Informing Consumers through Smart Disclosure:

A Summit hosted by
the White House and the National Archives and Records Administration
with support from ideas42

Friday, March 30, 2012 | 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
William G. McGowan Theater at the National Archives, Washington, DC

Dear Colleagues:

The White House and the National Archives and Records Administration, with support from ideas42, are pleased to invite you to our Smart Disclosure Summit to discuss a powerful new policy approach to helping consumers make better informed decisions. Smart Disclosure refers to providing consumers with access to the information they need to make informed decisions in machine readable data formats, in order to fuel the creation of interactive tools for consumers. Smart Disclosure is now being used in a variety of consumer sectors, including health, education, personal finance, energy, transportation, and telecommunications. This event is relevant for agency officials involved in disclosure regulation as well as the release of government data. It is a unique opportunity for agencies to learn more about an exciting emerging policy tool from leading experts and peers.

The Obama Administration has committed to promoting the use of Smart Disclosure in its Open Government Partnership National Action Plan. In September, the Office of Management and Budget issued guidance to Federal agencies on Smart Disclosure. In conjunction with that, the National Science and Technology Council established a task force dedicated to promoting better disclosure policies. Departments and agencies will work over the next year to expand the use of Smart Disclosure to help consumers make more informed decisions in numerous domains.

The goal of the March 30th summit is to inspire and support agency efforts on Smart Disclosure. You will hear about diverse real world case studies that illustrate what Smart Disclosure is and how it can help promote better informed consumer choices. Leading innovators and experts inside and outside of government will share best practices and practical advice on how to use Smart Disclosure as a tool to further your agency’s mission. Speakers will include leaders from the White House (e.g., Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs Administrator Cass Sunstein), the private sector (e.g., Tim O’Reilly of O’Reilly Media), academia (e.g., Professor Richard Thaler of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business), and nonprofits (e.g., Chris Meyer of Consumer’s Union).

At the end of the day we will hold an “Ignite Session,” where participating agencies will have the opportunity to informally pitch a Smart Disclosure idea and then workshop the concept in breakout groups. The idea could be something your agency is already working on or a new idea. This session will be an excellent opportunity for you to draw on peers from other agencies and leading experts from outside the government. Please email Sophie.Raseman@Treasury.gov if your agency is interested in pitching an idea.

Attendees must register for the conference through http://smartdisclosuresummit.eventbrite.com/. Attendance at the Summit is limited. For any questions, please contact Sophie Raseman (Sophie.Raseman@Treasury.gov / 202-622-0386) or Will Tucker (will@ideas42.org / 310-422-3786).

† http://www.ideas42.org
Sincerely,

Chris Vein  
Deputy Chief Technology Officer of the  
United States for Government Innovation  
Office of Science and Technology Policy  
Executive Office of the President

Jonathan Greenblatt  
Director  
Office of Social Innovation & Civic  
Participation  
Domestic Policy Council  
Executive Office of the President

Miriam Nisbet  
Director  
Office of Government Information Services  
National Archives and Records Administration

Enclosures:  
Summit Agenda (DRAFT)  
Smart Disclosure Background  
OMB Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on Informing Consumers through Smart Disclosure  
Map of National Archives and Records Administration
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DRAFT AGENDA

8:00 AM Continental Breakfast

8:30 AM Welcome
  • Mark Zuckerman, Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy*

8:40 AM Opening Remarks
  • Cass Sunstein, Administrator, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs

9:00 AM External Keynotes
  • Professor Richard Thaler, University of Chicago Booth School of Business, ideas42
  • Tim O’Reilly, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, O’Reilly Media

10:00 AM Government Pioneers of Smart Disclosure
  Moderator: To be announced.
  • Patricia Hoffman, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Electricity Delivery and Energy Reliability, Department of Energy*
  • Michael Davis, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Employee Benefits Security Administration, Department of Labor
  • David Bergeron, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning and Innovation, Department of Education
  • Neil Eisner, Assistant General Counsel for Regulation and Enforcement, Department of Transportation
  • David Halpern, Director, UK Behavioural Insights Team*

11:20 AM Emerging Markets for Consumer Information Tools
  Moderator: Jonathan Greenblatt, Special Assistant to the President and Director, Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation
  • Chris Meyer, Vice President for External Affairs and Information Services, Consumers Union
  • Professor Beth Noveck, New York Law School
  • Alfred Spector, Vice President of Research and Special Initiatives, Google*
  • Ryan Alfred, Co-Founder and President, BrightScope
  • David Hirsch, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Transparency Labs
12:15 PM  Lunch
Exposition. Short demonstrations of consumer tools using Smart Disclosure data.

