

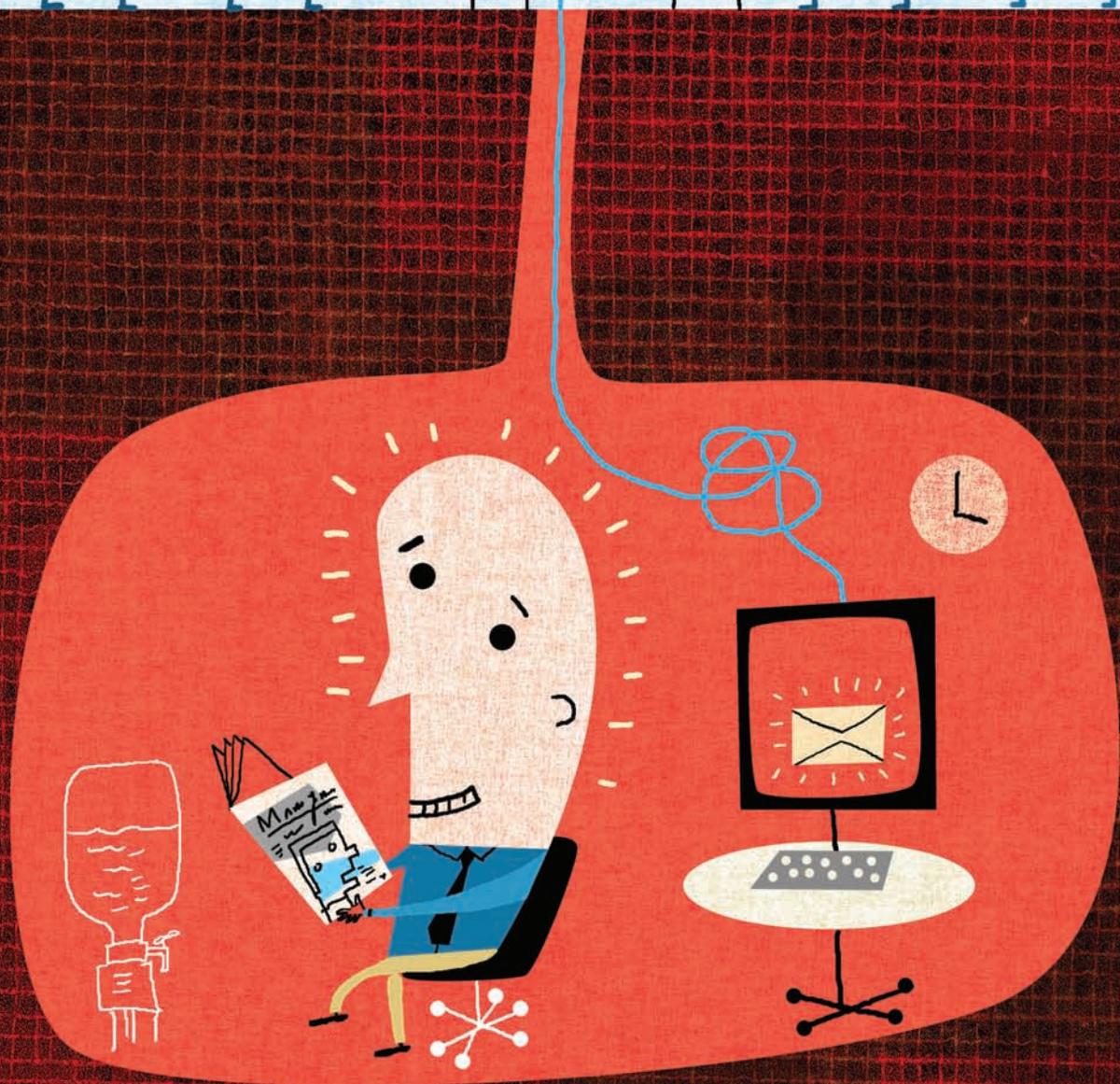
High-tech breakdown

Speedy replies are rare at government
websites in Massachusetts

BY COLMAN M. HERMAN | ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES YANG

THE WEBSITES OF FEDERAL, state, and municipal agencies and officials can serve as pipelines to the public, allowing citizens and government officials to interact in a convenient, cost-effective manner. But here in Massachusetts, these pipelines often flow in one direction, with citizen email inquiries either ignored or answered in haphazard fashion by government officials.

