Increasing interest and engagement with USA.gov's benefits finder tools

What is the GSA priority?

USA.gov, a General Services Administration (GSA) Technology Transformation Services (TTS) site, is the online portal that helps individuals locate and understand government benefits. Reducing inefficiencies in connecting eligible people with relevant benefits is a high priority for USA.gov.

USA.gov includes content about federal programs and new tools for navigating benefits. The benefits finder tools provide users with lists of programs to consider based on a brief screening process. Developing clear and compelling outreach that brings more people to the site and to the benefits tools is a GSA priority. These efforts align with other directives to help support effective service delivery to the public.[1,2]

What did we evaluate?

We partnered with the TTS Public Experience Portfolio Outreach and Partnership team to evaluate which types of messages about the benefits finder tools are most effective in helping people access the benefits website. Our primary focus was getting people to the website, but engaging with communications is an important first step, so encouraging people to open emails from the team was also of interest.

We evaluated four versions of an outreach email that varied across two dimensions: length and topic.[3] TTS sent emails that were either short or long, and either focused on general information about government benefits or details about the new benefits finder tools. We also evaluated two versions of an email subject line that varied by topic as mentioned above.

How did the evaluation work?

We evaluated the effectiveness of subject lines and email versions with a block-randomized control trial.[4] On May 15, 2024 we sent emails to people who opted in to receiving emails from the English listserv (n=180,253) and the Spanish listserv (n=141,078) on USA.gov. People on each list were randomly assigned to one of four groups. We measured whether people opened the email and whether they clicked on a link to the benefits finder tools page of the USA.gov website by July 23, 2024.[5]

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[1] U.S. General Services Administration, *GSA Annual Evaluation Plan 2025.* https://www.gsa.gov/system/files?file=GSA-FY2025-Final-Annual-Evaluation-Plan.pdf
[2] President's Management Agenda Performance.gov, accessed September 2024. https://assets.performance.gov/PMA/PMA-Learning-Agenda.pdf

[3] See the Appendix for the specific email text and subject lines in each of these four groups.
[4] We blocked on list subscription and prior interaction with benefits finder email content to ensure that the groups included people with varying levels of prior interest in and exposure to emails about benefits.
[5] We used linear probability models to estimate the effects of each subject line and email variation, accounting for block randomization. Effect size was estimated using a linear probability model with Lin's mean-centered

What did we learn?

Most effective subject lines

We found that subject lines made a difference in who opened the email. In English, a subject line focused on benefits in general led more people to open the email while in Spanish, a subject line focused on the new tools led more people to open the email.

Those who were sent the tool-focused subject line in English were 6.37 percentage points less likely to open the email compared to those who were sent the subject line about general benefits (p<0.001, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.06]). However, those who were sent the tool-focused subject line in Spanish were 10.13 percentage points more likely to open the email (p<0.001, 95% CI [0.10, 0.11]).

These effects are substantial in absolute terms and against the backdrop of the effect sizes typically seen in outreach studies. These emails were sent to lists of 141,078 - 180,253 people – if we had sent the tool-specific email to everyone, this effect size would correspond to 16,000 more Spanish language recipients and 11,000 fewer English speaking ones opening them.

Most effective email messages

We found in both languages that short emails focused on general benefits information worked best to encourage people to visit the benefits finder tool websites.

In English, 2.7% of those who received the short, general benefits message clicked through to the website. This version of the email was between 1 and 2 percentage

points more effective than any of the others, as shown in Figure 1.[6] If a short message focused on benefits in general had been sent to the entire English list, a 1.5 percentage point increase in click throughs would have corresponded to 2,704 additional visitors to the benefits finder tools page.

Figure 1. In English, people were more likely to visit the benefits website when the emails were short and contained general information about benefits
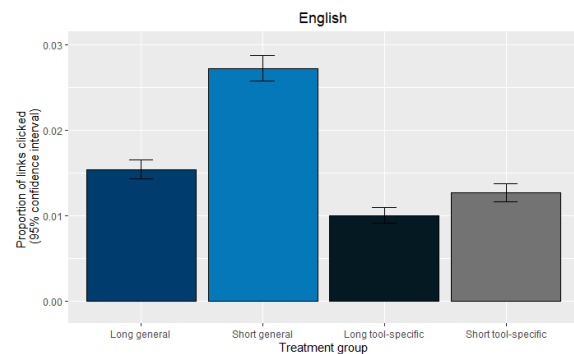
Figure 2. In Spanish, people were more likely to visit the benefits website when the emails were short and contained general information about benefits
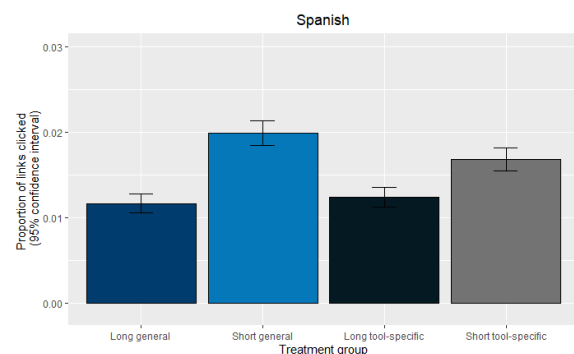
In Spanish, 2% of those who received the short, general benefits message clicked

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interaction approach to account for block randomization.

[6] With the short, general message as the baseline comparison group. Coefficients on other treatments ranged from -0.01 to -0.02, with p-values<0.001.

through to the website. This version of the email was between 0.3 and 0.8 percentage points more effective than any of the others, as shown in Figure 2.[7] If we had sent this email to the entire Spanish list, a 0.5 percentage point increase in click throughs would have corresponded to 705 additional visitors to the benefits finder tools page.

What do we recommend?

We found that both the subject line and content of outreach email affected people's behavior.

Subject lines can have a large effect on open rates, and it is important to consider tailoring subject lines to recipient groups: the most effective subject line for increasing open rates in English was by far the less effective subject line in Spanish. Given the magnitude of these effects, it is important to understand what is driving these differences and whether they are unique to this context or campaign. Exploring how the interests of those who subscribe to the USA.gov English list and those who subscribe to the Spanish list differ could be helpful in tailoring outreach more effectively.

In terms of message content, we found that shorter, more general messages were more effective in getting people to click through to the benefits website in both languages. This suggests that the USA.gov team should continue to prioritize concise messages if the goal of an outreach effort is to drive traffic to a site with more details.

With respect to the broader goal of reducing inefficiencies in connecting eligible people with relevant benefits, it may be helpful for

future studies to examine how likely people who receive more or less information via email are to engage with tools like the benefit finders once they've clicked through to the site. It is possible that people who receive short emails are more likely to click on a link, but those who receive more information are better able to decide if a tool will be helpful to them before clicking through.

Our findings also suggest that people may be more motivated by appeals to the availability of benefits in general or that the ostensibly appealing attributes of the new tool that the messages emphasized did not resonate with people on the email lists. Again, future research could examine whether there are differences in how effective information about tools or benefits in general might be in encouraging people to use the tools.

As the USA.gov team continues to explore outreach strategies that reduce inefficiencies in connecting people with benefits for which they might be eligible, this study provides support for subject lines tailored to the interests of particular email list subscribers and continued exploration of concise emails focused on broad public interests.

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[7] With the short, general message as the baseline comparison group. Coefficients on other treatments ranged from -0.003 to -0.008, with p-values<0.01.