

E-Service Provision by New Zealand Local Government

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, information and services can only be obtained through narrow, one to one, phones, and agency-specific shop fronts (Caffrey, 1998). Information technology, especially the Internet, opens possibilities of using methods to distribute information and deliver services on a much grander scale. The Internet provides a foundation for a variety of communications media. The Web is one of the most important media built upon the Internet. It can be accessed from almost anywhere in the world by means of computers and electronic devices; it is possible to elicit more information, establish platforms for online payment, online consultation and e-voting. Security concerns can be overcome by data-authentication technologies.

It can deliver government services and encourage greater democracy and engagement from citizens. Governments around the world are exploring the use of Web-based information technology (Grönlund, 2002). Attention has focused on the design and delivery of portals as a major component of government electronic service infrastructures. The N.Z. government portal site (<http://www.govt.nz/en/home/>) or the Local Government Online Ltd (LGOL) Web site, (www.localgovt.co.nz/AboutCouncils/Councils/ByRegion/) are examples.

Since the mid-1990s governments have been tapping the potential of the Internet to improve and governance and service provision. "In 2001, it was estimated that globally there were well over 50,000 official government Web sites with more coming online daily. In 1996 less than 50 official government homepages could be found on the world-wide-Web" (Ronaghan, 2002).

Local governments are faced with growing demands of delivering information and services more efficiently and effectively and at low cost. Along with the rapid growth of technological developments, people demand high quality services that reflect their lifestyles and are accessible after normal office hours from home or work. Thus, the goals of delivering electronic government services are to simplify procedures and documentation;

eliminate interactions that fail to yield outcomes; extend contact opportunities (i.e., access) beyond office hours and improve relationships with the public (Grönlund, 2002).

Having an effective Web presence is critical to the success of local governments moving to adopt new technologies. Of equal importance is the evaluation of Web sites using different manual and automated methodologies and tools. In this study an evaluation of local authority Web sites was conducted to gain a practical understanding of the impact of the Internet on local governments in New Zealand using a tailor-made model specific to local governments. Issues studied focused on the information and services provided by the local authority Web sites. What is more important is whether the local government operations can or are able to support the expectations for speed, service, convenience, and delivery that the Web creates. Through identification of best practice Web sites and a set of evaluation methods and tools, this paper will provide a set of design guidelines to local authorities that would benefit and better meet the needs of their local communities.

BACKGROUND

New Zealand local government, created by statute of the central government, is one of the two branches of government in New Zealand. There are in total 86 councils, 12 from Regional, 15 from Territorial-City, 59 from Territorial-District (including the Chatham Islands and four unitary Councils that have regional functions). All 86 local authorities from four different sectors represent multiple functions and accountabilities on their Web sites. While regional councils focus on biosecurity control, harbour navigation and safety, land transport, and regional civil defense; city and district councils are responsible for community well-being and development, environmental health and safety, infrastructure, recreation and culture, as well as resource management.

Table 1. Web-site evaluation criteria

CATEGORIES		CRITERIA
INFORMATION	Authority Information	Web-site host: Councillor profiles, Council structure, and history of Councils
	Customer Information	Council's audiences: Ratepayer/Nontatepayer, residents, visitors to the site, and businesses
	Informational Services	News/Events, Tourist/Visitor, Property and Rates, Water, Public, Community, Environmental, Economic, Local Governance Statement, Democracy, and Publications and Reports
	Transactional Services	Water, Rates, Property and Cemetery Search, Billing and Payment, GIS and Mapping, and Feedback
	Other Information	Links to external or useful sites (e.g., Library, Government Portals, and Tourism)
LEGAL STATEMENTS		Legal Disclaimer, Privacy Statement, Security, and/or Copyright
PROMOTIONAL/RETENTION		Newsletter, Climate, Photo Gallery, Employment, and Contact
NONFUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS		Aesthetic Effect, Ease of Use, Innovation, Navigability, and Performance

New Zealand central government launched an e-government strategy in 2001 that brings all government agencies together, including local governments, using the Internet and e-commerce applications to better provide citizens and businesses with government services and information (State Services Commission, 2004a). The e-government strategy also provides a set of Web development guidelines, which forms the standard for public sector Web sites in New Zealand.

In achieving the goals of the e-government strategy, local government has collectively developed an e-local government strategy in 2002 to increase online access to local government information and improve public participation in decisions. Such strategy emphasizes on: access, innovation, participation and leadership. Easy access means a set of core information provided by all councils and accessible through their Web site and the central government portal, and a set of templates for the standard information that all councils provide. There are also options for transactional systems, online billing and secure payment systems being formulated. The role of local governments is to try to present a somewhat consistent interface for the citizen and to try to develop policy for the appropriate release of government held information to the Internet community (Bursztynsky and Kirking, 1996).

EVALUATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY WEB SITES

Criteria for evaluation of the local authority Web sites were grouped in four major categories and 30 subcategories:

Information, Legal Statements, Promotion/Retention, and Nonfunctional Requirements. This evaluation model was adopted from Hersey's (Whiteley, 2000) e-commerce Web site evaluation model and Paynter and Chung's (2001) usability model and tailored to suit the relevancy of the local authority Web sites. This approach was proven to be effective and appropriate from previous Web site evaluation studies, namely: Internet banking (Chung, 2001), travel industry (Satitkit, 2001) and Internet mortgage service provision (Lu, 2002).

Two rounds of evaluation were conducted with the first round done between April and June 2003, and the second one was between February and March 2004. This is to ensure that the site examination was up-to-date and that the changes and enhancement made to the Web sites were also examined. In the second round, four additional subcategories were added to the criteria, making a total of 34. The reason for the change was due to 2002 legislation whereby regional councils were empowered to collect levies separately. 2004 was also the local government election year. Details of the categories are illustrated in Table 1.

All 86 local authority Web sites were evaluated using a binary code scheme of "1", which denotes the presence of elements/characteristics and "0", which reflects the absence. The content analysis focused on two aspects: the site score was used to rate the performance of local authority Web sites, while the element score assessed the adoption of elements in designing the local authority Web site. A quantitative approach was used for counting, calculating and summing the frequency of each element across each site.

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