Posing as a regular citizen, I tested the responsiveness of 101 agencies or political officials by sending them queries using emails listed on their websites. Thirty-seven of the inquiries had still elicited no response weeks later (see sidebar) and five bounced back, meaning the email address listed on the agency's





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website was not functioning.

The remaining 59 emails were answered, but only 28 of them were answered promptly and completely. The others were answered after lengthy delays or in incomplete fashion.

The non-responders ranged from politicians like Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, who was asked for a copy of his State of the City address, to state Fire Marshal Stephen Coan, who was asked for tips on buying a smoke detector.

The state's Board of Registration in Medicine, Alcohol Beverage Control Commission, and Division of Professional Licensure all handle complaints about the people and businesses they regulate. Yet none of these agencies responded to email queries on how to file a complaint.

Russell Aims, a spokesman for the Board of Registration in Medicine, says he can't pin down why the email to his agency wasn't answered. "It may have been carelessness," he says.

Some of the non-responders answered my inquiries with automatic-reply assurances that a response would be

One office said the 'average' response time was one day, but no answer came.

sent out shortly. The state Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation, for example, responded to an email with this auto-reply: "Please note that the average response time for emails is within one business day." No response ever came.

Similarly, the Massachusetts Office of Small Business and Entrepreneurship's auto-reply stated, "Thank you for your interest in doing business in Massachusetts. Your information has been forwarded to members of the Massachusetts Business Resource Team and a representative will contact you soon." No one ever did.

The MBTA's email form states, "Please tell us who you are so we can follow up with you." I did, but the "T" never responded.

Politicians didn't fare much better in the email test. The offices of Menino, state Treasurer Timothy Cahill, Senate President Therese Murray, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, and US Sen. Edward Kennedy all failed to respond to email inquiries. "No system is perfect," says Cahill spokeswoman Franci Ronayne, in a common refrain.

There were a number of agencies that did respond to the emails, but took a long time to do it. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, for example,

took 24 days to respond to simple questions about charter schools, and the Massachusetts Highway Department took 21 days to answer questions about its Adopt-A-Highway program and whether the department issues an annual report.

Still other agencies responded in timely fashion, but then dropped the ball. For example, I expressed interest via email in volunteering at the Department of Conservation and Recreation. An official there contacted me, asking what I would like to do. I provided the information, but never heard back. "I'm really sorry about this," says spokeswoman Wendy Fox. "I can't tell you why it happened."

I also asked Secretary of State William Galvin's office, which oversees the state's lobbying law, whether lobbyists are allowed to speak to legislators in the chambers where the legislators vote.

Maria Marra, supervisor of the lobbyist section, wrote back that the office did not have the statutory authority to oversee the conduct of lobbyists and referred me to the attorney general's office. When I contacted the attorney general's office, I was told, "The appropriate agency for you to contact is the Lobbyist Section of the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office."

