

Asian trade agencies and web usability

Research commissioned by *Public Sector Technology & Management* sheds light on the usability of 13 trade agency web sites in the region. Commentary: Trent Mankelow.

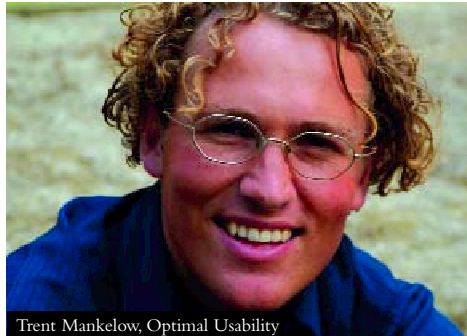
In the rush to push service and information online, government agencies have encountered the challenge of making the complex internal processes and information resources of government as transparent and as manageable as possible, from the user perspective.

Public Sector Technology & Management commissioned research into the web usability of 13 trade agencies in the region, with a view to assessing how adequately these sites served their intended external audiences. The usability assessment was carried out in January 2005, and reviewed the functionality and design of the web sites, along with the value of the available content.

Leaders

International Enterprise Singapore (www.iesingapore.gov.sg) topped the overall rankings, offering relevant content that was professionally presented and easy to navigate. Beyond this the site's content was comprehensive – and presentation made the information easily accessible at high and detailed levels. Adequate tools were provided to help users find desired information with detailed contact information for queries. Partially as a result of the site's volume of content, the user's current location was not easily visible, and the rich visual presentation style resulted in slow page load times.

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (www.nzte.govt.nz) came a close second, as a result of the thoughtful organization of categories, and population of relevant information. This site was the most text-based site of



Trent Mankelow, Optimal Usability

the thirteen evaluated, and the content was comprehensive and easy to navigate. Pages were easily scanned and well formatted to give users summary or detailed information as required. Users could also easily identify the current location using the left hand navigation. Although users were given good information if they wished to make further queries, online feedback was not always accessible and there was a lack of comprehensive FAQs.

Austrade (www.austrade.gov.au) was also well categorised for users helping them get to relevant information quickly. The main page linked into other specific web sites that provided more detailed user-specific information. Content was comprehensive and grouped from a user perspective rather than an organisational structure.

The Thailand Board of Investment site (www.boi.go.th/english) was one of the best sites evaluated. Not only was it well structured and easy to navigate through, but the content was comprehensive and grouped according to users' most likely requirements. The site provided both top navigation and shortcuts to major

information groupings, and users were kept aware of current location and their navigation options. The site was less strong on support and service aspects: customers were not given adequate contact details if they wanted to make further enquiries, and the search facility was not so robust, generating mistakes.

Back to basics

The remaining sites suffered from a number of fundamental design problems, generally related to the structuring of information. A common problem was that content was poorly categorised, reflecting internal agency considerations rather than those of external business and citizen users.

The biggest problems that were observed from the usability

assessment come back to some very basic principles: government agencies need to ensure that users know where they are, where they have been and where they can go to.

It is amazing the number of sites that broke these simple rules to help people find their way to the information they were looking for.

The next most common problem relates to the 'findability' of information. It is crucial that a site supports the users' goals, which almost always involve finding information. Most of the assessed organizations need to put more emphasis on their labelling and navigation design in order to improve the findability of information.

Trent Mankelow is a Director with New Zealand-based Optimal Usability. Last year the firm was commissioned to review 110 New Zealand government sites, and document their progress relative to New Zealand's e-government strategy.

Asian trade agency usability ranking

1. International Enterprise Singapore	82%
2. New Zealand Trade and Enterprise	77%
3. Austrade	75%
4. Thailand Board of Investment	66%
5. Indonesia's Investment Coordinating Board	65%
6. Korean Economic Portal	65%
7. Sri Lanka Board of Investment	62%
8. The Philippines Board of Investment	62%
9. Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation	62%
10. India in Business	59%
11. Pakistan Board of Investment	57%
12. Hong Kong Trade Development Council	55%
13. Invest in China	54%

Source: Optimal Usability. Ranked in order of usability; figures represent percentage of maximum score.