Victorian.Government@Online: E-Marketing Strategy In Review

Ms. Denise Palmer
School of Marketing postgraduate student
RMIT University
Mr. Stewart Adam
Senior Lecturer
School of Marketing
Faculty of BusinessRMIT University
Dr. Kenneth R Deans
Senior Lecturer
Department of Marketing
University of Otago

Abstract

Since 1994, Australian and New Zealand business and government have increasingly used the graphical face of the Internet, the World Wide Web (Web), for a number of market-related purposes. For much of this period, the Victorian government has publicly stated its commitment to the information economy. The inaugural broadcast of the Victorian State Budget over the Internet (Net) in 2000 highlighted this commitment to providing government information and services online.

By way of background review, this paper examines the implementation of the Victorian government's Online Government 2001 *(Multimedia Victoria 1998) strategy and to a lesser extent the Commonwealth government's GovernmentOnline strategy (GovernmentOnline 2000). It is acknowledged that there are a number of challenges facing the developers of government websites. These challenges include adherence to legislative requirements, marketing to key stakeholders and the general public, as well as the impact of bureaucratic processes on government website development. Content analysis using the model developed for the WebQUAL Audit (Deans and Adam 1999; Adam and Deans 2000a) was undertaken with a small number of Victorian government websites to compare government's stated online strategy with observable Website implementation. The paper also draws on preliminary results from the WebQUAL Audit of business and government sites conducted in Australia and New Zealand (Deans and Adam 1999; Adam and Deans 2000a). The central finding of the paper is that as Adam and Deans (2000a) have found in the business sector, government has yet to progress beyond use of the Internet as a one-way marketing communication tool.*

Introduction

The Internet and its graphical face the World Wide Web (Web) are now widely used in conducting business and in the affairs of government. The Gartner Group (1999) describes e-business as incorporating the gamut of marketing and logistics tasks: e-commerce transactions, customer relationship management, supply chain management, market intelligence, knowledge management, and collaboration technologies. Adam and Deans (2000a) simplify this to three main roles in their discussion of eMarketing: marketing communication, marketing channel (transactions and fulfilment), and customer relationship management. Government is also using the Web, although differently to business eMarketers.

The Victorian State Government is one that has shown a firm commitment to online information and service provision. This commitment was expressed in 1995 by then Premier Jeff Kennett's 'Victoria 21 Directions Statement'. The Statement expressed a vision to "transform the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of Government service delivery, public management and communication" (Department of State Development 1995). The government's expressed objective in 1995 was to provide all government services online by 2001. By 1998, the Directions Statement had become 'Online Government 2001 – from vision to reality' and the objective had evolved to "improve public sector service delivery to the citizens and business of Victoria" (Multimedia Victoria 1998a,
http://www.mmv.vic.gov.au/DIR0123/mmv_www.nsf/Graphic+HTML+Frameset?open&
[/mmv_www.nsf/Graphic+All+Content/Government+View?OpenDocument&Count=50000]).

Why is government online?

A literature review reveals that there are many unresolved issues concerning business use of the Web. These issues range from lack of observance of technical standards—such as in the use of META tags and catering to challenged users—to unrealistic expectations concerning the Web's role in gaining or maintaining sustainable competitive advantage. To date there has been little research to suggest that the gap between government expectations of the Web and its use, is much different from the gap evident from examination of business use of the Web. The research proposition this paper seeks to support or refute concerns whether or not government use of the Web involves marketing communication, channel transactions and relationship management as its strategies suggest. These strategies are examined in the following sections before results of content analysis on government sites are presented.

Examination of pronouncements by the Victorian government suggest that service delivery improvement is a stated key aim behind use of the Web. There is room for conjecture as to what constitutes effective and efficient online service delivery by government. This is a matter that this paper examines further. It is suggested here that the Web presents government with an unprecedented opportunity to improve service delivery as well as an interactive channel to provide information to the public. It is also suggested that use of the Web facilitates intra-government communication and enables increasing accountability and transparency.

