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E-citizen

Developing research-based marketing communications to increase awareness and take-up of local authority e-channels

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Abstract

Purpose – At the English local authority level, there has been significant investment in e-government infrastructure (e-channels) in the last five years, but take-up of these e-channels is low. This paper aims to look at e-citizen, a £3 million project funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and led by Norwich City Council, which has developed a methodology to enable local authorities to encourage their citizens to use e-channels.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper undertakes a comprehensive research programme to inform the national approach towards the take-up and marketing of local authority e-channels.

Findings – The study finds that there are a large number of English adults who are ready, willing and able to use e-channels, the so-called potential early adopters of e-government. Take-up is low, however, because awareness of e-channels is low. One solution to increase take-up is to run targeted marketing communications campaigns. The gross potential take-up market in England is 17.5 million adults aged 15 + .

Research limitations/implications – The research conducted by e-citizen is the largest and most comprehensive study of the take-up of local government e-channels in the world. This work has established that there is a large potential market for e-government in England and that running marketing campaigns is one way of realising this potential. These findings can be applied throughout the UK and also internationally, although the project did not test whether different nationalities might have different reactions to marketing campaigns. e-citizen did not consider other variables which impact on take-up, such as accessibility of e-channels and their effectiveness.

Practical implications – The methodology and findings from e-citizen have already been taken-up by a number of English local authorities. The UK Government, through the DCLG, has picked-up the e-citizen findings and applied them in a £4.6 million national marketing campaign.

Originality/value – Work of this nature and scale has not been conducted before. It has been financed by central government but delivered by a consortium of English local authorities, government representatives and private sector suppliers.

Keywords Research, Marketing communications, England, Local authorities, Internet

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Over the last five years the UK Government via the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), formerly known as the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), has encouraged local authorities to develop e-government solutions across a range of local services. This has led to the establishment of various e-channels, for example, web sites, interactive digital television and e-enabled call centres.

This process was kick-started by the launch of the e-government National Strategy (ODPM, 2002) in November 2002 and has included:

- publication by the ODPM of priority outcomes for local e-government;
- 22 national projects to provide e-government solutions; and
- £0.9 million funding to each English local authority.

The ODPM (2005, p. 5) described this as “an increasingly sophisticated and complex programme of work designed to support local authorities during the delivery stage of their e-government investment”.

E-citizen, developed and led by Norwich City Council, formed part of this programme of work. The £3 million ODPM-funded project was set up in May 2004 and was originally known as the Take-up and Marketing National Project. The name was changed early on in the development phase to reflect the emphasis from the programme board and project team on finding out what citizens wanted from e-government.

The project was established against a background of low take-up of e-government services in the UK for 2003, at 11 per cent compared to the European average of 27 per cent (e-forum, 2003). The key aim of e-citizen was to show how local authorities could increase take-up to a higher figure. No specific target was set, but it was expected that research conducted during the project would indicate to the ODPM a realistic figure to aim for in the future.

E-citizen was divided into five phases. The remainder of this paper highlights key areas of work from each of these phases. It finishes with a discussion about the impact of e-citizen on current government thinking and practice, and the potential benefits to local authorities and citizens in applying the project’s findings.

Phase 1 – development phase (March 2004 to June 2004)

The ODPM’s other 21 national projects (ODPM, 2006a) were concerned with infrastructure and supply-side elements. e-citizen was the only national project looking at the demand-side, tasked with helping local authorities market their e-channels to increase take-up. The business case approved by the ODPM in May 2004 set out the high level aim of the project: “To develop a product which will enable local authorities to encourage their citizens to take-up e-services.”

A programme board was assembled consisting of members from:

- Norwich City Council (Chair);
- Nottinghamshire County Council;
- London Borough of Hillingdon;
- Norfolk County Council;
- Kent Connects Partnership;
- North West e-Government Group (NWeGG);
- ODPM;
- Cabinet Office’s e-Government Unit;
- The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA); and
- local government communications.

The main focus of work was to commission research into the current state of e-government in England, then to use these findings to develop proof of concept marketing communications campaigns to increase awareness of local authority e-channels.

The Research Programme Managing Agency

This was a key role. As the market research programme for e-citizen was intended to underpin all of the proof of concept work, it needed to be thorough and comprehensive. From very early on, the programme director had been convinced of the need for a researcher to be involved in the day-to-day management of the research, plus be represented on the programme board. A Norwich-based national company called Opera Community Research (2006) were procured and their ideas for the research programme were fed into the business case. Therefore, a proper market research approach was embedded into e-citizen from day one.

