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Chapter XII

Providing Information for Business: Government Strategy for the Online World

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ABSTRACT

Governments assume a major role in providing information resources for business as a way of promoting national development. This has proven to be a much more demanding task than one might suppose, given the diversity and complexity of business needs and the limitation of government resources for undertaking the task. This chapter will: (1) identify the challenges posed for government online business information strategies, (2) discuss research relating to the information strategy of one Australian government agency to support export development among small business, and (3) set out a framework for government online information provision in a diverse industry context. Coordination of the many government information services remains a challenge, especially among different levels of government. Well-designed strategies can improve the usability of online information and the efficiency of government information services.

INTRODUCTION

The power of the Internet to deliver information and services online offers an opportunity for governments to support businesses and the economies they serve. This is an important issue, both for government economic development strategies and to help them meet the rising public expectations of online service provision (Carberry & Steins, 2000; Symonds, 2000; Public Management, 2000). The economic importance of a strong, viable business sector, especially a strong and viable small business sector with its potential for employment and export generation, makes it imperative that government agencies provide encouragement, leadership and effective support. Governments undertake a wide variety of initiatives to achieve these ends and online information provision is one of many such initiatives. Individuals and firms moving into a new and unfamiliar field of activity are increasingly using information resources provided over the Internet. Many small to medium-size enterprises (SMEs) may turn initially to a government agency for business-related information, in part because they lack the confidence and financial resources to engage private consultants at the initial stages of the planning process.

Providing the necessary information poses a significant challenge for government. Enterprises vary in size, resources, management expertise and awareness of the kinds of assistance they might access. The information required to answer each inquiry cannot be too generic if it is to be relevant. It is essential that the answer be structured to meet the needs of the inquirer. Customised advice to individual enterprises would have a maximum impact but it is too costly for government agencies to employ the necessary personnel with a high level of expertise. Thus, governments must strike a balance between offering individual advice and the need to keep service costs contained.

Government business information strategies must be oriented to a number of issues:

- **Complexity:** business operations have become increasingly complex and demanding, with greater product specialisation, globalisation, legal requirements and competition. To give detailed information about this complexity is beyond the capability of governments, but failure to acknowledge and describe it could have unfortunate consequences for individual businesses and whole sectors of the economy.
- **Diversity:** the range of business activities, markets and operations confronts information providers, including government, with a major task of dealing with a high level of diversity. Addressing the information needs of one sector or type of business may well fail to address those of other business types.
- **Relevance:** government information needs to be relevant, both to the specific business activities of each user and to the context in which they
operate. This means that the format and medium of information must be easy to find, assimilate and apply.

- **Efficiency and integration:** governments’ business information material must be delivered efficiently, not only in the initial cost of provision but in the maintenance and updating of information. This dictates simplicity and avoidance of duplication in provision, using other reliable information sources (including industry and other government sources) to the maximum while maintaining the quality of information provision. The task of integration between channels for one government is challenge enough; to integrate across different levels of government and between governments is especially problematic. Some degree of duplication is likely to develop in a multi-layered system, which may create both inefficiency and confusion.

- **Impact and reciprocity:** each government information channel (e.g., a web site) will depend on its profile and recognisability for impact. Business users should recognise the site as a rich and trustworthy one, easy to find and navigate. To achieve this, some publicity and reciprocal links with other sites are highly advantageous. This recognition is difficult to achieve with the plethora of sites, layers of government and competing “brands” of government information provision. While governments may be trusted sources of information, they must first attract users, many of whom operate in a commercial context and tend to draw their information from existing commercial information sources, both private and public.

To meet these challenges, many governments have established online portals to provide information and links to other sources of business information.

Information portals, the most common form of information provision by governments on the Internet, are provided at various levels including whole-of-government portals which give the user access to a wide array of government activities with links to specific sections of government, often through links to ministries or departments (see, for example http://www.fed.gov.au). The richness of these high level portals is sometimes obscured by the complexity and magnitude of the operations of the government and the user may become lost or overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available. When links to non-government sites are included, a sense of disorientation may result. Effective navigation of the site will depend on the user’s familiarity with the structure of government administration and the operation of the various departments and instrumentalities which are subject to periodic name changes and reorganisation. While whole-of-government portals are a good format for providing information about the operations of government, this is not optimum for providing information relating to a particular area of activity, especially one in which a variety of government organisations have an interest. To address this, many governments have developed nested portals which provide specific, collected information
about a major activity, including business support.