BRIGHT SPOTS AND DEAD ZONES

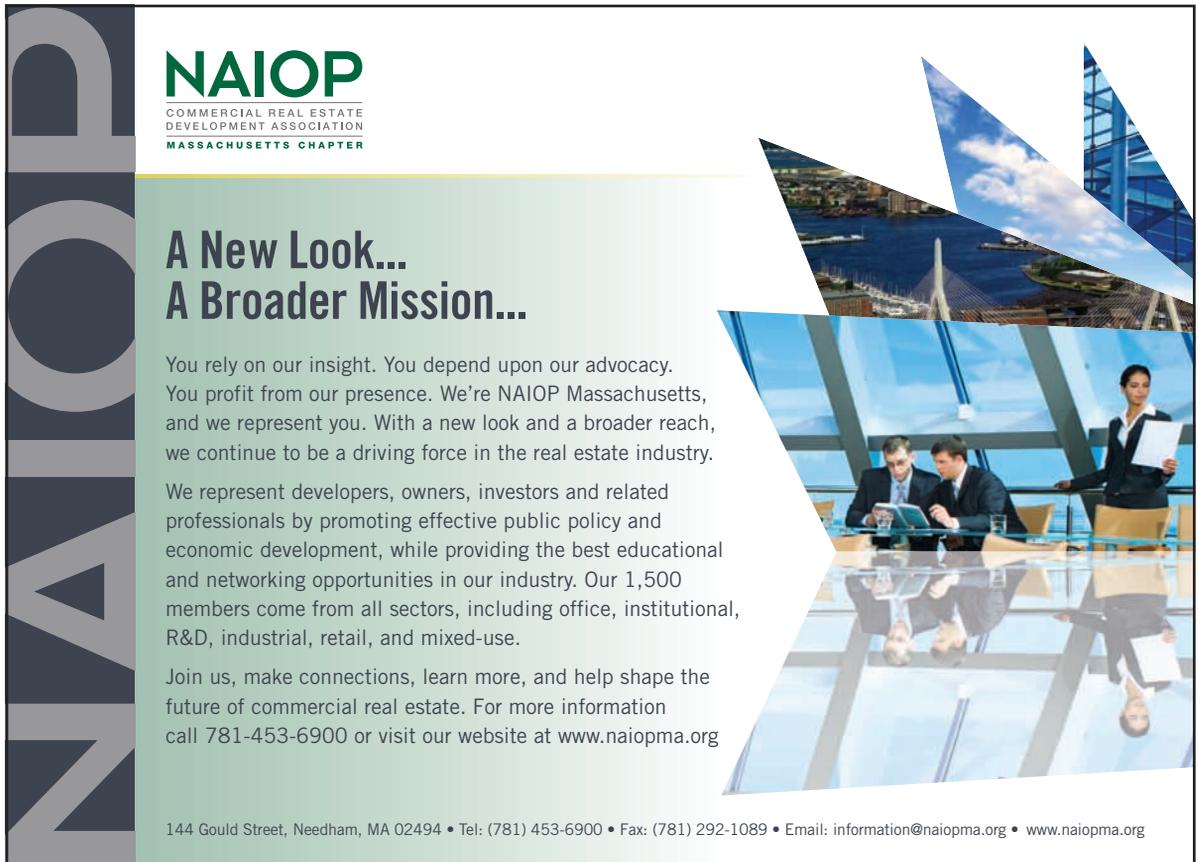
There were some bright spots in my email test. The Department of Elder Affairs, for example, not only responded electronically to an email question about assisted living and the Medicare drug program, but also followed up with a phone call.

The Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, as well as the state's Office of Campaign and Political Finance and the Department of Agriculture, all responded quickly and comprehensively to questions. So did two city agencies, Boston's Environmental Department and Boston Bikes.

"I've been on the job for a year and a half," says Department of Agriculture Commissioner Douglas Petersen. "And from day one, I've told my staff that responding to inquiries from citizens is the highest priority here."

Gov. Deval Patrick's office did well, too. His staff responded within one day to email questions about where to find a copy of the governor's State of the State address and how to take a State House tour. Mark Lilienthal, the governor's director of constituent services, says the governor receives an average of 210 emails a day, or nearly 1,500 a week.