Procuring market research companies

The Research Programme Managing Agency (RPMA) acted as a client-side research manager, and worked with the project team to draft the specifications for the research projects and procure the market research agencies to undertake this work. Opera were involved in the evaluation of tender submissions and subsequently took on day-to-day responsibility for managing the successful agencies. They were the link between the agencies and the project team, and co-ordinated the development of the four initial research projects and then the 13 research projects for the proof of concept work. The RPMA also had an important quality assurance role.

Procuring a marketing communications agency

The e-citizen proof of concepts would involve developing a large number of campaigns spread across England, with creative material developed in line with the research findings. It was therefore important to choose a marketing communications agency with the resources to manage a large-scale national project. A representative from the RPMA with a marketing background joined the project team to help manage this relationship, as part of their QA role. E-citizen needed an agency with national reach and resources to meet our demands, and Manchester-based Photolink were selected (Photolink, 2006).

Phase 2 – market research to determine potential for e-government amongst citizens in England (July 2004 to January 2005)

MORI (2006a) were procured to supply three of the projects, with Opera undertaking the fourth. This was the first time there had been a comprehensive research programme to inform the national approach towards the take-up and marketing of local authority e-channels. The Society of Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) described e-citizen as “the most important piece of work that has ever been carried out in the UK into these issues of take-up and promotion of local authority e-channels” (SOCITM, 2005, p. 117).

There were four surveys:

- (1) What People Want (MORI, 2004);
- (2) The Intermediaries Research (Opera, 2004);
- (3) Local Authority Survey (MORI, 2004); and
- (4) Literature Review (MORI, 2004).

What people want

This was a key piece of research for the entire e-citizen project. Prior to our research, the potential market for e-government had not been defined. We commissioned MORI to produce the *E-citizenship – What People Want* report. This was the largest survey ever undertaken to determine people's attitudes to local authority e-channels and involved 4,100 interviews.

The report highlighted that there were 17.5 million potential e-citizens, drawn from the adult population of England, representing 46 per cent of all English adults. These were people who were eager and keen on new technology and who were already using new technology. They were e-commerce "early adopters" and using e-channels was increasingly how they expected "to conduct relationships with the organisations they deal with" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 2).

MORI identified attitudinal clusters of the population that would be most likely to take-up opportunities to contact their councils via e-channels. Of the six clusters which they identified, two were of "particular interest" and gave the headline figure of 17.5 million adults:

- (1) Cluster 1 – named e-amenable progressives, and representing six million people or 16 per cent of the English adult population. These people were the most pro-technology and wanted greater e-communication opportunities from their local council.
- (2) Cluster 2 – called contenteds, representing 11.5 million people or 30 per cent of the English adult population. This group were generally happy with their local council and comfortable with technology.

This research had therefore identified the "gross potential for take-up" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 3). Significantly, the findings allowed us to state that "the net potential for take-up from these two clusters will be determined by the effectiveness of promotional campaigns to make citizens aware of services available via e-channels" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 3). The research showed that barriers to increasing take-up were not access to technology, having the skills to use it, or having trust in the process, but rather it was about citizens having low awareness of councils' e-channels. Therefore, in order to reach these 17.5 million potential e-citizens, "the key issue for local authorities (was) effectively marketing these channels to interested citizens" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 3). These people represent the "low hanging fruit" amongst the general population – the group who will most readily move to using e-channels to contact their council and access services.

This research also identified that current interest in local authority e-channels was much higher than current usage. For example, 42 per cent of all respondents said they would be likely to use their local authority's web site if it became immediately available; however, only 12 per cent of the sample had contacted their local authority via an e-channel.

As reported in the Abstract, the gap between current interest and current usage suggests that there is "considerable scope for expanding this customer base, particularly in the context that satisfaction with e-channels is high among those who have used them to contact their council, standing at over 8 in 10 satisfied with the ease of finding information and the ability to deal with the request" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 3).

The intermediaries research

Opera Community Research conducted a separate research study which looked at intermediary organisations, to test the hypothesis that groups in the population currently excluded from using e-channels through access, training or trust issues could nevertheless benefit from them via organisations that they turn to for advice and guidance. The research results were significant:

- 69 per cent of intermediaries have high access to computers and the internet for work purposes;
- 72 per cent feel their staff are confident with their own IT skills and competencies;
- 31 per cent of intermediaries need to make no changes to embrace e-channels; and
- in the past year 50 per cent of intermediaries increased their use of e-channel communication, and over 85 per cent of these believe it will increase further in the next year.

