

Site Works

Developing a grants super-site

For Western Australia's Lotterywest, redeveloping the Grants and Community Development section of their website turned into something of a cross-country adventure. Doing it all internally, the organisation embarked on an inter-disciplinary approach that broke new ground – and, along the way, created much more value than just an outstanding piece of cyberspace. You can view the results at www.lotterywest.wa.gov.au/grants and read below about the what, why and how of this highly effective new website.



By SALLY EDWARDS

Lotterywest is one of the nation's busiest grantmakers, with around 1400 grants totalling more than \$163 million given to the Western Australian community last year alone, all from the profits generated through sales of the state's lottery tickets.

After the organisation's major re-branding project in 2003, routine market research carried out in June 2004 showed some disappointing data about the grants section of the website. Visitors' feedback indicated problems with navigation, clarity and overall friendliness. While this may have been concerning for any of Lotterywest's departments, it was a significant worry for the Grants and Community Development team, which prides itself on being people-friendly and whose applicants increasingly rely on the website for much of their information.

An annual survey explored grant applicants' opinions of the Lotterywest website. The survey had been of grants customers (both applicants and recipients) and further delving soon endorsed the results with internal feedback. It seemed that, although the site was 'fine' as it was, the navigation was difficult and it was not up to Lotterywest's standards, nor its hope to make the application process easier, more inclusive and more efficient. Instead, too many people were getting lost and resorting to the telephone.

Changes were clearly required and from the outset this process became a two-team task: the Grants and Community Development directorate went to the Information Systems directorate to ask, "Can we do some fixes?" It wasn't long before both teams began to realise just how big a task it would be to "do it right".

Policy specialist Pauline Logan was to become the Project Leader and she remembers that a shared vision of a leading edge grantmaker's website started to take shape at the very first meeting where Information Systems representatives were invited to hear customer feedback on the existing website and be presented with the Grant Team's vision for a better site.

"Our Director, Jacquie Thomson, spoke to the newly-appointed IS Director Don Wharton and they were both fully on board. That first meeting achieved lots of buy-in from everyone. We all agreed that we didn't want to compromise this time, we wanted to invest the time and resources to push the boundaries and make the site truly fantastic."

A Little Understanding Goes a Long Way

The Project Coordination role with Grants and Community Development went to Maggie Plumb, who says that listening to the website's prospective visitors was the most important thing driving the design. The weakness of the existing site was that the Grants and Community Development team's understanding of their visitors just wasn't reflected in the site and its navigation. This contrast did not sit well with Lotterywest's emphatically people-friendly culture and branding. The newly formed website team was determined to turn this around – to make visitor understanding the hallmark and greatest strength of the new site.

The team's first task was to make sure they had a really clear, comprehensive picture of who the visitors were. Realising that existing relationships between staff members and the community sector was an enormous asset, Lotterywest set about capturing this in profiles, building up a shared understanding of who the site was to be designed for.

It was already clear that the visitors to the grants website were very distinct from visitors to the rest of the Lotterywest site. They are people working in WA's community sector, with women over the age of 30 making up a significant proportion. They are typically under-resourced and often volunteers with a high level of dedication to helping others and improving their community. They are compassionate, committed people who prioritise quality of life.



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“That helped us realise we wanted an attractive, positive style to the site – very much like a magazine, something that people would want to come back to,” remembers Maggie. “We looked at loads and loads of other sites and got plenty of ideas and inspiration, especially from www.abc.net.au and www.marthastewart.com.”

Research into who the visitors actually were yielded more useful clues: the standard of hardware and software around was very patchy, especially among WA’s many small and remote communities; familiarity with the internet also varied but was increasing rapidly.

But Maggie thinks the most important insights they developed were about what visitors wanted and what else could help them.

“We realised that the majority of people using this site are repeat visitors but many don’t know how best to manage the application process or how to make the most of what Lotterywest can offer their organisation,” she says.

