



Chapter X

Drop the “e”: Marketing E-Government to a Skeptical Public and Web-Weary Decision Makers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter was prepared originally for the 2002 Task Force of the OECD Project on the Impact of E-Government and was updated in 2004 for inclusion in the book, Practicing E-Government: A Global Perspective. The chapter addresses the risk of low public awareness and declining political interest as barriers to e-government, and considers ways governments can develop better marketing techniques to “sell” online services and the e-government concept to both groups. The term “marketing” is used loosely to mean both the presentation and promotion of actual online services to encourage people to use them, and the presentation and promotion of the theory and concept of e-government to ensure political understanding of its benefits to society. The chapter has two parts plus an initial Executive Summary that summarizes the points raised in both sections. Part A discusses demand-side issues: the lack of awareness and confusion among users and potential users of electronic services and how these issues can be addressed with various marketing techniques. While the greatest factor contributing to low take-up of electronic services continues to be poor Internet access and a lack of computer skills, the purpose of this report is not to address social exclusion issues. It is recognized that the digital divide is gradually being bridged and therefore the chapter primarily considers the person who has access to a computer but, for a variety of reasons, does not use it to access government services. Part B looks at

the supply side and ways to market the concept of e-government to decision-makers — politicians and senior level bureaucrats — who are responsible for supporting and funding the development of online services and for removing remaining regulatory and legal barriers. The chapter does not address culture change within the public sector and the need to shift the mindset of government employees from traditional department-centric thinking into more customer-centric and user-friendly approaches. Overcoming employee resistance to new working methods requires more management skills than marketing skills. But marketing techniques can be used to address the risk of a backlash against e-government as declining political interest in the Internet generally and in e-government specifically coincides with the need to develop more complex and expensive electronic services and information systems. The author would like to thank Stefan Czerniawski, David Hickman, Chris Roberts, and Rod Quiney for their contributions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part A. Demand Side:

Marketing E-Government Externally to the Public

Most people who access government Web sites do so primarily for information purposes or, at most, to download a scanned form. Few are prepared to take the next step to conduct electronic two-way transactions that may require a payment or submission of personal data. For such interactions, most people still opt to wait in line at a government office and complete paper forms by hand.

Uncertainty of the take-up of electronic services makes it difficult to measure the benefits of e-government. There is a risk of overstating efficiency gains as a result of overestimating take-up, especially where existing delivery channels have to be retained. If take-up is lower and slower than expected, the benefits from investments in new technology will take longer to be fully realized.

Low take-up can be attributed to a number of factors, including people not having access to a computer or the skills to use one. But even the most experienced Web user may not trust security on the Internet, or they may not trust government with their electronic data. The desired services might not be available, service offerings may be of poor quality or a Web site may be too difficult to use. Quite often people are simply not aware that an electronic service exists or they don't see the advantage of using it.

The vast majority of visitors to government Web sites are first-time users, and they are not entirely sure what to expect. But few e-government strategies include a marketing component and, when applying for project funding, rarely is an agency asked to say how it intends to promote a service it intends to move online. Government tends to "inform" the public of changes to a process rather than "sell" a new service.

To encourage take-up, governments need to view their electronic services in much the same way that a private company would launch a new offering or product line: with much promotion and publicity. While still largely unsure how to go about it, some governments are at least starting to recognize they need some kind of a marketing strategy for e-government. Such a strategy should include:

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