

How the U.S. Census Bureau went digital

Watch the video



\$1.4B

Estimated savings from online census, per GAO reporting

59

Number of languages offered

+35%

Increase in digital ad spend since 2010



“Customer expectations change over time. That means digital transformation has to be a sustained effort to anticipate what those customer needs are going to be.”

Stephen Buckner

Assistant Director of Communications, U.S. Census Bureau

An agency that’s greater than the sum of its parts

The role of data in business is well-established. But the way data fits into the U.S. government is less clear cut. For the past 30 years, the private sector has been scrambling towards digital transformation because of the demonstrable connection between quality of data and ROI. Look at any analytics dashboard, and you can prove that the more high-quality data you have, the better the results. The U.S. government, however, has never questioned the value of data. They’ve been meticulously collecting it since 1790.

Like good business decisions, good governmental decisions are based on data. When Thomas Jefferson initiated the first census at the end of the 18th century, the U.S. population was just under 4 million. **It took months to collect all the information.** By 1902, the population had risen to over 76 million. To handle the added complexity of the ever-growing number of citizens, the U.S. Census Bureau was formally founded in 1902 to **“gather useful information about the United States’ population.”** By 2020, the population had skyrocketed again to over 330 million. Capturing a full set of high-quality census data was more important than ever to serve the nation at its highest-ever population.

But conducting the census is only a fragment of what the U.S. Census Bureau does for citizens. As the country’s primary statistical agency, the Census Bureau is responsible for gathering, processing, and disseminating data like unemployment figures, retail sales, and new construction statistics, to name just a few. This information forms the basis of major decisions and policy changes across business and government. Every year, federal agencies use data from the Census Bureau to distribute billions in federal funds for education, hospitals, social security, Medicare, new business development, and much more.

To help Americans get the support they need from federal funding, it’s vital for everyone to participate in the census. Like voting, it helps represent the interests and needs of the population so the government can adequately fulfill its responsibilities. Which is why, in 2020, the Census Bureau turned to technology to amplify reach and increase participation rates.

A stronger digital cornerstone of democracy

As Stephen Buckner, assistant director of communications at the U.S. Census Bureau, says, “The Census Bureau is something that the founding fathers really believed in as a cornerstone of our democracy. Working here it gives you a sense of civic pride and reminds you of the importance of what this agency does.”

For the past decade, the Census Bureau has been leading the way towards digital transformation in U.S. government. Powered by the dream of an online census

response option, its strategic vision used the momentum of the 2020 census as an opportunity for wider national engagement with the Bureau. Except for the once-every-decade census, the awareness with the Bureau and all its offerings was largely limited to government employees and students on fact-finding missions. Buckner and team were on a mission to change the narrative.

But, as with any massive task, the Bureau had to start from the beginning to make the lasting progress they envisioned. This meant modernizing the Census Bureau website — all 5 million pages of it. With 230 years of historical data, census.gov is one of the nation's largest websites. The website needed the right CMS to make their content as useful and usable as it could be. As part of the 2010 census, where there was no online option, the Bureau had focused on updating the front-end of their website. For 2020, they moved into strengthening the rest of their web structure, including search functionality. "We didn't have the infrastructure or backbone to support a modern front facing website. We had no content management system. There were no analytics," said Buckner.

And with the goal of shepherding millions of people to the site in a short window of time, census.gov needed to be able to handle extremely heavy traffic without a hitch.

These two challenges — moving the website forward and increasing awareness about the Bureau — drove Buckner to seek a multifaceted digital solution. "We first started working with Adobe try to figure out the best way to migrate over 5 million pages into [Adobe Experience Manager](#)," said Buckner. Doing so involved more than just a platform update. Buckner and team had to reevaluate their organizational structure and put new processes in place to ensure their website would remain functional well into the future. For instance, the Bureau had about 120 employees who could author and publish web content at any given moment, which didn't help with the structure and consistency of their large website. When they implemented Experience Manager, the Bureau chose to put processes into place to guide content creation that would fit well within their new web templates. According to Buckner, this helped census.gov look "more like a traditional website and less like an organizational chart."

In the decade since the last census, the rise of social media and other digital platforms meant that the Census Bureau needed to connect in new ways. To work on building awareness, the Census Bureau increased their digital ad budget from 8 percent in the 2010 Census to 40 percent in 2020 Census. With an updated website and an online census option, it finally made sense to use the power of digital advertising to drive customers to fill out the survey at [2020census.gov](#).

As Buckner said, "Even though as we're a government agency, we're always trying to stay ahead of the curve and be a forward-thinking organization." The first step forward was getting census.gov ready for its inaugural online option.



Successfully launched **first nationwide online census**



Estimated **\$55M savings** for each 1% increase in digital responses



Increased navigability and supported web traffic for **over 330M users**

A single website for 330 million visitors

Modernizing the website wasn't just a way to make the census easier on citizens — it also offered a dramatic reduction in costs. The government spends an average of \$107 per person for each decade's census. This budget covers a wide variety of costs, including salaries for the fieldworkers who go on foot to track down households that haven't responded to the census. This meant that, for every 1 percent of citizens who responded to the survey online, the Bureau anticipated a savings of \$55 million. With the promise of higher participation rates and dramatic savings, it was imperative to get the first-ever online census right. According to GAO reporting, that totaled to an estimated \$1.4 billion saved because of the [innovative technology used to bring the census online](#).

