



Chapter XII

Providing Information for Business: Government Strategy for the Online World

Tanya Castleman, Deakin University, Australia

Marina Cavill, Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Governments assume a major role in providing information resources for business as a way of promoting national development. This has proven to be a much more demanding task than one might suppose, given the diversity and complexity of business needs and the limitation of government resources for undertaking the task. This chapter will: (1) identify the challenges posed for government online business information strategies, (2) discuss research relating to the information strategy of one Australian government agency to support export development among small business, and (3) set out a framework for government online information provision in a diverse industry context. Coordination of the many government information services remains a challenge, especially among different levels of government. Well-designed strategies can improve the usability of online information and the efficiency of government information services.

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INTRODUCTION

The power of the Internet to deliver information and services online offers an opportunity for governments to support businesses and the economies they serve. This is an important issue, both for government economic development strategies and to help them meet the rising public expectations of online service provision (Carberry & Steins, 2000; Symonds, 2000; Public Management, 2000). The economic importance of a strong, viable business sector, especially a strong and viable small business sector with its potential for employment and export generation, makes it imperative that government agencies provide encouragement, leadership and effective support. Governments undertake a wide variety of initiatives to achieve these ends and online information provision is one of many such initiatives. Individuals and firms moving into a new and unfamiliar field of activity are increasingly using information resources provided over the Internet. Many small to medium-size enterprises (SMEs) may turn initially to a government agency for business-related information, in part because they lack the confidence and financial resources to engage private consultants at the initial stages of the planning process.

Providing the necessary information poses a significant challenge for government. Enterprises vary in size, resources, management expertise and awareness of the kinds of assistance they might access. The information required to answer each inquiry cannot be too generic if it is to be relevant. It is essential that the answer be structured to meet the needs of the inquirer. Customised advice to individual enterprises would have a maximum impact but it is too costly for government agencies to employ the necessary personnel with a high level of expertise. Thus, governments must strike a balance between offering individual advice and the need to keep service costs contained.

Government business information strategies must be oriented to a number of issues:

- *Complexity*: business operations have become increasingly complex and demanding, with greater product specialisation, globalisation, legal requirements and competition. To give detailed information about this complexity is beyond the capability of governments, but failure to acknowledge and describe it could have unfortunate consequences for individual businesses and whole sectors of the economy.
- *Diversity*: the range of business activities, markets and operations confronts information providers, including government, with a major task of dealing with a high level of diversity. Addressing the information needs of one sector or type of business may well fail to address those of other business types.
- *Relevance*: government information needs to be relevant, both to the specific business activities of each user and to the context in which they

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