

Printed Government Publications and Materials Continues to be the Best Way For the Government to Communicate With Individuals and Businesses

*Written for the Government Printing Council by Fred Antoun
August, 2010*

In 1846 the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) was established to provide printed government information in order to keep the public informed, and to communicate information to those citizens who needed it. As the government's central source for printing (most of which is contracted out to the private sector), and central repository for both printed and electronic government information, GPO has, despite some criticism over the years, done its job very well.

In recent years, Congress tasked GPO with establishing an online electronic database of government publications and government information. That program, *GPO Access*, has somewhat morphed into FDsys (Federal Digital System). To avoid confusion, GPO's website now refers to "FDsys-*GPO Access*." There is no doubt that in this digital age, online access to government publications and government information is an important goal for the federal government. Since GPO obtains many publications in electronic format, and since it is the "go to" entity for Congress and Federal agencies for publications, it simply makes sense for GPO to operate the electronic system. There are few that would question the effectiveness of GPO's handling of their electronic database, giving elected representatives, local and state government officials, and the public to access government publications and information efficiently and effectively through GPO's website.

Given the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of documents available through FDsys/*GPO Access* today, some have suggested that system will shortly do away with printed government publications and government information. We have seen the volume of government printed material being purchased and pushed out to citizens and businesses diminish. This is a direct result of the incorrect philosophy that after the government spends hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to produce a worthwhile publication, we have to go hunt for it. ***Those who suggest that printing should be dramatically reduced, or at least given a back seat, do not understand that print is an essential tool in helping federal government agencies fulfill their missions.***

In *webspeak*, there are two basic types of communication methods: push and pull. As the names imply, a push takes place when the originator of the document or information pushes it out to the desired end user. Information is pulled not by the originator, but by the user, typically from a website or a library. In the private sector, for example, product specs or drug contraindications might be pulled from the company's website. But the warm and fuzzy ad for the new product or drug is going to be "pushed" out to the consumer on TV and in print.

In government, most agencies have not only a need, but a duty to communicate with those citizens that they serve, often including critical, identifiable groups such as seniors, disabled and handicapped persons, educators, health care providers, food

producers and handlers, those that take care of children, the unemployed, and lest we forget, the poor and “underserved.” The obvious problem with using pull methodology through the internet for these groups and others is that they are not going to spend much of their lives searching the internet to pull down information. Most of us are not proficient web researchers, and probably all of us have better things to do than to look for government publications and information applicable to us.

It is the government agency’s job to use our taxes to “push” necessary information to the intended users. While there is no doubt that government publications and information should be placed on the web for electronic access, merely posting important government information on a website cannot fulfill the federal government’s duty to communicate the information to those for whom it was created.

Luckily, most agency heads and agency employees understand that they have a critical function to serve a segment of our society (be it individuals, businesses, or both) and have long understood that the best way to insure they get the information they need, is through printed materials. However, there is a very frightening trend towards not printing certain important government publications, but simply posting them on some obscure location on some agency website or sub-site. This is fueled in great part by the illogical desire to reduce the government’s revenue (taxes) and while maintaining services, and reducing the deficit!

Failing to use pushed print material is a huge waste of taxpayer money. How can I say that when printing costs money? The answer is simple: hundreds of millions spent to create publications and information is wasted if we do not get the information. Printing of information and publications important to businesses and the public is a small portion of the overall cost of creating, and maintaining that information. **For all Executive Branch Agencies, printing for outside distribution represents less than 1 cent out of every \$100 spent.** Cutting print budgets will not create a meaningful reduction in the budget deficit.

GPO – the Government Printing Office – should be a champion of the *Keep America Informed through print* effort. The next Public Printer, Bill Boarman, now awaiting Senate confirmation, was a printer for many years, worked at the GPO, and most recently represented printers through their unions. It appears that Boarman understands the critical role of producing printed information to keep our citizens knowledgeable and informed. We hope he will work with Congress and GPO’s Federal Agency customers to insure that publications and information of importance to us will reach us in a format that everyone is used to, and everyone can use—in print.

© 2010, Government Printing Council.

This article may be re-printed and/or re-distributed only with credit to the Government Printing Council.