As for the population as a whole, there is a significant group of intermediary organisations for whom access, training and trust of e-channels are not issues which prevent them from using e-channels. These are the low hanging fruit organisations which support people who are on the wrong side of the digital divide. These groups therefore offer good potential for reaching the socially excluded and bridging this divide.

Local authority survey

For the e-citizen research programme to be comprehensive, it needed an assessment of current take-up activity amongst local authorities. Out of 388 English councils, 131 responded to this survey and it showed that “the complexity of take-up measures is relatively underdeveloped currently, although there are exceptions” (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 7).

We found that web sites account for most of the services via e-channels. Residents in at least three in every four local authorities accessed services such as:

- local transport links (76 per cent);
- abandoned vehicles (76 per cent);
- consultation (76 per cent);
- council tax (80 per cent);
- voluntary organisations’ information (86 per cent); and
- job vacancies (98 per cent).

Promotion of websites was via traditional marketing routes, for example, articles in council newspapers, the local press and information on letterheads. The survey found that “for many authorities, it will be second-nature now to include a reference to their website on most publications and marketing materials” (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 7).

The survey also asked local authorities if they had carried out marketing campaigns to promote their e-channels. Only 19 per cent of respondents said they had carried out “any innovative campaigns using e-channels” (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 7).

Literature review

The review considered research from other studies around the world. MORI data from 2003 showed that 74 per cent of the total GB population had a mobile phone. While

56 per cent of adults (16 +) had a PC or laptop computer at home, with 52 per cent claiming to have some form of internet access, but 42 per cent of the adult population personally use the internet.

This confirmed that access to e-channels is good for a large number of people in the UK. The figure supported the data from our citizens' survey, which showed that 46 per cent of the adult population are ready and waiting to use e-channels.

The review identified the need to promote e-channels. We found that in Australia "e-government services were felt to be invisible by citizens and there was a perceived lack of promotion and efforts to create awareness" (NOIE, 2003). There were also reports that Canada and the Singapore national governments used high value media communications strategies to drive e-service use.

However, "there is relatively little information on successful marketing communication strategies around e-citizen initiatives in the literature" (e-citizen, 2005a, p. 6). The research showed that most countries have concentrated on e-enabling services and not ensuring the services will be used. For example, 75 per cent of government webmasters did not know how much their services were being used.

Phase 3 – proof of concept marketing communications campaigns throughout England to test different approaches (June 2004 to February 2005)

It was clear from the research that a general lack of awareness of e-channels amongst the adult population of England was holding back take-up. The project team now developed a series of proof of concept marketing communications campaigns, based on the research findings. The aim was to test if targeted campaigns could have an impact on awareness levels and consequently take-up.

Develop a methodology to target early e-government adopters (the matrix)

The research had identified the potential early adopters for e-government. These segments were attracted to particular services and e-citizen developed a matrix which over-layed socio-economic groups with services. This gave the hooks which were most likely to appeal to the early adopters, and formed the basis for identifying services to promote in the proof of concept marketing campaigns.

Identify and select suitable test areas for the proof of concepts

The criteria for being included in the proof of concepts were:

- senior officer support;
- member support;
- fully functioning e-infrastructure;
- could deliver in the timescale;
- able to work effectively with external agencies and suppliers;
- commitment for campaigns to be evaluated;
- agreement for results to be published, with anonymisation option;
- final sign off for all campaign materials was with each individual local authority; and
- final reports signed off by each local authority.

E-citizen was able to build a strong coalition of local authorities with common objectives to be tests for the marketing campaigns.

Link the intermediaries' research to reaching the socially excluded

The e-citizen campaigns focussed on two things, the early adopters amongst the general population, and also amongst intermediaries. We wanted to test the hypothesis that local authority e-channels could help intermediaries support the socially excluded.

Define the measures for the campaigns, including base line data

The campaigns needed rigorous measurement. Working with Opinion Research Business (2006) we developed robust and thorough pre- and post-qualitative and quantitative research in each local authority area. Each local authority also selected their own take-up metrics. The plan was to present all these different measures in the final research report and contribute to the national debate on defining some standard measures.

Develop effective campaigns and test these materials

Working with Photolink Creative Group, e-citizen developed materials to use across all the campaigns. These were tested in focus groups before use and tweaked and amended based on the feedback.