1:15 PM  Smart Disclosure and the Administration’s Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights
- Danny Weitzner, Deputy White House Chief Technology Officer for Internet Policy, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy

1:25 PM  The Opportunity to Promote Consumer Choice through Smart Disclosure of Personal Data
Moderator: Peter Levin, Chief Technology Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs*
- John Clippinger, Research Scientist, MIT Media Lab Human Dynamics Group
- Schwark Satyavolu, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Truaxis*
- Professor Nigel Shadbolt, University of Southampton*

2:30 PM  The Design of Smart Disclosure Initiatives: Advice to Agencies
Moderator: Joel Gurin, Federal Communications Commission & White House Task Force on Smart Disclosure
- Pat Gallagher, Director, National Institute of Standards and Technology*
- Sophie Raseman, Department of the Treasury & White House Task Force on Smart Disclosure
- Aman Bhandari, Senior Advisor to the Chief Technology Officer, Department of Health and Human Services

3:15 PM  Ignite Sessions

4:45 PM  Closing Remarks
- Chris Vein, Deputy Chief Technology Officer for Government Innovation, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy
- David Ferreiro, Archivist of the United States

*Invited
Smart Disclosure Background

Smart Disclosure is an innovative policy tool to help consumers make better informed decisions. Smart Disclosure refers to disclosure of the information consumers need to make informed decisions in machine readable data formats, in order to fuel the creation of interactive tools for consumers. Smart Disclosure is now being used in a variety of consumer sectors, including health, education, personal finance, energy, transportation, and telecommunications. The Obama Administration has led efforts to promote Smart Disclosure across the Federal government. Other countries, such as the UK, are also pioneering Smart Disclosure to empower consumers.

**Smart Disclosure is a new approach to an old problem: the difficulty of being an informed consumer.** Today’s consumers face complex choices, whether they are searching for colleges, health insurance, credit cards, airline flights, or energy providers. It takes time and energy for consumers to seek out the best deal. Too often, the effort to sift through all the relevant information is so high that consumers choose in the dark—and then pay the price. They may overpay, miss out on a better product, or get surprised by hidden fees.

High search costs do not just hurt people’s pocketbooks. Poor choices reduce overall market efficiency and economic growth. Properly functioning consumer markets depend on consumers’ ability to make truly informed choices. Consumer choices also have consequences for issues of vital national importance. Consumers’ decisions about higher education, energy consumption, and mortgages, for example, can affect the entire nation’s competitiveness, security, and fiscal health.

**Smart Disclosure works by enabling interactive consumer tools.** Technology has made possible a new category of tools that help consumers shop smarter, such as search engines, comparison shopping websites, and mobile shopping applications. These tools have become a part of daily life for the American consumer. For example, a consumer can quickly find airline flights on one of the many travel search decision engines. The mobile phone is allowing consumers to access a wide range of shopping tools even while they browse in stores.

Unfortunately, these tools are limited by an important bottleneck: access to data. Entrepreneurs and businesses need information to thrive. Too often, the data needed for consumer tools is too expensive or impossible to collect. Government can break this bottleneck by establishing access to the data needed to fuel new consumer tools. In some cases, government can build tools itself. For example, the Department of Education provides an online College Navigator to compare post-secondary institutions. In many cases, government can simply provide for public access to data and allow companies and nonprofits to build the tools. Those providing tools will have an incentive to offer high quality services to outdo their competition and attract more users. Smart Disclosure will not just benefit consumers—it will also seed innovation, economic growth, and job creation in this emerging industry for consumer tools.

**There are two main ways to expand access to Smart Disclosure data on products and services:** (1) releasing government data and (2) requiring or encouraging firms to disclose data in useable formats. Agencies already collect large amounts of information relevant for consumers. Smart Disclosure involves liberating this data so that it can be put to work for consumers. In practical terms, this means releasing government information in useable data formats so that it can be repackaged into tools by third parties. The Federal government has already led numerous
efforts in this area. For example, agencies publish data on colleges, product recalls, hospital and physician quality, broadband services, airline on-time performance, and energy efficiency of appliances.

Government also regulates how firms provide information to consumers. Traditionally it has done so by requiring print disclosures, such as a mortgage disclosure form. Smart Disclosure involves using data disclosures rather than print forms. This data can then be repackaged into consumer tools. Government already has extensive disclosure authority in diverse areas, such as interest rates on loans and nutritional information. In many cases agencies may be able to use this existing authority to promote Smart Disclosure—without new legislation or funding. For example, the SEC has required that mutual funds disclose important information on risk and return in interactive data formats, which can be downloaded into tools for consumers.