This chapter explores the initiative of one government agency in developing a portal to assist businesses to develop their export activities and associated e-commerce activities. This example highlights issues that an effective government information strategy should consider and the ways in which it might best use the Internet and its abundant resources to achieve its information goals, including the goal of assisting users to access specialised and even individual advice when it is required.

AUSTRALIA’S MOVE ONLINE

Governments in Australia have attached a high priority to developing strategic online information dissemination to support business, especially the small and medium enterprises which comprise a major part of the economy (ABS, 2002). The Commonwealth (national) government underwrote this thrust with its Government Online strategy, launched in 2000, in which it mandated a move of “all appropriate government services” to online delivery by 2001 (Government Online, 2000). State governments have developed parallel online policies and service provision. Steady work has been undertaken since that time to achieve this move with a burgeoning government web presence and increasing richness of information provision and functionality.

Government strategy for business development includes the increased development of export and international trade and the use of e-commerce to facilitate that development. This dual agenda has had Commonwealth government support (DFAT, 1999) and state governments have supported it in their own regions. A strong export economy enabled by electronic business processes is a key part of the “Information Economy” (NOIE, 2002) from which Australia is well positioned to benefit, being among the advanced nations in terms of key measures of Internet infrastructure, penetration and activity. A national survey of small businesses in 2002 (Pacific Access, 2002) reported that Australia had reached:

- Record levels (79%) of small businesses and (94%) of medium businesses with PCs connected to the Internet, which are starting to plateau. Of these, 82% were using the Internet to look for information, products, or services with a further 8% planning to do so within 12 months.
- Record levels (94%) of small businesses connected to the Internet using email.
- Record levels (46%) of small businesses reporting they had a home page; with another 16% expecting to establish a home page in the next 12 months.
However, in comparison with larger Australian businesses and SMEs in some other countries, Australian small businesses have been relatively slow to adopt e-commerce. Of those using the Internet for business communications, only a fraction do any form of e-commerce such as taking orders and receiving payments. Almost 50% of small businesses did not see e-commerce as having any particular relevance to their business at that time. Many small businesses have little interest in e-commerce, specifically in buying and selling over the Internet and have a limited appreciation of the benefits of moving online and the costs and process of doing so (NOIE, 2000, p. 11). To Australian governments, which have been pursuing a range of strategies to encourage small business to use the Internet and increase international trade activity, such findings are of continuing national concern, although the issues small businesses face in moving online have been widely reported (see DFAT, 1999; Poon & Swatman, 1999; Corbitt & Kong, 2000; Levy & Powell, 2002; Lawrence & Hughes, 2000).

Against this backdrop, the Victorian government’s VicExport site was developed primarily to provide small businesses with information to help them with export, but in doing so included online information about e-commerce as well. Thus, it is an example both of an online information initiative and an initiative to promote e-commerce.

**THE VicExport INFORMATION INITIATIVE**

The Victorian State government has for some time provided services to help businesses develop and participate in international trade, assisting firms already trading across borders to improve their performance. The Government has pursued a range of initiatives to encourage Victorian businesses to adopt e-commerce, both for domestic and international trade. Promoting e-commerce for export (EC4X) encourages the use of advanced online business techniques to lift the state’s trade performance.

Prior to the Government’s move online it dispensed export information primarily by the provision of printed material. This made revision and update of the material both difficult and expensive. In addition, the available information was not structured to facilitate its effective utilisation by inquirers who did not know exactly what information they were seeking. The Government believed that using the Internet could solve the problem of providing cost-effective export information to the target audience. They developed the VicExport web site to provide a comprehensive checklist of export issues. From this list, inquirers can access information which is relevant to their own specific needs and level of awareness.
The *VicExport* web site (http://www.export.vic.gov.au) provides access to a repository of information on all aspects of export. Its purpose is to:

- increase export awareness in the general community,
- encourage firms who have export potential to trade internationally,
- assist existing exporters to improve their export performance, and
- avoid ill-advised, under-resourced and premature ventures into international trade.

The site added a section on e-commerce in 2002 to help exporters develop EC4X. The information it contains is structured to provide a logical progression through the various stages of export development from initial consideration of export potential to the finalisation of contracts and export expansion. *VicExport* avoids duplication by using links to the web sites of other agencies able to assist in export development. In this way, the *VicExport* portal offered an opportunity to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of information provision about export and e-commerce.

