North Cornwall District Council

How often do people actually contact their local council? Most of the time, the answer is likely to be only when they feel they need to. North Cornwall District Council (NCDC) says that it wants to be more citizen-centric by encouraging citizens to register their details on the council's website, in order to receive information about the topics and services that interest them.

Such information and services can then be communicated through a variety of channels, including email and SMS, amongst others, by using both an integrated content management solution (CMS) and customer relationship management (CRM) system.

David Witts – the council's head of ICT says, "Online consultations on subjects that interest the citizen will become commonplace and if it is easier to request a service via an online form. This method of communication will become very popular, and hence it will increase interaction via the website. Basically, if local Government provides an improved level of consistent service through the implementation of a CMS that benefits the citizen, then they are going to use it. Therein lies the challenge ahead!"

When questioned about whether Councils are truly becoming citizen-centric, he replies: "I would say that they definitely are. As the Government increases the pressure to improve and streamline services, firstly through e-Government and now the Gershon Efficiency agenda, it is challenging Councils to see how they can transact their business in more modern, efficient and effective ways. The obvious outcome is to transform the business, with the focus on the customer. Now instead of the citizen having to speak to many different departments about their issues, one call or one visit to the website satisfies their requirements (or it will do soon)."

E-Democracy and Sharing Ambitions

Cornwall, in the shape of http://www.cornishkey.com, shares the same ambitions as those behind the http://www.dorsetforyou.com project. The portal will develop, Witts discloses, over the course of 2006. The plan is for this portal to become the focal point for citizens when they transact with local authorities in this south-western county. As with Dorset's own site, it will deliver a joined up A to Z of all of the 7 local councils' services, providing an integrated facility for advertising and public sector job applications.

With the different services and departments now maintaining their own content, their teams have taken over the accountability and responsibility for keeping it up to date and accurate, this therefore includes managing the quality levels of service delivery online. This means that the public, it is claimed, have more visibility of what their Council does through the information provided on its website. However, to increase the uptake and to strengthen accountability, there needs to be some good marketing behind the project in order to encourage more online interactions and consultations.

Witts believes that this could entice more people to get involved with local e-democracy, and to a degree this will depend on the quality of the interaction that they can have through the use of online polls, forums, and consultations. The Government would also like to see people vote online, and this is one of the main drivers behind the vision for e-government. Yet will this ever happen? Recent pilot projects, he says, dictate that this could be a while yet before it becomes a reality.

Targets and the March Uphill

There are many Councils out there who've found the challenge of meeting the Government's targets an uphill struggle. Witts believes this is because the focus is heavily upon the implementation of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), "So where Councils have not developed a strong relationship between ICT and the corporate business, they are struggling to gain adoption of the e-Government vision that it is more about business transformation to a citizen-centric future, than just a set of ICT-led projects."

The Government's targets can, however, be met through the use of websites such as the one used by North Cornwall District Council, by providing improved access to, and information about local authorities' services.

The CMS, provided by GOSS – an Enterprise Content Management firm, has enabled the Council to shift responsibility for the maintenance of the website content from the ICT service over to those providing and managing a particular Council service area.

Legislation is an important consideration for all Council and Government bodies. NCDC's website, like many other Councils' sites, enables it to comply with the Freedom of Information Act (FOI). Witts says that this was the only way in which it could comply with the legislation, subsequently, all public documentation is now available online for the public to peruse.

NCDC: Managing Red Tape and Change

North Cornwall District Council is currently implementing the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) frame-work from the Office of Government Commerce, which according to Witts defines a particular change management process that NCDC intends to adopt. Witts says that the local authority also uses the Prince2 methodology for project and programme management.

Thankfully, he claims, the Council has quite a few people who actually enjoy change and who help to drive it forward. Staff can be, in some organisations, reticent to change, so on the face of it this seems quite a refreshing and encouraging approach. This, he thinks, will facilitate the ambition to continually improve the delivery of information and Council services for the benefit of each citizen.

Red tape is accepted as a business norm, and the council considers this as being part of the change management programme. It isn't seen as a problem at all, and the aim remains to encourage people to communicate with their council by registering online, which will also mean that their should be a reduction in the same information being sent out more than once.

Public Lessons from the Private Sector

At the end of the day Witts maintains it is about the following:

- It's all about providing the right service
- At the right time
- And at the right cost to the right person.

By encouraging online registrations the Council should be able to better target its services, while gaining a better understanding of what its citizens need. This will also enhance the creation of efficiencies and the effectiveness of NCDC's service delivery. Lessons, here, can be learnt from the private sector, based upon its own collective experiences of what does and does not really work well.

Witts therefore feels that the public sector should not be afraid to ask the private sector some 'killer questions' like: "How do we make this work and pay for itself from efficiency improvement?"

The Next Steps in e-Government

Most of the finance for e-Government projects has resulted in a number of large-scale implementations of infrastructure, such as the various ICT projects. The aim has been focused on providing the appropriate levels of functionality to improve and deliver the real benefits of e-Government, and mainly this entails the quality of service delivery to the customer – the citizen.

The following are just some of the systems that have been implemented:

- Customer (citizen) Relationship Management (CRM)
- Content Management (CMS)
- Electronic Document and Records Management (EDRMS)

The next challenge therefore involves changing the perception of citizens to what the Council offers, and the means in which the information and services are delivered. Witts therefore forecasts an increase in the number of local contact and call centres. This is considered to be a more joined up approach to local Government.

Whether you see yourself as a citizen, as a local taxpayer, a constituent or a customer of the Council, the aim is to make the way the Council works more focused upon you. The focal point, he claims, will then become the Council as an outlet for service delivery rather than on the service itself. He also sees self-service via the web becoming more commonplace, and the CPA process will become the key, CPA is the incorporated indicator for measuring a Council's performance against Government criteria.

As with the Dorsetforyou project, and seemingly its Cornish equivalent, Witts believes that the trends will be more towards working in partnership with other Councils and third party organisations. This in itself could increase the efficiency gains, and make access to local information and service easier for the citizen. Witts says that the previous investment in the e-Government infrastructure should ease this along. So the question, "Who delivers the service?" will become less important.

So customer-centricity or citizen-centricity will be the core cultural change that everyone should see as a result of e-Government. However, when was the last time your Council sent you a questionnaire and asked you what you wanted to see beyond the fences of the party political agenda? Yet there is some significant evidence to demonstrate that people do want to use the web as a means of gaining access to Council information and services.

So online polls, questionnaires and forums would thus be a very effective marketing tool to realise this noble aim. This will be enhanced by offering the customer - the citizen - the choice of how he or she would prefer to be communicated with. Hopefully, it will also revive local democracy too, through the stimulation of greater local Government transparency and accountability.

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