**Personal data can empower consumers to make better choices.** One important focus for Smart Disclosure is a person’s own data. Access to one’s own information in useable data formats can make consumer choices dramatically easier. Patients can use their medical claims data to choose new health coverage. Homeowners can use their energy usage data to find ways to save on electricity. Consumers increasingly have access to new kinds of tools that analyze their data to provide personalized recommendations. For example, consumers use finance tools to get personalized advice on bank accounts and credit cards.

Both government agencies and companies hold personal data of great potential value to consumers. Giving consumers access to their own data—with comprehensive privacy and security safeguards—can empower consumers to make better choices. Federal agencies have pioneered efforts to give individuals access to their own data. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the Department of Defense allow veterans, beneficiaries, and members of the military to download their personal health data via a “Blue Button.”

The Administration also supports a consumer’s right to access and correct personal data in useable formats in the commercial sector. To help consumers make more informed choices, the Administration encourages companies to make personal data available in useful formats to the properly authenticated individuals over the Internet. The private sector has already led innovative efforts in this area. For example, some private health insurers have adopted the Blue Button option to allow people to download their own health data. Utilities across the country have committed to allowing customers to download their energy usage through a “Green Button.” And many banks allow customers to download their transaction history.

**Smart Disclosure is an area ripe for innovation.** Smart Disclosure is a promising new policy tool. Efforts by Smart Disclosure pioneers have illuminated the power of this approach in diverse consumer markets. Going forward, innovators inside and outside government face a great opportunity—and challenge—to realize the full potential of Smart Disclosure to empower consumers to make better choices.
September 8, 2011

MEMORANDUM FOR THE HEADS OF EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES

FROM: Cass R. Sunstein
Administrator

SUBJECT: Informing Consumers through Smart Disclosure

In the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, issued on January 21, 2009, the President called for the establishment of “a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration.”¹ The Memorandum required the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to issue an Open Government Directive “that instructs executive departments and agencies to take specific actions implementing the principles set forth in this memorandum.” Following the President’s Memorandum, OMB’s Open Government Directive requires a series of concrete measures to implement the commitments to transparency, participation, and collaboration.²

Section 4 of the Directive specifically instructs the Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to “review existing OMB policies . . . to identify impediments to open government and to the use of new technologies and, where necessary, issue clarifying guidance and/or propose revisions to such policies, to promote greater openness in government.” On June 18, 2010, OIRA issued a Memorandum on Disclosure and Simplification as Regulatory Tools, which set out guidance to “inform the use of disclosure . . . in the regulatory context.”³

Executive Order 13563 directs agencies “[w]here relevant, feasible, and consistent with regulatory objectives, and to the extent permitted by law” to “identify and consider regulatory approaches that reduce burdens and maintain flexibility and freedom of choice for the public. These approaches include warnings, appropriate default rules, and disclosure requirements as well as provision of information to the public in a form that is clear and intelligible.”⁴ Executive Order 12866 provides that “[e]ach agency shall identify and assess available alternatives to direct regulation, including . . . providing information upon which choices can be made by the public.”⁵

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The purpose of this Memorandum is to set out guidance for agencies to inform and facilitate the use of disclosure, specifically “smart disclosure.” As used here, the term “smart disclosure” refers to the timely release of complex information and data in standardized, machine readable formats in ways that enable consumers to make informed decisions. Smart disclosure will typically take the form of providing individual consumers of goods and services with direct access to relevant information and data sets. Such information might involve, for example, the range of costs associated with various products and services, including costs that might not otherwise be transparent. In some cases, agencies or third-party intermediaries may also create tools that use these data sets to provide services that support consumer decision-making. Such decision-making might be improved, for example, by informing consumers about the nature and effects of their own past decisions (including, for example, the costs and fees they have already incurred).

To the extent permitted by law, and where appropriate in light of government-wide policies, including those designed to protect privacy, agencies should give careful consideration to whether and how best to promote smart disclosure. This Memorandum was informed by input from, among others, the National Science and Technology Council’s Task Force on Smart Disclosure, which continues its efforts to promote smart disclosure.

I. The Benefits of Smart Disclosure

Under relevant statutes, disclosure is one of the chief tools that agencies can use to improve the operation of consumer markets. To be effective, disclosures should be designed in recognition that “[p]eople have limited time, attention, and resources for seeking out new information, and it is important to ensure that relevant information is salient and easy to find and understand.”