Running the campaigns

Everything was put in place for the campaigns to start in January 2005. There were some minor problems with some of the media, for example, the radio adverts kicked off two days early. But considering the complexity of the campaigns, they ran very smoothly.

Example one – promotion of online library service

This online service allows users to browse the library catalogue and renew and order items online (e-citizen, 2005b). Using the matrix to choose the hook and target segment, a research programme was undertaken to test the hypothesis that people age 55 + would be influenced by a marketing campaign to use the online library service. The campaign ran for four weeks, starting 10 January 2005. Over 750 residents were involved in the research, which covered three separate research projects over two-and-half months.

An initial qualitative focus group tested three different marketing messages. The main findings were:

- Awareness of the service significantly increased amongst the target group, from 21 per cent pre-campaign, to 47 per cent post.
- Take-up of the service also increased from 12 per cent to 21 per cent.
- Interest in using the service increased, from 47 per cent to 59 per cent.
- Some users were unlikely to use the service because they preferred face-to-face contact (9 per cent post stage).
- The LA had take-up data covering a 35-month period. This showed a growing trend on the renewals service and significant increases in the use of the reservations service. The highest levels of service were seen during the campaign, and this was at variance with the trend in previous years which showed a drop during January and February.

Example two – providing advice and information on council web site

This service is about providing information sheets online (e-citizen, 2005c). It is aimed at people with caring responsibilities. The research tested whether women aged 35-54 would be influenced by the marketing campaign to use the service. Over 500 residents were involved in the research, which covered three separate research projects over two-and-half months.

An initial qualitative focus group tested three different marketing messages. The main findings were:

- awareness of the information sheets increased as a result of the campaign from 5 per cent pre-campaign to 10 per cent post;
- take-up increased from 1 per cent to 5 per cent; and
- 57 per cent of people interested in using the service.

Phase 4 – evaluation of campaigns and publication of results (March 2005 to April 2005)

The aim of the proof of concept marketing campaigns described previously was to test the findings of the market research phase that:

- awareness and take-up of local authority e-channels could be increased amongst the early adopters identified by the MORI research;
- targeting marketing campaigns at different customer segments would be effective; and
- these segments were interested in specific services, and these could be used as hooks to attract people to use e-channels.

The results from the proof of concepts “indicate that targeted marketing communications campaigns will drive take-up of local e-channels amongst citizens” (e-citizen, 2005d). The key finding was that lack of awareness is currently holding back take-up in some local authority areas. This was an important finding. It showed that no matter how good (for example) a web site, how well designed, how accessible and so on, if people do not know it is there and what is on it, they will not use the e-channel route to the delivery of the service.

The research also highlights that marketing communications campaigns will start to have a positive effect on awareness, even when the campaign is live for as little as four weeks. People are also then interested in using the service again:

With a fully funded complete campaign, it is reasonable to assume that awareness will be driven to optimal levels and usage will follow through as a result (e-citizen, 2005d, p. 5).

Long term investment in realistic marketing budgets, sufficient to create and maintain interest, is required whether at local authority level, via partnerships of authorities, at a regional level or nationally (e-citizen, 2005d, p. 5).

The campaigns had a measurable effect (e-citizen, 2006e). Overall the proportions of people claiming to have seen the campaigns rose from a typical 4 per cent across the campaigns, to typically 15 per cent after the campaigns in just four weeks, giving a net impact of around 10 per cent. Interest in using the services in the future was also positively affected by the campaigns. For example:

- Online jobs service, to help residents find employment – awareness of website increased by 12 per cent following campaign; there was a high recall of the campaign (15 per cent); 70 per cent of people said they would be interested in using the service.
- Online payments service – awareness of website increased by 5 per cent; high recall of the campaign (12 per cent); people who would definitely consider using the service increased from 32 per cent to 49 per cent.
- Using intermediaries to access advice and information from council web site – awareness of the service doubled to 40 per cent; 33 per cent of people recalled the campaign; 80 per cent would be interested in using the service in the future.

Other impacts (other than just increasing awareness)

The research found that marketing activity might be treated with suspicion, because local authorities might not have done targeted campaigns in the past. It might also appear that councils are trying to replace face-to-face contact with e-channels, and this might lead to job cuts amongst council staff. Marketing activity needs to make it clear that e-channels are in addition to existing channels, not replacements. It also needs to be clear that e-channels are free and that personal data are secure.