"We're on the front lines for Gov. Patrick. We're his



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NON-RESPONDERS TO *COMMONWEALTH'S* EMAILS

STATE AGENCIES

Alcohol Beverage Control Commission
Department of Capital Asset Management
Department of Children and Families
Department of Fire Services (Office of the State Fire Marshal)
Department of Health Care Finance and Policy
Department of Industrial Accidents
Department of Public Health
Department of Public Safety
Division of Professional Licensure
Department of Revenue
Executive Office of Administration and Finance
Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development
Human Resources Division
Massachusetts Bay Transpiration Authority
Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine
Massachusetts Office of Small Business and Entrepreneurship
Massachusetts National Guard
Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation

STATE CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICERS

Treasurer Timothy Cahill

STATE LEGISLATURE

Senate President Therese Murray
House Speaker Robert DeLeo (queried in February)
House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi (queried in November)

CITY OF BOSTON

Animal Control and Adoption Center
Boston Police Department
Boston Public Health Commission
Civil Rights Office
Consumer Affairs and Licensing Office
Emergency Shelter Commission
Inspectional Services Department
Law Department
Licensing Board
Mayor's Office
Parks & Recreation Department
Property and Construction Management Department
Transportation Department
Treasury Department

U.S. SENATOR

Edward Kennedy

public face," Lilienthal says. "In today's world, people are more and more accustomed to doing things electronically and getting answers."

The numbers bear Lilienthal out. There are now 220 million email users in the United States alone, and they

will generate 49 billion messages this year, according to the Radicati Group, a market research firm based in Palo Alto, California.

Lilienthal has a five-person staff to respond to emails, phone calls, and off-the street visitors. Other agencies typically don't have such resources available to them. Several, including the Department of Transitional Assistance and the Department of Labor, don't even offer email addresses on their websites for citizen queries.

Juan Martinez, communications director for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, says there's no excuse for state agencies not responding to emails. Martinez attributes the email problems at health and human services agencies to inactive email accounts and the volume of emails received. "Since I've started looking into this, we've made some upgrades to the email accounts and the agencies are taking steps to improve the process of responding to emails," he says.

Most of the other state executive agencies said they would look into why I did not get responses to emails, but few ever called back to say what they had found.

William Oates, Boston's chief information officer, did not respond to requests for comment on why the mayor and 13 city agencies did not respond to my emails. The non-responders included the city's Inspectional Services Department, the Public Health Commission, the Consumer Affairs and Licensing Office, and the Boston Police Department.

QUICK RESPONSES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

For comparative purposes, I also tested the email responses of private businesses to questions about returns and the availability of products. The contrast was startling. Every business *CommonWealth* contacted responded with good answers, and all but one did so in very timely fashion.

The winner was Building 19, the local emporium known for selling overstocks, irregulars, and insurance salvage. Lisa Bleidorn of Building 19 responded in a lightening-fast nine minutes. She says the company receives a couple hundred emails a day. She prints them out for owner Jerry Ellis to read and then types up his responses.

Very close behind Building 19 was the luxury Boston retailer Shreve's, which responded in 13 minutes. L.L. Bean responded in 34 minutes, Nordstrom in 47 minutes, and Bloomingdale's in 56 minutes. Jordan's Furniture, Staples, J.C. Penney, Shaw's, Sears, Target, CVS, and Costco responded in the space of one to 10 hours. Lowe's and BJ's took under two days. Stop and Shop was the only laggard—it took 7 days to hear from the Quincy-based supermarket chain about what grade of meat they sell and whether they have a delivery service.

Ten years ago, the city of Rockville, Maryland, decided

to treat its contacts with its citizens like a business would — as valued customers. City officials, working in conjunction with employees and citizens, developed a set of customer service standards that were designed to be specific, measurable, and reasonable.

Rockville guidelines require, for example, that email be responded to within 24 hours on a regular business day and that the responses must contain detailed contact information about the responder. Rockville regularly assesses adherence to the guidelines, in part by sending “secret shopper” emails to departments the same way *CommonWealth* did here in Massachusetts.

“Customer service is ingrained in the way we work in the city every day,” says Louise Atkins in the city manager’s office. “It’s what we do. It’s how we operate as a government.”

Sorry to report, the city of Rockville talked the talk, but didn’t walk the walk with me. I sent emails to five city agencies there. One responded in nine minutes, two responded six to seven days after the city’s self-imposed 24-hour deadline, and two still hadn’t responded a week later. As this entire test of email responsiveness illustrates, agencies are only as good at answering citizen queries as the people at the other end of the line. **CW**

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