Smart disclosure makes information not merely available, but also accessible and usable, by structuring disclosed data in standardized, machine readable formats. Such data should also be timely, interoperable, and adaptable to market innovation, as well as disclosed in ways that fully protect consumer privacy. In many cases, smart disclosure enables third parties to analyze, repackage, and reuse information to build tools that help individual consumers to make more informed choices in the marketplace.

Consumers will frequently be able to make better choices when they have accurate information about the economic consequences of those choices (including their own past choices and those of others). The best product for a particular consumer, such as an insurance plan, will often depend on that consumer’s distinctive situation. In some cases, consumers must take into account many details about their own current circumstances when selecting a product. In addition, they must often make predictions about their future circumstances. In practice, it is often time-consuming and difficult for consumers to track and analyze the complex information

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7 See supra note 3.
they need to make these judgments. Smart disclosure can help consumers to find and use relevant data, including data about the effects of their own past choices and those of others, to make decisions that reflect their individualized needs, and to revise and improve those decisions over time or as new circumstances arise.

Third parties can also use smart disclosure to create tools that help consumers to make informed choices. When individuals have access to their own consumer data, these tools can help them track their own information and analyze it to make better and more tailored choices. Such tools can also promote well-informed comparisons. Examples include comparison-shopping websites and mobile phone applications that help people to identify and compare local providers of many relevant goods and services. These tools can greatly reduce the cost to consumers of seeking out relevant information from individual companies. They can also help individuals search efficiently based on very specific criteria that would be burdensome and time-consuming to extract from traditional print disclosures.

Smart disclosure initiatives can help promote innovation, economic growth, and job creation in the market for consumer tools. Smart disclosure of consumer data yields other benefits, including allowing consumers to monitor more easily the accuracy and use of the information that companies hold on them.

II. Disseminating Smart Disclosure Data

There are two primary ways that agencies typically authorize or promote the disclosure of consumer information to members of the public. First, agencies may require or allow companies or other entities to make information (including individualized disclosures) directly available to consumers, such as when consumers log on to company websites. Second, agencies may collect the information from those entities and then make the information available, sometimes in modified form, to the public.

In many cases, agencies have released data sets to promote informed choices by consumers. Data.gov is a government-wide platform established on May 21, 2009, as a flagship Open Government initiative, to facilitate access to Federal data from across government. The platform houses numerous and diverse data sets relevant to consumer markets and can be used to disseminate smart disclosure data sets going forward. Other examples include a website that provides consumers with up-to-date product recall information, and another that releases information about automobile safety and crash ratings, along with data rating child safety seats.

Agency use of smart disclosure, to the extent consistent with law and government-wide policies, promotes the goals of OMB’s Open Government Directive. The Directive is intended in part to ensure that high-value government data sets are placed online. Indeed, many high-value data sets count as such because their publication helps agencies to further their statutory

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8 See, e.g., www.recalls.gov.
9 See, e.g. www.safercar.gov.
missions. In addition to posting such data sets, agencies are encouraged to collaborate with other agencies and the public to ensure the usefulness of the data sets and to increase awareness of their availability. Posting such data sets can also facilitate regulatory goals, often at low cost, by fostering transparency and promoting accountability.

In some cases, agencies may wish to create their own tools for consumers using smart disclosure. Agencies may build their own tools for a number of reasons. For example, there may be instances when it is not possible or preferable to make the underlying data sets public (e.g., for proprietary or privacy-related reasons). Alternatively, an agency tool might meet a consumer need that is not readily addressable by making data available to third parties. One example of such a tool is a searchable database of product information on an agency website. After a careful analysis of the likely effects, agencies are encouraged to consider whether there are appropriate opportunities to create their own smart disclosure tools for consumers, particularly when the underlying data sets will not be released to the public.

Agencies are also encouraged to consult with the public and relevant stakeholders, as well as to work collaboratively with other agencies, in identifying further opportunities for smart disclosure.

### III. Types of Smart Disclosure Data

Below are different types of information that agencies are encouraged, to the extent appropriate, to help make available in the form of smart disclosures.

A. **Product or service data.** Such data are comprehensive information on the products and services being offered. Examples include full pricing information, geographic availability, and complete listings of features, terms, and conditions of products. This type of information is often disclosed directly by providers to consumers.

B. **Data on providers.** Consumers may need to know relevant information about providers to make informed choices. For example, before they do business with a company, consumers may be interested in the financial position of the company, or whether other consumers have complained about that company.

