Exploring e-democracy and online service delivery for Australian governments.  
A background to Australian e-government usage.

By Scott Davey

Australian governments at all levels are becoming more sophisticated with their internet activities. No longer just static information pages, the modern government website has become a recognised service channel, and in the last twelve months, thirty nine per cent of all Australians had made contact with a government agency using this new channel.

The term “e-government” largely implies the use of interactive websites, but the bigger picture includes a broad range of emerging technologies such as SMS, smartphones and smartcards, and many also include the use of the telephone, as it allows remote (and sometimes automated) interaction. E-government also brings with it broad range of issues such as user authentication, personal security and transparency.

According to a recent government study Australians’ use of and satisfaction with e-government services, more people user the internet to access federal government websites than state or local government websites. However, access to federal websites is more limited to information access or one-way form submissions, and complex transactions, involving a two-way exchange, are performed at state government and local government levels.

Users of government services over the internet are more likely to be male (57%), live in metropolitan areas, be under 50 years old, university educated and work as professionals.

Although Australia is emerging as a strong provider of e-government services, interface designers and usability experts can learn the following lessons.

Citizens would use a service if only they knew about it.
Surveys show that if users realised that it could be done online, they would probably use it. This highlights the low expectation of what can be done using the internet, but the difficulties many users have navigating large sites.

Ensure user interaction is clear and non-ambiguous
Users are more likely to seek telephone or in-person assistance where a process is vague or ambiguous. This has no bearing on the actual level of complexity of the service, with many sophisticated online systems being highly used because they are easily understood by the user.

The internet is not seen as an accountable channel
Users feel less comfortable with internet-based transactions where accountability and formal response is required. Excluding online payments, users feel that form submissions often appear to go ‘into the ether’, especially as most provide no way to track the request.
Forms that send immediate email confirmations, and forms that provide receipts and reference numbers upon submission, are felt to be more accountable.

**Content coverage and accuracy is important**

Users experience major frustration with existing e-government websites whenever they find incomplete, out-of-date or missing content, or when users cannot find the content on the site at all.

**Privacy and security scare many users**

Many users also have concerns with the security of their personal information online, although in many cases this is unfounded.

**Site navigation and usability is important**

Government websites still have many lessons to learn with information architecture and usability, as these problems were cited as the biggest causes of dissatisfaction by e-government users.

**High satisfaction with telephone services**

The telephone is the principal competing service channel for remote communication, and existing users prefer the telephone. For this reason the internet is expected to augment, not replace, telephone customer service.

In conclusion, Internet access to Australian governments is emerging as a favoured service channel, and governments at all levels are working hard with a strong push from federal government to e-enable their services.

Most importantly, the recent Australian government survey found that citizens’ attitudes and behaviours to e-government service delivery have changed over time, which means that constant monitoring of users will be necessary to ensure a user-centric approach to service delivery into the future.