The site is openly available but is primarily designed to assist SMEs with little or no exposure to international markets. An important aim is to provide information for enterprises in regional and rural areas where access to this type of information is limited. The site uses the interactivity of the Internet to allow the inquirer independently to develop a preliminary export strategy specific to their business either on or offline. The department estimated the site saved over 1,600 hours of face-to-face counseling by departmental staff in the 18 months after its launch. Its positive impact on the Victorian economy cannot at this stage be gauged, but it was followed by a marked increase in the number of small to medium-size enterprises showing interest in taking products and services into international markets. This trend is also evident from the increased number of direct contacts from users of the site seeking further advice on export and referral to export service providers.

The Government estimated conservatively that its saving from the site was in the order of 60% less time spent in export counseling; 20% improvement in service levels and 10% decrease in operating costs mainly associated with reduced costs of printing export information material. Overall costs have been contained to existing levels despite increased workflows and higher levels of customer service. A further benefit of the site is its use as an easy reference resource for departmental staff who may have little or no personal experience of international trade.

It has to be acknowledged that no matter how comprehensive the information provided by *VicExport* and no matter how innovative the means of delivery, most SMEs will ultimately require specific and ongoing support in the form of individual counseling and advice. The information that *VicExport* provides must be viewed as a starting point on the road to e-commerce implementation and the
successful move into international markets. To work effectively, a site such as VicExport must provide information that matches the needs of exporters and potential exporters. To do this, they must know:

- the information needs of SMEs involved with EC4X,
- what resources are available to provide that information accurately and efficiently, and
- the appropriate mix of online and individual assistance for EC4X and how this can be structured into the government strategy.

The dual goal of increasing export trade and e-commerce use raised issues about how this could best be achieved and what role the government ought to play in this development. Earlier research (Castleman & Cavill, 2000, 2001) examined the experiences of companies which were successful in EC4X and identified their needs in a number of areas. To support the government’s EC4X initiative, the research reported here looked more specifically at the information strategy and, in particular, the state government strategy, to help SMEs move into EC4X.

Investigation of the EC4X Information Needs of SMEs

In November 2001 the Victorian Department of State and Regional Development (now the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development) contracted us to conduct an investigation of the information and support needs of SMEs engaged in EC4X and to advise on the EC4X content for the VicExport web site (Castleman & Cavill, 2002).

The project entailed an interview survey of 25 SMEs currently using or contemplating using EC4X in order to identify the issues confronting them in export development and the use of e-commerce. In the course of the interviews, a level of detail about business operations emerged which provided an understanding of the wider context of EC4X development. To provide a range of business types, we drew up a sampling framework to select businesses in four categories, depending on their level of export and e-commerce activity.

We adopted the following criteria for this framework:

- **Established export activity** was indicated by regular and planned provision of goods or services in an international market, even if that business accounted for only a small part of the business. The proportion of export share of the business ranged from 100% (two companies) to 5% (two companies) with an average of 49% of business activity devoted to export among the companies. Seventeen companies were established exporters.
- **Established e-commerce activity** was less easy to define because of the variable nature of the use of e-commerce technologies. Most businesses were online, used email and had a static web site, but this did not indicate
active e-commerce use. We considered a business to have established e-commerce if it was able at least to take orders and provide customer service via its website or if it used more sophisticated applications for either business-to-business or business-to-consumer interactions. Fifteen companies had established e-commerce activity.

- A company was classified as “developing” export or e-commerce if they were considering these activities seriously but did not meet the criteria listed above.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participating companies into four groups according to their export and e-commerce activity.

The participating businesses varied in size, although all were small or medium businesses. The average number of employees in the 25 businesses was 28 and the mean annual turnover of the 16 businesses willing to divulge this information was $5.3 million. They were located in both metropolitan and regional areas of the state. Nine of the 25 businesses had a number of branch offices, including six with offices located overseas. Their business activities were diverse, including manufacturing, services, retail, wholesale and logistics.

Besides interviewing members of the companies, we conducted interviews with eight representatives of industry and regional business organisations. This provided confirmation of the SME interviews and another valuable perspective on the issues.
Study Findings

The interviewees gave a detailed account of their move into export, e-commerce and EC4X. Both established and beginner exporters overwhelmingly cited expansion and diversification of their market base as the main reason for moving into export. This was important to businesses for many different reasons, for example: to overcome troughs and peaks in local markets, to expand the risk base, to provide improved cash flows, to reach markets for goods that the domestic market alone could not absorb and to achieve economies of scale in production.

