

Portals to the People: government, gateways, public, private, hybrid and mutant

FirstGov



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The Welcome on FirstGov's search page declares that FirstGov, is a " world wide web information portal for the United States Federal Government. FirstGov is intended to be your first resource to find any government information on the Internet." That is a lofty goal considering FirstGov is still in its infancy having just debuted in September, 2000.

Born in less than 90 days, FirstGov is linked to more than 27,000,000 federal Internet pages. Disproving the phrase, it takes the government forever to do anything, FirstGov was conceived on the fast track. Eric Brewer, co-founder of the Inktomi search engine met President Clinton in January 2000 and proposed the creation of a single portal to government information on the web and offered to build it.

President Clinton announced the concept in June of 2000 challenging the government and industry to finish the product in 90 days. On September 22, portal was launched. A team from the General Services Administration manages it. The development process was aided by industry partners such as At & T, GRC International and AppNet. Although FirstGov is a .gov, it allows custom use by "partners" that agrees to specific conditions of privacy, free access and no advertising. Eric Brewer's involvement is limited to 3 years, at which time, FirstGov will either become a solely federal project, or be privatized.

FirstGov shows the effects of being launched in haste. Reviews have been mixed as to its effectiveness. Refinements and improvements have been put in place since its debut in late 2000. The General Services Administration abandoned plans to relaunch the site in late December 2000, opting instead for improved Web pages and additional content.

The Search engine upgrade added an advanced search function, and "exact phrase search" to counter criticism that the search engine returned to many results. An example from our list of questions is a good illustration. A search of Florida manatee resulted in 616,329 results. Utilizing the exact phrase search this results are reduced to 429.

FirstGov strives to be a vortal(vertical portal) to all government data, focusing on the broad consumer needs. FirstGov has been constructed for the average person and small business. Power users, such as corporations, will continue to use commercial databases, while librarians will opt for portals that reach into agency websites for specific data.

FirstGov's directory displays a hierarchical structure, which focuses on popular sites and topics. 16 broad topic such as Consumer Services and Safety, Federal Benefits and Grants are displayed as buttons. Each topic page then has a set of links divided

into featured and related groups. The Featured group contains links to high interest topical sites, while the related group includes links to agency home pages and individual content rich pages. The links are not annotated, which decreases their usefulness. In addition, one could argue that sources not being classified appropriately. For example, the Federal Consumer Information Center is located in Reference Topics rather than Consumer Services.

FirstGov ranked rather well on the test questions, however data rich pages are not necessarily pulled to the top. The Advanced search function provides some improvement, however it offers limits such as file extension, and domain name which most users would not utilize. Overall it lacks relevance. Data rich items such as the CPI Report, or the Edgar Database from the SEC are not included in First Gov.

When testing the questions, FirstGov results varied between December and February. By February, the search engine had been tweaked. The vortel behaved in a more "Google" like manner with much better results. FirstGov is still a work in progress and as yet not ready to fulfill President Clinton's claim as the first resource to find government information.

A study done by of referrals to GPO Access discovered that in the first two months of 2000, FirstGov represented $\frac{1}{2}$ of one percent of all referrals. This fell even further to over three one hundredths of one percent in the fourth month. The FirstGov team plans to meet with GPO staff to increase awareness of GPO Access via FirstGov.

The future of FirstGov has become somewhat more secure with the release of Presidents Bush's 2001-2002 budget. President Bush plans to make Government more Citizen-Centered by using the Internet. The budget stresses the implementation of E-Gov to allow citizens to transact business with the government. He proposes the creation of an E-Government Fund to support interagency e-government initiatives. FirstGov is cited as an example of a project which crosses agency boundaries offering citizens access to government online information 24/7.

RESULTS OF TEST

1. **I need to see the 1996 recovery plan for the Florida manatee.** 0 (The document appeared in February, not in April. Not the fault of the portal, the documents has been removed from the web.)
2. **What is the FDA's position on whether bioengineered foods are safe?** 20 (2nd hit)
3. **What is the most current GDP for Croatia?** 10 (1st hit)

4. **Can you help me find the most current data for the number of people living below the poverty level by state?** 10 (2nd hit)
5. **What source should I use to find federal grant opportunities for a non-profit organization?** 10 (Also a button on subject choices leads to different page)
6. **I need a Department of Defense specification for mailing packages.** 10 (3 clicks)
7. **What are the top ten Service Exports.** 0
8. **What is the text of the Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights?** 10 (5th hit)
9. **Is the Fox River a Superfund site?** 10
10. **Is there a copyright form for a website?** 8 (7th hit)

Total score 87