The golden state of usability

California embraces usability while embarking on a state portal redesign

Usability is a moving target. Just ask the State of California.

In 2001 California's new internet portal was an award-winning success (first place in the Center for Digital Government's *Best of the Web* contest). However, the site structure did not accommodate growth over the next five years, nor were processes in place to keep information current and harness new technologies. As a result, California's eGovernment efforts fell to a ranking of 47th out of 50 states in a 2005 assessment conducted by Brown University.

State CIO Clark Kelso knew that California needed to overhaul its portal and adopt a process for continuous improvement to prevent future backslides.

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> — Clark Kelso
> Chief Information Officer
> State of California

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> — Andrew Armani
> Director of eServices office
> State of California

The Challenge: A fragmented portal

California has the largest, most complex government of any state: 79 departments and over 300 boards and commissions. Historically, most of these agencies developed and maintained their own Web sites, with little guidance or oversight at the state level.

Under this fragmented approach, the state portal was not aligned with how citizens actually look for information. Rather, the site reflected the organizational structure of the government itself, making it difficult for people to find what they needed. For example, to establish a new business in California citizens were forced to jump between twenty-four different agency sites. There was no clear path for obtaining necessary licensing—people didn't know where to begin.

"We are not in the entertainment business," says Andrew Armani, Director of eServices office. "People interact with government because they have to, kind of like going to the dentist. We must create a simple, understandable environment to let them do their business and get out. Automating routine tasks online allows government to provide better service and save costs simultaneously."

The Approach: Citizen-centered design

Mr. Kelso's team formed a plan to guide the portal redesign and implement measures for ongoing improvement. Their vision is for a more "courteous, trustworthy, and responsive eGovernment." While past initiatives focused on the Web's convenience to government, a stronger emphasis is now placed on meeting the needs of citizens and businesses.

Since usability is a key element of this transition, HFI was brought in to assess the portal through a usability test, expert review, and nearly fifty stakeholder interviews.

Next steps

HFI identified many strategic and design-related issues and provided recommendations to address them. Several of the most urgent problems were:

- Design standards were too inflexible to meet the needs of different agencies
- Site navigation was hard to understand—people were overwhelmed by too much information on main landing pages (see graphic below)
- Visual design was not effective at guiding users towards relevant content
- Spanish-speaking users were not adequately accommodated

Despite this variety of issues, the underlying challenge is simple: government knows too much about itself to design for ordinary citizens. Applying user-centered design methods is the only systematic, reliable way to overcome this dilemma.

"Usability is grounded in empirical work with real users, giving us a more objective basis for decisions about Web design," says Mr. Kelso. "This helps our departments get out of their 'silos' and become more customer-centric. When I look at our Web pages, I just don't see things the same way as an ordinary user does. Usability analysis helps us avoid biased designs based on our own perspectives. We've begun to centralize important resources to improve usability collaboration statewide."

Usability may be a moving target, but California is clearly moving in the right direction.

What citizens are looking for isn't there

California's home page is full of information, but not what most people are looking for. Seven of the 10 most frequently searched terms (in red) are not findable on the portal home page.

1. **Secretary of State**
2. DMV
3. **Forms**
4. **Unclaimed property**
5. **Real estate**
6. Franchise tax board
7. **Jobs**
8. **EDD**
9. Tax forms
10. **Megan's law**

HFI's Recommendations
- Prioritize and clearly present the content that citizens are searching for
- Use Web analytics to drive design refinement

Human Factors International helps customers design Web sites, applications, and intranets that are intuitive and easy to use. To learn how HFI can support your usability initiatives, visit www.humanfactors.com.

Human Factors International

1–800–242–4480 US/Canada
1–641–472–4480

+44 (0)20 7953 4010 Europe
+91 (22) 2570 8465 Asia

hfi@humanfactors.com
www.humanfactors.com