C. **Individualized consumer data.** Such data are information pertaining to a particular consumer that is made available directly to that consumer. Such information can help inform a consumer’s choices in the marketplace. Examples of this kind of information include an individual’s past purchases and product usage history. In some contexts, Congress might require or permit agencies to make such individualized data available to consumers. In other cases, agencies might require, encourage, or permit companies or other entities to do so. In addition, agencies may be required or permitted to make individualized information available that is not directly related to a consumer product but can nonetheless be valuable in informing future consumer decisions (including investment decisions). For example, a consumer may want to know her expected Social Security benefits in order to determine what retirement products best meet her needs.
IV. Characteristics of Smart Disclosure

There are a number of characteristics agencies should consider when formulating smart disclosure initiatives.

A. **Accessibility.** Smart disclosure should generally make information as accessible as possible to the consumer, which ordinarily means that such information should be made available on the Internet (e.g., through government websites or directly on the websites of providers), to the extent permitted by law and government-wide policies. Agencies should also consider other ways to make relevant information as accessible as possible, for example by making it available through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), a set of specifications that allow software programs more readily to communicate with each other.

B. **Machine readability.** Machine readable data are digital information stored in a format enabling the information to be processed and analyzed by computer. These formats allow electronic data to be as usable as possible. Examples of machine readable data include formats that may be readily imported into spreadsheet and database applications. In contrast, computer files that are simply image reproductions of print disclosures or that contain only unstructured narrative text generally do not represent machine readable formats.

C. **Standardization.** In order for consumers and third parties to process information cheaply and efficiently, such information should be available in standardized vocabularies and formats. Standardized vocabularies and formats allow for meaningful comparisons and other analyses across datasets. For example, smart disclosure data on pricing for products in the same category should be comparable across providers, so that third parties can efficiently create accurate price comparison tools for consumers. In some cases, standard vocabularies and formats already exist (e.g., XML languages such as XBRL are used to share standardized information among private entities and to report information to regulators). In other cases, agencies may wish to develop new standards when no appropriate industry-based or other widely-accepted standards exist.

A potential challenge for standardization regimes is the diversity of consumer markets, many of which contain highly differentiated products and services. To the extent feasible and appropriate, standardization should occur in a way that promotes useful comparisons. Agencies should also consider mechanisms to combat attempts to evade standards (e.g., attempts to conceal the true price by hiding or shrouding fees or by categorizing them under misleading headings).

D. **Timeliness.** Smart disclosures should be available in a timely manner in order to achieve the goal of promoting transparency for consumers. For example, product disclosures should be updated as new products are released, just as many print disclosures are required to be updated today. To the extent possible, smart disclosure data should be time-stamped and updated as rapidly as necessary, which will sometimes be in real time or near-real time.
E. Market adaptation and innovation. Many consumer products and services evolve rapidly over time to include new features, pricing models, and product categories. In light of these innovations, agencies should periodically consult with user communities, including consumers, developers, and entrepreneurs, to review and adapt smart disclosure regimes so that the information conveyed remains accurate and relevant.

F. Interoperability. Smart disclosure data sets will often be more valuable to consumers if they can be linked to other sources of data. For example, a consumer may be interested in linking required product disclosures, information on providers collected by a government body (e.g., administrative actions taken against a provider), and third-party product reviews.

One mechanism to promote interoperability is the use of common identifiers that can link disparate data sets. Another mechanism is to harmonize data standards across different contexts, such as by using consistent vocabulary (e.g., defining “late fee” the same way across similar product categories). To the extent possible and consistent with law and government-wide policies, agencies should design smart disclosures to be interoperable with public and private data sets that can enhance their impact.

G. Personally identifiable information and protecting privacy. With respect to any disclosure policies, agencies must comply with all applicable privacy laws, regulations, and policies. In particular, agencies must comply with laws, regulations, and policies that protect against disclosure of personally identifiable information (PII).\(^\text{11}\)

Consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies, agencies are encouraged to look for opportunities to disclose useful information in a form that cannot be used to distinguish or trace any individual’s identity. Even when information does not contain direct identifiers, it can often be used to identify an individual by extrapolation or through combination with other available information. In general, however, privacy laws, regulations, and policies may allow agencies or companies to disclose information that does not identify individuals (e.g., information about consumer products), or to disclose an individual’s PII to the individual himself. Whenever an agency is considering smart disclosure of PII, the agency should consult with its legal counsel and the Senior Agency Official for Privacy.\(^\text{12}\)


Directions from the Metro:
1. Exit station through Archives Metro Station entrance.
2. Walk approx. 1 block South on 7th Street NW
3. Turn right on Constitution Ave. NW
4. Walk a short distance West on Constitution Ave NW.
*You should see a sign for Special Events Entrance.

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