The Australian Commonwealth government's stated aims in mounting an online presence, which are restated here, might well be applied at a global level to any government:

- "Improving public access to a wide range of government services, especially to people in remote areas, older Australians or people with disabilities;
- Providing access 24 hours a day, seven days a week;
- Reducing the cost of delivery of government services;
- Improving the quality of certain government services;
- Increasing efficiency – saving tax payers' funds;
- Encouraging growth of e-business, both business to business (B2B) and business to government (B2G); and
- Reducing bureaucratic and jurisdictional demarcation to provide unified services based on user requirements" (Campbell 2000).

Online models for government

A visit to any Australian or international government website indicates that the adopted online model is "improvement-based" (Hanson 2000, p.127). This is almost self-evident, as government websites in early 2000 are mostly informational in nature. Victorian government websites, for example, are used when promoting and disseminating statutory documents and other information of interest to the general public. When considered in the light of the 'Pure dot.com ... Pure bricks and mortar integration spectrum' presented in Figure 1, government departments are 'almost pure bricks and mortar' organisations. Their websites rarely enable commercial transactions. In many instances, government website users can print an order form from the website and then fax it to the relevant online business unit. Where government does incorporate facilities for transacting online, it can be argued that their online business model is not revenue growth oriented. By way of comparison, many business-to-consumer (B2C) sites are indeed growth oriented. It appears that government's online objective is not to increase revenue and a surplus, but rather to increase productivity and thereby reduce the cost to citizens of doing business with government. This is also the stated aim of business-to-business (B2B) trade hubs— often referred to as vertical or horizontal exchanges. It is suggested that government use of the Web is closer to B2B use than it is to B2C online retailing for example. This is due to the fact that implementing a strategy such as that embodied in the State Government of Victoria's portal website is akin to performing the navigator functions (Evans and Wurster 1999) of a B2B trade hub. One excellent example of such independent B2B trade hubs is LIST.com.au in the liquor industry.
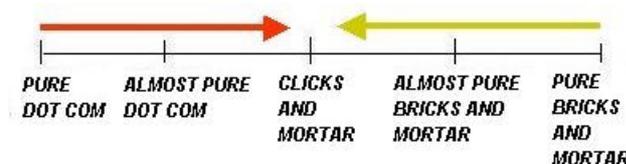

PURE	ALMOST PURE	CLICKS	ALMOST PURE	PURE
DOT COM	DOT COM	AND MORTAR	BRICKS AND MORTAR	BRICKS AND MORTAR

Figure 1. Dot.com ... bricks and mortar integration spectrum.
Source: Adam, S. and Deans, K.R. (2000a) <http://ausweb.scu.edu.au/aw2k/papers/adam>

The Victorian Government's commercially sponsored electronic service delivery system, MAXI.com.au, was an early attempt to provide an integrated service, and is based on a hybrid model of information and business services. MAXI provides various government agencies with the facilities to deliver services electronically, predominantly through kiosks located throughout the state, and was described in 1998 by a G7 Government-On-Line project group as "leading the world in the way it has tackled head-on the issues of providing a citizen-centred service … as well as the issues of security and authentication" (Clift and Ostberg 1997 online). However, in 2000, it is doubtful MAXI.com.au could be described as a complete success, particularly as governments are heading towards a single entry point into all government services. The site is slow to view and pages require regular refreshing. Not all government services are available, and only a select few local councils and other state agencies have joined the MAXI system. MAXI.com.au also links to state government websites with outdated information.

The Commonwealth government gets connected

The Commonwealth Government's GovernmentOnline strategy is being facilitated by 60 staff in the Office for Government Online (OGO.gov.au). OGO.gov.au's financial outlays for 1998-99 totalled $131 million (DOCITA 2000). The strategy entails eight priorities:
1. Agencies to take full advantage of the opportunities the Internet provides
2. Ensure the enablers (common policy issues) are in place
3. Enhance *GovernmentOnline* in regional Australia
4. Enhance IT industry development impact of *GovernmentOnline* initiatives
5. Government business operations to go online
6. Monitor best practice and progress
7. Facilitate cross agency services
8. Communicate with stakeholders.