To build the digital foundation for the online census and the new census.gov, the Bureau decided to implement Adobe Experience Manager as a managed service. In addition to organizing their 5 million pages, the new website had to hold up to high levels of short-term traffic during the census collection period. As Buckner said, "Starting with Adobe Experience Manager was an easy decision because we needed to have the ability to be able to handle huge spikes in traffic. When you're trying to count an estimated 330 million people across the United States, estimating the number of concurrent users or traffic to a site is a science, but it's also an art."

The U.S. Census Bureau uses these Adobe products:

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For the Bureau, Experience Manager offered the security, scalability, uptime, and robust features they needed to pull off the online census without a hitch. One of the

most useful capabilities was traffic predictions. With Experience Manager, the Bureau could run test campaigns to estimate traffic and view how sites of a similar size would handle it. This type of testing helped Buckner and team make data-driven decisions in restructuring the site for immediate and future usability.

Safety and uptime were other major factors in the Bureau's decision to partner with Adobe. Because Experience Manager is FedRAMP (Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program) certified, it's passed the high levels of scrutiny necessary for all government websites. And because it's a cloud solution, the 24/7 monitoring added a layer of safety and security that was vital to collect a tremendous amount of census data in a short window of time — especially during high-traffic moments. As Buckner said, "We got a huge boost in response based on our partnerships with Facebook. And trying to predict that on a particular day is very, very hard. We never would have been able to handle that traffic spike have we not moved to Experience Manager."

[Adobe Analytics](#) was another important part of the Bureau's web transformation. With their robust website, it was imperative that the Census Bureau make informed decisions based on actual insights from their web usage. With analytics, the Bureau could monitor audience behavior, using metrics like abandonment rates to identify what wasn't working. With a stronger web foundation underway, the Bureau could start working towards the other crucial success factor of the 2020 census — increasing online participation.

A personal experience for every citizen

Getting citizens to respond to the census is hard, even in the best-case scenario. The objective of the census is to count everyone once. But when you're dealing with over 300 million people, the goal of 100 percent participation is ambitious. In the 2010 census, the Bureau was able to achieve a 74 percent participation rate, which met the precedent set by the previous census in 2000. With the 2020 online census — which still included mail-in and phone responses — there was potential to gain even more participation.

The challenge at hand was to not only increase awareness of the census and its importance, but to drive census completion rates with personalized digital experiences. In a world that's only become more digital since the past decade, driving awareness online was well within reach. Partnerships with social media companies like Facebook meant that the Bureau could easily reach huge swaths of the United States population — nearly 70 percent of U.S. citizens have Facebook accounts, and of those, 74 percent check it daily. But the real test of the Bureau's online advertising would be conversions — the number of people who successfully completed the census survey online after clicking an ad. And in order to increase conversions, the Bureau had to get personal with 300 million constituents.

The scale of personalization the Bureau faced was daunting. Audiences of the even the biggest enterprises lacked the scale and diversity of the entire United States. For starters, census.gov needed to run in 59 different languages to capture a usable sample of respondents. "Unlike other business organizations, we serve everybody. But people come into the site with different levels of experience in terms of what they are looking for and how they interact with the data," said Buckner. For the Bureau to pursue their ambitious goal, they needed technology that could support them at a nation-wide scale.

With [Adobe Target](#), Buckner and team could pull data from Adobe Analytics and Adobe Experience Manager to create meaningful personal experiences that would convert. Target helped the Bureau make decisions in real-time about what content was working so they could optimize ads during the window of time in which the census survey was available. Combined with A/B testing and look-alike campaigns, Target helped the Bureau deliver personalized experiences that simply wouldn't have been possible in previous census years. As Buckner said, "Adobe Target lets you pull different components, like look-alike campaigns and audience mirroring, into your digital campaign. You can achieve a level of transformation that you never had before." And they did. A record 99.98% of all housing units and physical addresses nationwide were accounted for in the 2020 Census.

A changing census for a changing world

In March 2020, an event occurred that the U.S. Census Bureau could never have prepared for — the global COVID-19 pandemic. Coinciding almost precisely with the start of the 2020 census, the pandemic dramatically changed the Bureau's plans for collecting the surveys. The online census option could not have come at a more important moment.

"I think the way the 2020 census was designed, with having the online response option, really helped insulate us in more than we could have possibly hoped. It has been a saving grace for people to be able to respond from the safety of their homes," said Buckner.

But with their modern platform, not even a global pandemic could stop the Census Bureau from doing their important work. Because the decennial census is part of the constitution, there was no way to delay or modify the timeline. And even if that had been an option, the census was too important to postpone. It's for situations exactly like the 2020 pandemic that the U.S. Census is so necessary.

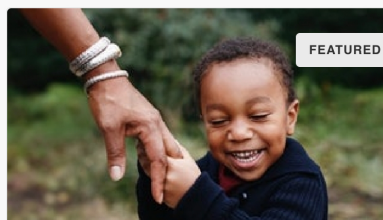
As Buckner said, "We know that if we do our jobs well, it means that real people are affected by our work. So much information from the census is used every single day by the American public. It's times like these that you need data to help your local health officials and other emergency planners to be able to use that information to help us all recover."

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