

South Side Internet Access

The project sought to better understand the hesitancy among some South Side residents in accessing a free internet program.



THE PROBLEM

In Spring 2021, Smart Columbus, in partnership with the City of Columbus, piloted an internet program aiming to connect more South Side residents to reliable WiFi at no cost. At the outset, there was limited interest in the free offering. The Columbus Foundation partnered with Smart Columbus and the City to better understand what community concerns needed to be addressed and what program framing might improve utilization rates and ultimately increase digital access in the neighborhood.

THE APPROACH

We worked with The Reeb Center and others to identify residents who would be willing to join our design team and others who would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences accessing technology.

We compiled a design team led by Heather Tsavaris, from The Columbus Foundation, which included designers LaToya Jordan and Bre Przestrzelski with support from Matt Martin from The Columbus Foundation. Members of the Smart Columbus team and staff from the City of Columbus Department of Technology also joined the team. Our community co-designers included Elizabeth, Jessica, Ruth, and Steve.

We carried out a week-long design sprint during which we conducted around 15 hours of interviews with South Side residents and collaboratively identified areas to introduce more transparency and collective benefit into the existing program.

THE INSIGHTS

In interviewing community members, we discovered a myriad of concerns around the security of the internet, free programs in general, and government-sponsored programs specifically were all contributing to a lack of community trust toward this program.

Concerns about free offerings

- No cost? What's the trade-off? South Side residents voiced concerns that in their experience free programs were either of low quality or likely a scam.
 - **“I wouldn't like it - sounds sketchy; free - is it going to bust? Worry about problems? Will it work A-ok?” - Joseph**

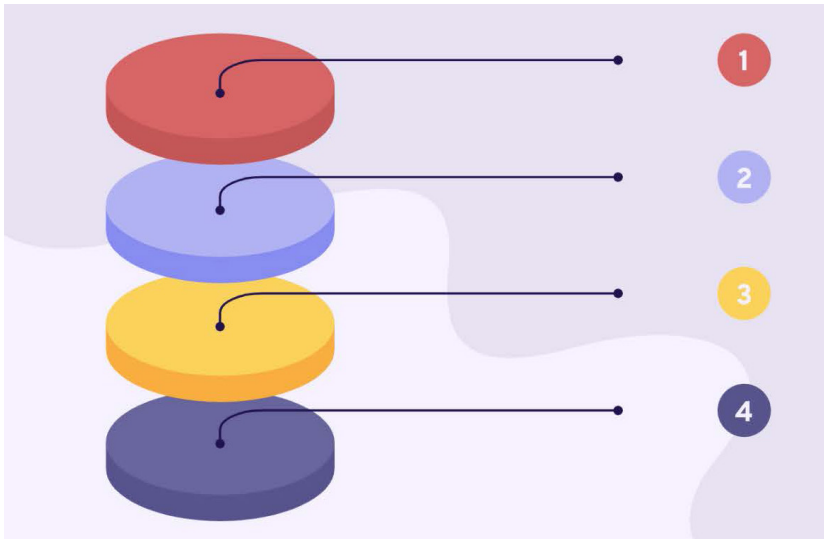
“I don’t trust them.” Concerns about a government internet offering

- Many residents we spoke to expressed concerns about trusting the government to provide this service.
- **“I keep tape over my camera lens. My doctor taught me about how to hide camera/ personal image when we have Zoom appointments.”** - Cierra, currently receiving government benefits
- **“Entering personal information is scary because of hackers. I don’t trust websites, even if they say it’s safe. My card was recently hacked. I try and only do things over the phone or fax. Calls are safe, but not doing things online.”** - Tamara
- **“I got my information stolen before. The web gives hackers easy access to your stuff. I don’t have a lot, if they steal from me I feel it... I had to request a birth certificate online. I won’t do it. I know how, but I don’t trust it.”** - Nyshia

“Maybe I should save that for someone more deserving.” Concerns about scarcity.

- Lastly, some residents shared that although they would describe themselves as “very low income” there might still be others more deserving of the free program and they would not want to participate if it meant taking from someone else.
- **“I probably would do free internet, but I want to make sure I qualify... I just don’t want to take away from somebody else who really needs it. Don’t want to cheat the system and take from others. My income going up is going to knock me out of qualifying for benefits.”** - Cierra, currently receiving government benefits
- **“Maybe I should save that for someone more deserving. An insecurity issue I have, I guess... It’s like imposter syndrome—you’re fake and someone will find out that I don’t deserve it.”** - Cora, described her family as “extremely low-income”
- **“I would rather give it to someone who needs it. Give free services to people who were not fortunate enough to keep their job during the pandemic. I have a job and shouldn’t take from them... If I can pay for it, I should pay for it... I would let those in my neighborhood [experiencing homelessness] use the free internet. I would make it available to them so that they can stand near my house and call their parents to let them know they are ok. I would like to do that. But I wouldn’t use it for myself. I would like to support others in the community in this way though.”** - Michelle, mother of 8

With these community perceptions in mind we worked with South Side residents to craft some recommended modifications to the program.



1 People seem more inclined to trust systems or community leaders who have mutual respect, are transparent, and show vulnerability.

2 Charging something for internet may signal better quality and no catch.

3 Giving out internet that others can give away may help alleviate accepting something residents think that others might need more.

4 Internet option itself needs to be high quality, dependable, easy to use, and guaranteed for an extended period of time. Be straightforward if this internet is not an equivalent substitute to market internet.

IMPACT

Overall, we learned that there might be more palatable ways of pitching this pilot program and we also heard the importance of the program offering high-quality connection that was on par with what residents could access on the open market. This echoed our learnings about the need for high quality in all subsidized offerings.

As a result of this design sprint, Smart Columbus:

1. Changed language from “free” to “no cost” in its Cbus Wifi pilot outreach materials.
2. Changed language from government of City Wifi to “Wi-Fi program provided by the community.”
3. Leveraged in-person outreach approaches in partnership with people/organizations that residents already know and trust to meet people where they are.
4. Emphasized the concept of participating in a ‘pilot’ as an opportunity to test out a technology that could potentially offer benefits more broadly to their community.
5. Generated additional design sprints to dive deeper into aspects of trust and internet quality.

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2023