The Commonwealth Government aims "to ensure that the lives, work and well-being of Australians are enriched, jobs are created, and the national wealth is enhanced, through the participation of all Australians in the growing information economy" (DOCITA 2000, http://www.ogo.gov.au/about/index.htm). The objectives behind moving the federal government online have already been detailed. The Commonwealth Government is also involved in a number of related projects that are not detailed in this paper.

Principles and standards

The GovernmentOnline strategy document sets out specific principles and standards for government departments and agencies. However, these are merely guidelines, and agencies are still free to make choices about which standards to use when placing their information and services online (GovernmentOnline 2000b). Also recommended is the use of the Australian Government Locator Service (AGLS) as a metadata standard. The AGLS consists of 19 descriptive elements, and is based on a leading international online resource discovery metadata standard, the Dublin Core standard (http://www.w3.org). It is anticipated that these guidelines are being adopted by state government departments and agencies, as well as local government.

With regard to government information publishing, dissemination and delivery, guidelines to cater to the unique qualities of the Intranet, such as the use of hyperlinks, integration of text, sound and images, downloading capacity and feedback mechanisms, have yet to be developed to the most appropriate standards (Commonwealth Government 2000, http://www.ausinfo.gov.au/guidelines/cim02.html#2.4). Accessibility is another major website design issue being tackled by the *GovernmentOnline* strategy. After 1 June 2000, all federal government websites will be tested for accessibility, and all new website contracts will include accessibility as a key performance measure (GovernmentOnline 2000b).

Victoria's vision

The already mentioned government of Victoria's 1998 online strategy, reveals a government committed to 15 strategies and actions designed to improve information and service provision online. The strategy focuses on implementation and does not provide guidelines for website design and operation, despite the overall concern that a 'common look and feel' for the government should be adhered to. The Strategy's major failing is that although it aims to break down the silos and offer a citizen-centred service, it is structured according to current government service delivery (in 1998) – the very model it is trying to move away from!

The government's strategy is essentially about such managerial matters as setting target dates, signalling program priority, establishing management structures, establishing clear responsibilities, establishing project teams, developing standard methodologies and toolkits and details of access to funds. To be fair, the stated strategy is close to three years old. At the time the strategy was written, most likely in 1997, established guidelines for a government's online presence were minimal. It is suggested here that an update to the strategy is called for—at least for the benefit of state government departments and agencies trying to develop their own individual websites.

The State Government of Victoria's portal website (VIC.gov.au) was subjected to market testing in February 1999. An external consultant was engaged to test three mock websites and asked respondents to rank the following criteria.
- Ease of use (the site must be navigable without specialist knowledge of the government)
- Access and equity (must accommodate people with disabilities)
- Comprehensiveness (good access to online information and services required)
- Identity (user must know it's a government site)
- Visual appeal (must be appealing to a broad range of people)
- Utility (will be used as an information-access tool)
- Efficiency (must provide good pathways into other areas of government)
- Engagement (should provide users with a positive interaction with government)
- Validity (links must be to bona fide information) (Acumen Multimedia:1999).

With hindsight, one might argue that these market research results could have been developed into Victorian Government website design guidelines. At present no Victorian Government online guidelines or best practice procedures exist, despite being noted as an action in the 1998 *OnlineGovernment 2001* strategy. This then is the strategic context within which the content analysis methodology outlined in the next section has been employed.

WebQUAL Audit of Business and Government Online

The WebQUAL Audit is a multi-stage, longitudinal, probabilistic study of business and government use of the Web in Australian and New Zealand. The study involves an email invitation to a sampling frame of 2,976 Websites drawn from the early 1999 population of 81,563 Australian and 17,888 New Zealand domain names (com/co; asn; edu; org; and gov). The study achieved a response rate of over 17%, with an overall usable response of 399 (13.4%) (Adam and Deans 2000a). The study consists of three phases: An online email and Web form survey (Adam and Deans 2000b) of a random sample of Australian and New Zealand organisations with registered domain names, content analysis (Adam and Deans 2000c) of respondent Websites, and personal interviews with selected respondents. The results reported herein are from the first two phases of the study in Australia and New Zealand. The WebQUAL Audit found that Australian and New Zealand business (84 percent) primarily use the Web for one-way communication with a local market thereby conveying company and product information via this medium (Adam and Deans 2000a).