The main reason given for developing e-commerce was the ability to reach new customers and to achieve internal efficiencies. However, only a small percentage of companies were able to conduct business transactions from their web sites. The reasons appear to be a general lack of information technology expertise within the businesses, limited resources, and uncertainty about e-commerce applications. This is especially a problem in rural areas where expert advisors and mentors often are not readily accessible.

The analysis of the factors important in EC4X adoption highlights the importance of personal contacts, attending trade fairs, and taking part in trade delegations. As earlier reports commented, “while the Internet provides excellent means of doing business quickly once a link has been established, the process of establishing a relationship between buyer and seller and developing trust and mutual respect remains a critical foundation for the business relationship, just as it has always been” (DFAT, 1999, p. 58). Often it is only after establishing these international business contacts that E-Commerce becomes critical to a business, allowing it to develop and maintain these relationships and to move into international markets.

Several businesses commented that in order to trade internationally it had become essential for them to use e-commerce. It helps SMEs maintain personal relationships and realise internal cost efficiencies by streamlining operations. It can also open up new markets through international electronic marketing.

Established exporters reported their reliance on networks and personal contacts and when the beginner exporters were asked how they would determine if they were export-ready the majority indicated that they would have to check out the market personally by paying a visit, attending international exhibitions or trade fairs, and making contacts with local agents. They would be guided partly by the level of interest they had from overseas as well as by their own market research. Several also mentioned that they would need to ensure that they had adequate infrastructure to deal with exports — such as an appropriate web site, reliable transport logistics, and knowledge of the documentation requirements.
Table 2. Information required to launch or extend EC4X.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Export information</th>
<th>Number of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International markets</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Import-export regulations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacts with trading partners and agents abroad</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial matters including payments and currency</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local customs and business practices</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E-Commerce information</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT and related technical matters</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website design and designers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better general knowledge about E-Commerce</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs of going online</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online finance and banking</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic marketing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online security</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 25

Requirements for EC4X Information

We asked the interviewees what information they required to help them begin or to develop EC4X. The responses for both export and e-commerce information are tallied in Table 2. This not only indicates the scope of information needed, but the mixture of generic and specific information. For example, seven interviewees (beginning e-commerce users) wanted general information about what e-commerce was and what applications were available and eight wanted information about how to find a web designer at a very specific level. Sixteen mentioned import-export regulations and 12 wanted to find specific contacts.

This list to some extent masks the range of specific and general information required. The level of specific information about regulations, for example,
varied. For example, some reported a need for very detailed information about customs requirements, while others needed information relating to their industry or their specific product.

**Sources of EC4X Information**

Not only were we interested in discovering the type of information SMEs needed in order to embark on EC4X, we also wanted to find out where they turned to find that information. This factor would provide useful feedback on the channels which would assist SMEs most effectively in the future.

All 17 established exporters ranked personal contacts including export agents as their main source of export information. Government organisations (10) and industry associations (eight) were the next ranked. Both established and potential exporters associated the Commonwealth government with export information. Potential exporters ranked state and federal government information sources as most likely to be useful followed by private providers (e.g., shipping agents and export agents).

The pattern of e-commerce information provision was very different. Sources of e-commerce information mentioned by e-commerce users were primarily IT providers and consultants (eight of the 15) followed by online sources (six). Five said there was no suitable information available at the time they were developing e-commerce.

For the companies in the early stages of e-commerce development (who said their needs included general knowledge about what it was and what it could do), private providers were by far the highest ranked information source followed by industry associations. They were unaware of the EC4X information available from State government sources.

Respondents provided further insights about the pros and cons of accessing information from these sources. Personal relationships turned out to be a very highly rated source of information. These included contacts established at times of personal visits overseas or at trade shows, information provided by customers or people who had experience in export, freight forwarders, import agents, regional export development officers. While people seem to be happy to look up much of the export information online, often there is no substitute for personal mentoring and one-to-one information transfer. A number of respondents emphasised the importance of combining research and networking, using both channels to gain a good knowledge of the area and business opportunities. However, some businesses are still not confident that they are using the Internet effectively to find information such as the export code for an unusual product. They want a personal contact to follow up. Some respondents mentioned the usefulness of the individual help they had received from Business Victoria’s export advisers who provided personalised advice and “someone to hold your hand.” Personal contacts overseas were also of great value.