Campaigns can have an impact on levels of satisfaction. If the starting point is that residents are not happy with the delivery of a particular service, marketing communications campaigns will find it hard to succeed in pushing up use of e-channels. So there is a need to target services which are already being delivered effectively, and this in turn is more likely to have a positive impact on take-up, and will help to develop trust between councils and local citizens.

Citizens want feedback. In one of the e-citizen tests, when people used texting to report abandoned cars, they felt that it would be less likely to be actioned than ringing up their local authority. Advertising might get people to use the scheme, but they want proof that something has happened (e.g., a return text saying the service request has now been completed).

The proof of concepts show it is important to localise the “call to action”. This was done in the campaigns by using local photographs and logos of the local authority. In a national campaign to boost awareness and take-up, a local angle must be introduced at the point that campaigns are asking people to access local services.

**Phase 5 – reporting the results to local authorities and wider context
(April 2005 to March 2006)**

All the results are available on www.e-citizen.gov.uk. Norwich hosted an event for over 200 local authority officers where the findings were published. Since then a number of councils have used the methodology to run campaigns.

The ODPM provided additional funding to roll-out the findings to English local authorities. The concentration of work took place between September 2005 and March 2006. The next version of the web site was launched, and it now provides easy access to all the project’s deliverables, including research findings, campaign materials used during the proof of concepts and video footage of the campaigns.

The ODPM was restructured in May 2006 and responsibility for e-government passed to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The results of the research and proof of concepts from e-citizen have been used by the DCLG as the

basis for a £4.6 million advertising campaign (ODPM, 2006b) to take place between April and July 2006. The aim is to increase awareness of e-channels and drive take-up. Norwich City Council/e-citizen are represented on the programme board for the national campaign.

Discussion

Market research played a significant part in this project. The initial studies defined current practice and take-up and enabled e-citizen to develop its hypothesis that lack of awareness was holding back take-up of e-channels. The creative material used in the proof of concepts was tested with focus groups before it was used in live campaigns. All 13 campaigns had extensive pre- and post-research studies to track their impact. The research was conducted by professional research companies, and e-citizen had a research director represented on the project team. The proof of concepts were developed by a professional marketing communications agency.

In other words, we really tested our approach and applied the results in a highly professional manner, and so we are confident the results are very solid. This is the reason why the DCLG has been prepared to invest a further £4.6 million in the national campaign to run in 2006. Without e-citizen, the government would not have the justification or methodology to do this. It is a mark of our achievement that a relatively small project has had such a major impact on government thinking.

The main aim of the project was to develop a product which local authorities could use to increase take-up of their e-channels. All the findings from e-citizen have been published on the project web site and our approach has already been adopted by some authorities, for example, Basingstoke and Surrey (e-citizen, 2006). In addition, an easy to use Toolkit has been sent to all English local authorities, and further dissemination events have been organised across the country.

We will be adding additional information to the web site, for example, showing how a business case for e-channel marketing can be developed. This will include justification for securing new marketing budgets, the potential return on investment and the impact on reputation and levels of customer satisfaction. We plan to demonstrate the link between the e-citizen findings and the Local Government Association's (LGA) "Reputation" campaign (Local Government Association, 2006) and recent work from MORI (2006b) on the five drivers of customer satisfaction.

The focus for e-citizen has been on the low hanging fruit and early adopters of e-government. These people have the access, skills and trust to use e-channels immediately. This does not mean that people without these attributes should be ignored. We showed very clearly during the proof of concepts that intermediary organisations can play a vital part in bridging the digital divide. However, the e-citizen research showed that there are 17.5 million adults in England who want to access council services via e-channels. This is a great challenge to local authorities, but also a great opportunity. Councils have to make sure their e-channels work, that they are accessible and that they do deliver services. In other words, e-channels have to prove that they "do what they say on the tin". This requires sustained and long-term investment in e-infrastructure. The opportunity is that as millions of citizens use these e-channels, resources are freed up to be invested in services for the socially excluded.

These are major issues which are beyond the scope of the current project. We set out to define the potential market for e-government, which we have now done, and also to suggest some approaches to driving up take-up, which we have also achieved. For

e-citizen, the audience now is communications officers within local authorities. We want to help them secure the investment they need to run campaigns.

Norwich City Council is proposing to take ownership of the e-citizen products and to continue to publish information concerning take-up on www.e-citizen.gov.uk

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