The online survey shows that some 65 percent of Australian and New Zealand government Websites (ANZSIC Division) stated that "publicising the organisation's name and intent" was a reason for being on the Web. Earlier studies by KPMG (1999) and Andersen Consulting (1998) also found similar results regarding business use of the Web for marketing communication. It seems that government websites are also locked into a one-way diatribe with their guests in that only 29 percent reported a desire to interact with visitors. Over 80 percent of government websites were uninterested in learning about their customers using this medium. Content analysis involving a single researcher visiting each respondent website and ranking the site using the criteria in the conceptual model used by Adam and Deans (2000c) revealed that only 8 percent of government websites provided email, Web form or other means of handling product / service complaints. A quarter of government respondents reported that they were transacting online. However, content analysis revealed that 17 percent of government sites were offering transactions without security, while the rest were not transaction sites—or eCommerce sites as defined by the Gartner Group (1999). It appears there is a difference between what respondents meant by the term 'transacting' and the meaning of the term used herein.

Content Analysis of Five Victorian Government Websites

Content analysis was used to evaluate a number of Victorian government websites that did not form part of the sampling frame used in the WebQUAL study as a means of examining the implementation of this government's online strategy. A researcher involved in the WebQUAL Audit conducted an examination of the five Victorian State Government Departments listed below in mid-2000, using the WebQUAL criteria developed by Adam and Deans (2000c).

Government of Victoria Websites n=5 (Vic Government portal is one site)	a.	b.	c.	d.
Department A	15	1	5	21
Department B	17	1	4	22
Department C	11	0	3	14
Department D	16	1	3	20
Department E	6	0	1	7
Mean	13	0.6	3.2	16.8
WebQUAL Government respondents (Australia only) n=7				
Commonwealth	15	1	5	21
QLD Authority	11	0	4	15
Commonwealth	15	6	3	24
Commonwealth	13	1	2	16
Commonwealth	15	0	2	17
Vic Local Gov	11	0	3	14
NSW Reg Gov	6	1	1	8
Mean	12.3	1.3	2.9	16.4
WebQUAL Business respondents (Australia only) n=228				
Mean	10	2	2	14

Table 1: Content analysis rating comparison
[a.] New Media Marketing Communication Rating; [b.] Marketing Channel Rating
[c.] Relationship Enhancement Rating; [d.] Total Rating

- State Government of Victoria portal website (VIC.gov.au)
- Treasury and Finance (VIC.gov.au/treasury/)(economic, financial and resource management).
- Infrastructure (DOI.vic.gov.au) (responsible for Planning, building, heritage, public transport, ports and marine and local government
- State and Regional Development (DSD.vic.gov.au) (development of *OnlineGovernment 2001* strategy, promotion of Victoria to investors, assistance with small business)
- Human Services (DHS.vic.gov.au) (health and social welfare service provision)

New media marketing communication ratings
The results shown in Table 1, and the commentary on these results which follows, suggest that government website development guidelines should be a priority. A fuller listing of the content analysis criteria behind the groupings shown in Table 1 may be found at (Adam and Deans 2000c, http://www.bf.rmit.edu.au/~stewarta/ausweb2k/adam_deans/webqual/ WebQualConceptualModel.htm).

All departments perform reasonably well on URL guessability. Once the Web user understands that in Australia one uses the www.vic.gov.au to find government services, this aspect is perhaps not as critical as it is with free-standing sites.   However, from anecdotal evidence online customers are unaware of which service is offered by each department, and it is most important that the sought services can be searched for from the main Victorian government portal site. From there, it is suggested that the easiest route to an online government service is via Multi-service Express or a keyword search from this portal.   All but one of the examined sites contains a separate internal search facility to further assist in this regard. There is little difference between the Victorian government sites, WebQUAL government respondents and commercial respondents on this criterion. Other communication strong points are the use of ALT statements which aid the sighted and challenged user alike.