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Several respondents commented that information from Commonwealth government sites was too generic to meet their needs beyond a certain point and that they needed to go further. Business organisations both in Australia and internationally such as national Business Councils and Chambers of Commerce, employer and industry organisations, local business organisations and business service providers provide useful sources of advice for many industries. However, not all industry groups are yet online, and not all can provide dependable, comprehensive export advice.

Courses and workshops were not rated very highly, either because they were too costly and time consuming to attend or because they were too generic and not focused enough. E-commerce beginners sought information from IT professionals and liked to speak to people who had already introduced e-commerce into their business. They preferred individual advice sessions and mentoring from these groups. However, several participants mentioned difficulties in finding reliable and trustworthy sources of local e-commerce advice, indicating that not all such practitioners are good or impartial sources of information. This echoes findings from earlier studies (Castleman & Cavill, 2000 & 2001; Castleman, Cavill & Parker, 1999) that pointed to the problems in the capabilities and business practices of some IT and Internet consultants and the difficulties that companies had in assessing their ability to provide high quality e-commerce services. Good strategic advice about e-commerce is also difficult to source from providers concerned primarily with IT.

The high number of mentions of personal contacts is notable. Certainly personal contacts are likely to be more enduring (in many cases long-term relationships) and more memorable than official information sources. Thus even among relatively established exporters with some e-commerce readiness, individual contacts remain a significant element of their export business. A government information strategy should not try to replace these sources but to provide general information which enables small businesses to make good decisions about choosing private providers.

Channels for EC4X Information Delivery

Having identified the range of EC4X information needs and the relevant sources of that information, a key issue for the study was the preferences the respondents had for the delivery of that information. What channels and what mix of channels would be most effective in getting the information to the users? How can this be done cost effectively?

Each respondent was asked to evaluate the format in which export information was provided. The results summarised in Table 3 shows the number of respondents who indicated the format was very useful.

Online information was endorsed as the most useful, although there were some limitations to relying entirely on online provision. The high ranking given
to individual advice sessions is consistent with the strong approval of face-to-face and personal contact as a good information source. Although the need for printed material is not as important as it was before the spread of the Internet and businesses going online, there is still evidently a need for printed information within an overall information and support strategy. While workshops and seminars were cited as a source of export information, they did not rate as highly as other sources. The explanation seems to be that SMEs have limited finances and time available; workshop attendance requires both. Some have attended workshops and have found that they were too generic and did not address the issues of concern to them. Many prefer to find the information online and to be advised of courses on specific topics.

The representatives of industry associations confirmed that personal contacts and networking were likely to provide the most useful source of information for export. Trade missions, local agents and distributors were seen to be particularly useful. They also noted that individual mentoring assistance, particularly in regard to export documentation would be very valuable. Training courses were viewed as useful, providing they could be provided at a low cost and were specific to the SMEs’ needs. The relevance of these findings is that online information is seen as useful but it needs to be linked to other information sources (printed materials) and needs to facilitate personal contacts and linking with business contacts.

As asked to evaluate the format in which e-commerce information was provided, both groups ranked interactive sessions (individual or workshop sessions) as more useful than general information, with printed information being ranked as the least useful format. However, usefulness should not be confused with cost-effectiveness. The higher ranking given to individualised and interactive sessions does not mean that they should replace general information provided online. Established e-commerce users ranked workshops and training courses as the second most important source of information, while beginner e-commerce users ranked online information sources higher. This is partly a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designations as “Very Useful”</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online information; websites</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual advice sessions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed brochures</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops and training courses</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reflection of the information that was online around 1997 when most of the established users introduced e-commerce compared with the information that is now available online.

**KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ONLINE BUSINESS INFORMATION STRATEGY**

Governments have an important role to play in the provision of business information and they will increasingly use the Internet to do this effectively. We argue that they should focus on the provision of generic information about export and electronic commerce as they cannot realistically provide all the detailed information needed for diverse industries and destination countries. However, without links to the more specific information and pointers about how to use these links, the value of the government efforts will be undermined. The links to more specific information will typically be to industry information sites.

Even access to specific online information will not be sufficient if there is not also some support for locating individualised sources of advice. Some kind of guidance to help smaller companies find those individual sources would be useful, given the evidence that these connections remain critical in the development of EC4X. Governments need to be cautious about appearing to recommend private providers, but they may help by suggesting business directories and headings in those directories under which the right kinds of people can be found as well as suggesting criteria for selecting such providers and the pitfalls to avoid.

