

Department of Veterans Affairs reaching out to vets via blogs and social media

By Amanda Erickson
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A little before 8 every morning, Brandon Friedman steps into his cubicle, turns on his computer and tries to single-handedly revolutionize the way the Department of Veterans Affairs talks to vets.

Friedman, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, arrived at VA eight months ago with a mandate: to reach veterans using new media -- and little else. It's no easy mission at a department known for its communication failures and cumbersome bureaucracy.

Friedman has helped overhaul the department's Web site, created a dozen Facebook pages and launched a [Twitter account](#). The goal, he said, is to improve communication between veterans and the department.

Friedman, who served in the 101st Airborne, knows how hard life can be for veterans. "When I got out of the Army, I was done," he said. "I didn't want to deal with anything anymore."

He spent his first months at home drinking and traveling. But after a bout of appendicitis left him bedridden, he began blogging about his experiences. That led to a book deal ("The War I Always Wanted" was published in 2007) and eventually a position with [VetVoice](#), an online forum for progressive veterans.

"I got addicted to blogging," he said. "I began getting a real handle on the power of communicating online."

In 2009, VA Assistant Secretary [Tammy Duckworth](#) tapped Friedman to revamp the department's social media presence. His work appears to be gaining some traction. The [department's Facebook page](#) has gained about 20,000 fans in five months.

That's not surprising to Steven Livingston, a communications professor at George Washington University who has worked extensively with U.S. troops in the Middle East. "Even the veterans are kids these days," he said. "They're tied into new media. The VA can tap into that familiarity."

Veterans are active online, said a member of [Swords to Plowshares](#), a veteran support organization that helps former service members in the San Francisco area find housing, benefits and employment.

Amy Fairweather, the group's policy director, said she often receives requests for help from families that come across her organization's Facebook page or Web site.

"The Internet is their connection to home," she said. "That follows through when they return."

About 60 percent of the service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan are younger than 30, according to the Defense Department.

But Friedman is working against a legacy of decades of distrust. Veterans regularly complain about having to file several appeals and wait years for their disability and medical benefits. Additionally, a 2007 department review found the hospital system severely overtaxed. "The VA is seen as this giant, evil bureaucracy in the sky," said Richard Allen Smith, who edits the VetVoice blog and is Friedman's friend.

Friedman knows this. "Veterans want to be engaged," he said. "They want a two-way conversation with us, to tell us what we can improve on."

He has begun to foster this discussion on the VA Facebook page, where he regularly responds to comments. And the department will start a blog by the end of the year.

None of it is enough for Larry Scott, editor of the Web site [VA Watchdog](#). "What we have is new media and the same old message," he said. "It's all about telling the customer how great we are, not solving the problems."

Instead, he wants to see the department acknowledge mistakes and outline possible fixes.

"Very rarely do you see a VA official stand up and say, 'We have a major problem, and here's what we're doing to solve it,' " he said. "I think they could serve the veteran community a lot better that way."

C.J. Grisham, who blogs on [A Soldier's Perspective](#), agreed. "The problem with any government-type blog is it's always gonna be viewed as an official word on things," he said.

But Friedman points to signs of progress. Last fall, the department failed to mail tuition reimbursements to thousands of veterans attending college on the GI Bill. In response, VA organized a conference with bloggers to find solutions.

"It was really successful," he said, adding that he would like to continue holding such forums.

It's one of many ways Friedman has tried to live up to the Obama administration's promise of a transparent, cooperative and open government. "I take it to heart," he said. "Even if we have some bad news, we're gonna try to address it. . . . You're not going to get any propaganda from us."

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