – This is a well-done site, providing up to date information on a wide range of topics. Includes such things as company names, rates, phone numbers, maps to offices, commissioners pictures and biographies, agenda schedules, how to file a complaint, etc. Links are available to speed the consumer in accessing information. The site is easy to use and very informative.

Maryland Public Service Commission – The Maryland web site is basic in its visual appeal, but makes up for the lack of glitzy in its content. It provides a full scope of information on areas of customer interest. Hot links to additional information, a directory of personnel with contact information and a request for comments make this an example of a customer focused site. It was last updated March 2000; a real plus to know that information is current.

Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Energy – This visually attractive site, is structured by industry for easy access of information. It provides the capability of electronically submitting a complaint form, and is the first PUC site we visited that provided an electronic form for easy use by the consumer. The site was last updated, February 2000.

Oklahoma Corporation Commission – An excellent site that provides content in an easy to read format, provides search capabilities to enable easy targeting of information and is overall a very friendly, customer-oriented site.

Wyoming Public Service Commission – This site ranked high because of its content, speed in loading and overall organization. However, it needs improvement in keeping the site current.

Complete Rankings

ENERGY E-COMM.COM lists the next 17 sites in descending order:

- | | | |
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| 6. Missouri | 12. Delaware | 18. Pennsylvania |
| 7. FERC | 13. Kentucky | 19. Arizona |
| 8. Idaho | 14. Ohio | 20. Georgia |
| 9. Michigan | 15. Alaska | 21. Illinois |
| 10. North Dakota | 16. Kansas | 22. Nevada |
| 11. Utah | 17. Louisiana | |

The remaining sites did not merit ranking - in our view. Based upon our criteria and opinion, they fell below a threshold where ranking adds useful information.

Alabama	Mississippi	South Carolina
Arkansas	Montana	South Dakota
California	Nebraska	Tennessee
Colorado	New Hampshire	Texas
Connecticut	New Jersey	Vermont
District of Columbia	New Mexico	Virginia
Indiana	New York	Washington
Iowa	North Carolina	West Virginia
Maine	Oregon	Wisconsin
Minnesota	Rhode Island	Hawaii

The most worthless State commission site is Hawaii. It is so bad that it really deserves special mention. It is difficult to find the site. There is basically no useful content available at all, not the basic statutes; not rate filings by regulated utilities, essentially nothing. The failure of the Hawaii government to provide a useful site is particularly disappointing in view of geographic isolation of the state from the mainland and of each of the islands from the others. One would expect particular attention paid to the site in such circumstances; instead, it is nearly non-existent.

Thank you for your interest.