Customer input

Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Legislative Council Secretariat

3/F Citibank Tower

Central, Hong Kong

February 3rd, 2006

Submission: Strategy of the e-government service delivery

TO WHOM IN MAY CONCERN

Customer input Ltd. is a Hong Kong-based customer research and usability consultancy with extensive experience with large multinational companies in Asia and worldwide. We specialize in customer experience optimization projects with strong expertise in branding, design, Internet technologies and change management. Today we are writing to provide our constructive comments/ concerns on Hong Kong Governments' approach in developing a strategy to build a "citizen-centric" one-stop e-government platform.

Our input is summarized below by topic:

Building services clusters

Many corporations and organizations organize information in their Websites according to their internal organizational structure. However, this rarely matches the way people tend to see the organization from the outside, which results in Web sites where people have difficulty finding the information they are looking for. Few companies succeed in truly fitting their Websites with users' interests and needs. Doing so requires a deep understanding of users that can only be obtained using qualitative investigation and analysis of users' expectations, and build information structures around them. The science of organizing and labeling information in an intuitive way is sometimes referred to as "information architecture".

The previous initiative to build a "common look and feel" (CLF) has focused mainly on aesthetic properties of the web sites by providing templates with position of department logo and navigation, color guidelines, etc. However, it had little guidelines on one of the most important aspects of the interaction with the Web site; how information should be grouped.

We are concerned that without first addressing this potential issue, the initiative to have single B/Ds finance and develop their own applications may not result in a "citizen-centric" initiative and may make seamless integration of their applications in the portal difficult.

Personalization and other services

Personalization, although a useful and "trendy" feature, is not necessarily applicable to all Websites. While personalization works well on Web portals such as Yahoo!, or e-commerce Web sites such as Amazon, users may not return often enough on the government Website to want to have a personalized interface and profile. Before considering whether personalization, or other planned value-added services are a needed feature, focus should be placed on answering fundamental questions about normal web usage such as identifying various target segments, how, why and when users would access the government Web site, what is the current perception of e-government service offering, etc.

Citizen-centric

One of goals in formulating and implementing a new e-government strategy is to deliver "citizen-centric" and "user-friendly" e-government services. This is also the stated goal of numerous organizations, but is something rarely achieved in practice. The reason is that traditional software development processes, such as those currently in place within the Hong Kong government, are IT-solution-oriented and put little emphasis on user needs. And when they do, user needs are often considered after the solution has been implemented, and when changes are too costly.

Citizen-centricity can only be achieved through methodical gathering of target user needs and building the solution around them. Such processes do exist, and are actually international standards. One such standard is the ISO 13407:1999 "Human-centered processes for interactive systems". Another one, the ISO 9241 Usability standard, is a legal requirement in some European countries.

Innovation

We believe Hong Kong is a mature enough market to take decisions without requiring inspiration from other markets and capable of becoming a best-practice example in terms of e-government. Doing so however requires establishing a framework that nurtures positive changes and the adoption of measurable and enforceable standards and processes.

While technical solutions and implementation are tangible and easily accountable for, concepts such as "citizen-centricity", "ease-of-use" and "user satisfaction" are still somewhat elusive. These concepts are nonetheless achievable and measurable. We would encourage the Hong Kong government to become more transparent in its selection of vendors and methodologies used to ensure that "citizen-centered" is beyond the surface level.

Customer research

There is a stated intention to "conduct customer research at various stages of the programme to ensure that the OSP/service clusters developed have full regard to the needs and preferences of citizens". While more useful done prior to development, customer feedback is important in order to measure whether the results meet citizen requirements. It is also important to conduct on an ongoing basis, as citizens' needs change over time.

According to the e-government Web site, a December 2003 survey showed that "over 90% of the 2 400 respondents agreed that CLF has helped promote the brand image of government websites and improve user confidence; provide a user-friendly experience in navigating government websites; and organize information more consistently to facilitate search.". However, an initial study we have conducted through formal usability tests showed that many people were unable to accomplish simple information-finding or form-completing tasks on different B/Ds Web sites and ESDLife, which results in user going back to traditional channels such as phone or going to government offices in person.

Different types of research methods yield different types of data. As such depending on the objective of a specific study choosing between surveys, focus groups, ethnographic studies or usability testing has to be done carefully. Using the wrong research method may produce misleading data. And even the right research method may yield misleading data if it is not planned and conducted expertly.

We would like to encourage the government to exercise additional caution when conducting in-house research, in the allocation and spending of customer research budgets and to become more transparent in the external vendor selection criteria.

Although the list of comments above is very succinct, we hope that it brings into light some important aspects to bear in mind so that a real "citizen-centric" e-government platform can be developed. We would be honored to have the opportunity to share our expertise and advice on the issue further should you think it is relevant. You can contact Customer input Ltd team at info@customerinput.com or by phone: (852) 2517 7711.

Yours Sincerely,

David Jacques and Nicolas Lassus
Founders, Customer input Ltd.