The selected Victorian government sites perform well in the use of graphics that support textual content. This may be due to the fact that government sites are unlikely to feature some of the unrelated and dare we say superfluous graphics of the kind found on some business sites. All five government Websites rank low in the 'exciting and interactive experience' category, perhaps because information and service provision is the main objective. The Victorian government Websites are easily navigated, having been updated in the past twelve months.

Overall one Victorian government Website scored consistently well across all marketing communication criteria. The Victorian State Government portal provides the best example of a 'citizen-centred' service model, most likely due to the market research carried out prior to its development.

There are however a number of weaknesses in evidence. Major HTML coding weaknesses lie in the use of META (search) tags. Provision for people with disabilities is unsatisfactory on most of the sites, despite the existence of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1991* and SOCOG's difficulties in this area. There is no overall standardised look and feel to the Websites that are accessed from the Victorian government portal site. For example, one downstream site makes gratuitous use of tickertape that serves little functional purpose other than to distract the guest.

Out of a possible rating of 26 in this grouping, the highest score overall is achieved by one Victorian government Website (17), while the lowest is achieved by both a Victorian Government Website and a NSW Regional government Website (6). The mean rating by business is not much higher at 10.

Marketing channel ratings
By all accounts, government Websites are not transaction sites in the sense of synchronously supplying digital goods, services or experiences. At best, information is provided on which (sometimes downloadable) form to complete to make application via post or facsimile. At least the Victorian sites provide information on their physical locations. At the time of undertaking content analysis of the WebQUAL respondents, government Websites neglected even this aspect. Out of a possible rating of 14, no Victorian government or WebQUAL respondent government site scored higher than 1, apart from a single Commonwealth government site which rated 6. Business sites on average scored no better.

Relationship enhancement ratings
We have grouped a number of criteria that evidence a desire by Websites to permit two-way communication and facilitate relationship enhancement. Out of a possible rating of 10, the highest rating Victorian government site, scored 5, while the highest rating WebQUAL respondent Commonwealth government site also scored 5, but for slightly different reasons. The former provided a means of handling online complaints whereas the latter provided an online helpdesk. Business respondents to the WebQUAL Audit, on average performed poorly (2.29).

Overall ratings

We draw the conclusion that the proposition that government is using the Web for marketing communication, channel transactions and managing customer relationships is not supported. This is based on overall ratings achieved by the Victorian departmental Websites viewed and analysed, as well as from the WebQUAL Audit results. Like Australian and New Zealand business, use remains limited in the main to one-way marketing communication. From a comparison of the content analysis conducted with the five Victorian government Websites and the seven responding commonwealth, state and local government sites shown in Table 1, there is little difference between the performance features of these sites. A comparison with the ratings for business sites indicates that both the private and public sectors in Australia are locked in a one-way communication paradigm and not fully utilising the Web's interactive and one-to-one fulfilment capabilities. If anything, government sites perform better than business sites in marketing communication from an expert analysis of Websites in the two sectors. However, the standard of the government Websites is still far from optimal. Adopting the Commonwealth's initiative in creating an organisational unit totally devoted to State website development is suggested as one step in remedying this situation.

Conclusion

It is evident that both the Victorian and Commonwealth governments are planing to move towards full online information and service provision within the next two years. The existence of a website for the Office for Government Online demonstrates that the federal government is committed to service delivery via the Web. The results of this study indicate that the richness of the medium and its knowledge media capabilities are not being used to the full. Victoria continues to advance in its use of the Web, and needs to examine its implementation of the 1998 *GovernmentOnline* strategy given the variable results from content analysis. It may need to revisit the strategy itself. In addition, it is anticipated that the need for resource allocation to facilitate intra-government communication, and to implement innovations in website development, such as XML standards, will continue unabated.

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