

CAPITA

Maximising your investment in online services



Practical suggestions for promoting your online services

In line with the e-government programme most local authorities now offer online access to services such as Council Tax and Benefits. Yet in the rush to meet the 2005 deadline many authorities seem to have forgotten to tell anyone about it.

Most local authorities don't have the marketing budget for channels such as TV, billboards and other grand tools however there are plenty of tools and techniques that will cost nothing more than some time.

The aim of this document is to offer you some simple ideas that you can implement quickly and start benefiting from straight away. The document includes ideas from our customers, representatives in local government plus some of our own ideas to help promote your online services.

Why try to increase usage?

You've met the e-government target, so why bother trying to increase usage? The key reason is to maximise the investment that you've made in these online services to help improve customer satisfaction and help meet your efficiency savings targets.

According to David Hunter, author of the SOCITM Better Answered report, "there are significant savings to be gained from persuading customers to switch from making enquiries on the phone which cost the average council around £1.50 a time to 'Self Servicing' their enquiries on the web which reduces the cost to around 12p".

Where to start?

Marketing is something that will sit uncomfortably with the vast majority of local authority managers and many will be wondering where to start. Most marketing professionals would argue that the key to successful marketing is segmentation and targeting. As good as your online services are, not all of your customers will want to use them. The key is to break down your customers into groups (segments) and then put maximum effort into targeting those who are most likely to use your online services.

You should also consider the cost savings that you can gain from servicing different groups online. Take landlords for example, there aren't many of them, but they may each call you several times a month. The cost savings to be had from servicing this group online may be greater than other groups you've identified, even if there are fewer of them.

Once you've got your list of segments the next stage is to decide which ones to target first based on what you stand to gain and how accessible they are. Once you've selected your segments you then need to decide how you will target them.

Review your website

The people currently hitting your website are probably a key group. Does your website make it obvious to them that you are providing services online? The services are probably linked from the relevant section of your website, but ask someone who's not used your website before if they can find it. If they can't or it took them more than a few clicks, you need to think about how you can make it more accessible.

If customers aren't even aware that you offer online services they are unlikely to navigate through your website to find out. It's worth making them aware on the homepage that the services are there using an advert or link.

Some customers will use your website simply to find out your phone number. Make sure you tell them about your online services on your 'contact us' page, allowing them to make an informed choice of contact channel.

Google often seems to know far more about government websites than an authority site's own search tool. Make sure your search tool returns the pages that you expect with suitable descriptions. If not you need to amend the Meta data that describes your webpage to search engines.

Telephone messages

Providing online services makes your authority easily accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but your telephone service probably gives the impression that you're a 9 to 5 organisation. Make your customers aware of your online services by telling 'out of hours' callers about the services on your 'out of hours' message. A similar message could be played to customers held in telephone queues.

Direct email

Many systems, including Academy, allow you to store your customers' email addresses. You probably already have a large number of email addresses for your customers. If they are stored in the system, you've had some contact with them already and the fact they have an email address indicates that they have access to the Internet. Why not email them to tell them about your services? You could also consider email addresses stored in other systems such as your CRM.

Turn paper electronic

Several online services are designed to replace paper equivalents, for example bills or Direct Debit forms. Add a message to your paper bills making customers aware of e-billing and how to sign up for it. A message can be printed on paper based forms explaining where to find the online equivalent. Many people these days are aware of the impact of receiving bills by postal methods and would be happy to accept electronic bills if they are aware they are available.

Easy to remember URLs

Your online services may have addresses such as http://www.authorityxyz.gov.uk/Info_page_two_pic_2_det.asp?art_id=4210&sec_id=1314 but no one can possibly remember this.

Set up short URLs that are easy to remember, for example www.authorityxyz.gov.uk/paperlessbills. These URLs can then be used in all communications.

Cross promotion

If you offer a range of online services then you can use each online service to promote another. For example, once a customer has signed up for one service, why not use the confirmation message or welcome email to tell them about other services? If you've implemented a single sign on tool, such as eCitizen or eCitizen Plus, make sure you tell those who sign up about all the services they can now access. If you are offering access through Self Service to Council Tax details ensure you advertise the availability of internet payments to encourage not only payments to be made immediately but increased uptake of the internet payments facility.

Add a message to email signatures

Ask all staff within the relevant department to add a standard message to their email signature promoting the service. This will help raise awareness externally amongst customers, and internally amongst other staff who may help promote the service.

Council publications

Many local authorities publish customer newsletters keeping customers up to date. These are great as they will target all potential customers within your authority and you will most likely be able to contribute for free.

Internal marketing

Much is made in the marketing press of the impact that internal marketing to staff has on the success of marketing to external customers. If your own staff don't know about it, how will they promote it to external customers?

Ask everyone in your authority to sign up for online services. This will give them first hand experience of what you have to offer, and help them provide good information about the service to your customers. Use internal newsletters, email, the intranet, posters, displays and stands to spread the word internally.

Your authority's contact centre staff will be in regular contact with external customers so make sure that they are aware of your online offering and can pass this on when required. For key groups such as this you should put in additional effort. For example, providing additional training to help customers use the service, or asking staff to inform customers that "you can do this online".

Change your processes

If someone telephones to ask for a Benefits claim form what happens next? Do you print off a form, put it in an envelope and post it or do you tell them that they can complete it online? By redesigning your business processes to incorporate your online services, authorities can drive more traffic that way and more importantly, provide customers with more choice.

Incentivise customers

Many commercial companies offer incentives such as a discount for customers who use online services rather than the phone. The same is true for e-billing. BT for example offer a discount off every e-bill and plant a tree when you sign up.

Providing a discount for Council Tax e-Billing may be controversial in many local authorities, but other incentives might be more acceptable. You could offer to enter all customers who signed up for e-billing before a defined date into a prize draw. The prize would need to be something of interest to all citizens, perhaps vouchers for local shops. You may be able to get a sponsor for the prize, but if not it would be paid for by the savings made from customers using e-channels rather than the telephone.

Kiosks in reception

By placing kiosks in your reception area you can make your online services accessible to people who don't have access to the Internet. Some of this group may need some assistance to get started, but once they've got the hang of it they'll be able to 'self-serve' themselves and take queries away from your front desk. You could consider printing some cards with your website address which customers can then take and use the service at friends and family houses that have internet access.

These computers won't need to be powerful as they will only ever be displaying your website. You may be able to recycle computers that were destined for the skip!

Telephone

Clearly it's not practical to telephone all customers to tell them about the new services offered but a telephone campaign might be useful if you have a small group of high usage customers who you want to tell. For example, those with a product such as Academy Self Service Landlord Access might choose to write to all landlords advising them of the service. This could be followed up with a telephone call to reinforce the message and encourage them to use the service.

Key messages

Your customers are more likely to use online services if there's something in it for them. Make sure you tell your customers of the benefits to them. It might be access to online services when the Council office is closed, or maybe customers who submit benefit claims electronically receive a decision sooner. What ever it is, make sure you tell your customers.

Further reading

Those wishing to read more about increasing uptake of online services might like to read the following SOCITM report:

Better Marketed: achieving success with take-up of online services
available at www.socitm.gov.uk.

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