Government online information strategies should provide generic information along with guidance about how to access more specific information at various levels. In Table 5 we have set out an example showing the elements of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of designations as “Somewhat or Very Useful”</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual advice sessions</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online information; websites</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops and training courses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed brochures</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Assessments of formats for e-commerce information provision.
an information strategy for one issue (customs regulations) that will affect wine exporters. There are many other issues for which a similar table could be constructed for this group. Wine exporters need access to general information about customs regulations but also more detailed information about export labelling that applies specifically to wine. They are likely to need yet more specific information about how to label their wine for a particular exporter or a particular market.

The general information about customs can be provided on a government web site (in this case, the Commonwealth government would provide that information with links to State government web sites). By following links to the relevant industry associations (in this case the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation), the exporter can find details about the particular regulations for the export of wine (and of no interest at all to exporters of auto parts). Information about e-commerce can be structured along the same lines. General information

Table 5. Aspects of and integrated EC4X information strategy — an example from the wine industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Needs</th>
<th>Export</th>
<th>E-Commerce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generic</strong></td>
<td>Customs regulations</td>
<td>Web-based logistics tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td>Wine export labelling</td>
<td>Online documentation for wine industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Wine labelling for a particular importer</td>
<td>Proprietary online logistics systems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Sources</th>
<th>Export</th>
<th>E-Commerce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generic</strong></td>
<td>Australian Customs Service</td>
<td>Department of Transport and Regional Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td>Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation - Export Grid</td>
<td>Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation – Wine Export Approval System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Suitable export agents</td>
<td>Shipping agents with IT capability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Delivery</th>
<th>Export</th>
<th>E-Commerce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generic</strong></td>
<td>Government websites</td>
<td>Government websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td>Industry websites</td>
<td>Industry websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Individual import/export agents</td>
<td>Individual shipping agents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government and industry export advisors; referrals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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on the government site about logistics and web-based tracking could link to specific information that related to the documentation needs of wine exporters provided on an industry web site. For individual-level advice, these sites refer to potential individual information providers, whether they are government, industry associations or private providers. The development of reciprocal links between these various sources will dramatically increase their usability and effectiveness.

An information strategy that gives primary focus to Internet sources also needs to link to people not online and to more individualised sources of advice and networks. A promotion strategy must also include other channels to heighten the profile of the online site. Multiple channels will need to be maintained for some time yet, perhaps indefinitely. It is imperative to coordinate the online information service with other information sources, while moving the balance gradually toward the Internet as yet more companies go online.

The VicExport strategy is designed to provide an informative, efficient web site which points exporters to e-commerce information and other more specialised information sources. Many easily-navigated links between the export and e-commerce material and between the general and specific levels will help support SMEs developing EC4X.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the challenges that governments face in providing effective information supported by online resources. First, they must gain the attention of the businesses which need to access the information. Thereafter, the information must be provided to address the complexity and diversity of the potential users, neither confusing them with excessive and irrelevant detail nor giving them only bland, superficial information that is of little use. An effective online business information strategy will be structured to point users to increasingly specific and more detailed information, often provided by other organisations such as the industry associations that cover the area in question. These organisations are sources of current, specific and relevant information that governments will find it difficult to locate and maintain. Effective information provision also leads business owners to find personal contacts and individualised information and advice, but only after they have accessed much of their information online and are able to take better advantage of the specific advice.

Efficiency of service provision is important, given the limited funds that governments have for this purpose and the broad group of users they must serve. Part of this efficiency derives from links to good quality sites outside the government, including other governments, which give more specific information. Traditionally, governments have been obliged to provide information for their own constituents but web sites do not limit use that way. As a result there is
considerable overlap, duplication and sometimes confusion. Greater cooperation and integration between government service providers and better coordination with private sector sources, including industry associations, would improve efficiency and reduce users’ confusion. The VicExport site is a good example of a government portal based on such principles. Ultimately, more extensive information coordination and cross-referenced links would benefit all parties. Although not easy to achieve, this is the form of information provision that would make most sense from a user’s as well as the providers’ point of view. Governments are in a good position to take the lead in achieving it.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 Information about the VicExport initiative and export advice to small business was generously provided by Les Terrill, Senior Project Manager - Business Information Services, Victorian Department of Innovation Industry and Regional Development.