“We had learnt from our Business Service Team that they were spending lots of time on the phone guiding people through the existing site. This was a great opportunity. Listening to them about this told us a lot and we realised that what everyone needed was an easy-to-use index right upfront. The

Now Featuring

The new Lotterywest grants website has many features, but here are some particularly worth noting:

- The home page has one major image and a rotating banner of lead-in features such as grant stories, recent news and suggested links. These rotate and appear out of order so that the homepage stays both fresh and familiar.
- Everything existing was re-done and new sections were added. It was all colour-coded to attract attention to related resources that may also be relevant.
- The ‘Application Must-Haves’ section was suggested by the Business Service Team staff and has proved very popular.
- In almost all cases, a visitor can find what they want in just one or two clicks. We all appreciate not having to continually burrow down to find something in a site – but this is especially important for Lotterywest’s remote clients for whom telecommunications access is a constant frustration.

home-page design evolved from there and the other pages followed.”

Pauline Logan agrees: “The design was the real innovation. Now there’s one welcome layer that not only shows visitors how to get what they came for, but also lots of other resources they might not even think to look for but could really help.”

For Maggie this is one of the most important results of making sure the content is driven by the visitors’ needs, not the other way around.

“We all agreed that we didn’t want to compromise this time, we wanted to invest the time and resources to push the boundaries and make the site truly fantastic.”

“The best thing about this site is not just that it has gone beyond the usual, self-promoting ‘online brochure’ approach of many websites but that it has really become a resource for helping Lotterywest’s applicants and recipients,” she says.

Jacquie Thomson, as Director of Grants and Community Development, had the role of project sponsor and couldn’t be happier with the outcome her team achieved: “At Lotterywest we have four words which officially make up our brand but which day-to-day drive everything we do. They are *rewarding, inspiring, trusted and engaging*. For me, the best thing about the new website is that it doesn’t just *display* the brand, it *enacts* it.”

Go Home

Like all good ‘home’ pages, this one both sets the tone and the content of the site itself. Distinctly (and deliberately) magazine-like, this page is designed to balance two needs: firstly, to give visitors easy access to what they are looking for, and secondly, the need to encourage them to access additional information they might find.

Its name, Grants Central, was chosen to mark it as distinct from the main Lotterywest home page, and to set the tone as being a communications ‘hub’.

There is a main menu, of course, but in this case you probably don’t even notice that it’s there (running horizontal in the top banner). This is because the entire home page itself is a menu – albeit a well-designed one – as attractive to look at as it is easy to use.



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As home pages generally go, this is on the 'busy' side, but Lotterywest has found that a busy home page actually works very well. Pauline Logan points out that there's no 'stuff' to get past, no introductory anything, just a couple of gorgeous pictures and colour-coded buttons which take you straight to where you need to go.

"From here, many of our applicants can get what they need in just one or two clicks," she says. "But they also get an idea of what else there is on our site because it's right there on offer as soon as you arrive. The need to make this index function available up front is one of the things that came through most clearly when we started this project and it really drove the design process."

The team learnt that the most important thing is to ask questions about function first, long before you ask questions about features. We started off with a big wish list like everyone



Good News for not-so-early adopters

Three years ago Lotterywest's Susie Dumitro never had anything to do with the internet, admitting "I didn't even surf for anything." When something on the website needed to be updated, Susie simply created or amended a document and sent it to 'internet people' to take care of. But now, as a result of the project to develop the new Grant and Community Development website, Susie is the new website's go-to-guru and now spends an extra day each week as content management coordinator, keeping the site dynamic and current. "These days I generally do everything except the sign-off," she jokes.

This is reassuring for those of us who aren't exactly what the technology industry calls 'early adopters' – Susie may be in charge of updating the grants website but she still has a dial phone and prefers a passbook to an ATM card.

Susie is now training other Lotterywest team members. "They're at the 'overwhelmed' stage just now but I was there, too, and if I can do it, anyone can. It's been really good and I've loved the challenge."

probably does with a website. But we learnt to keep asking more about "How do we want this to work?" and less about what bells and whistles we wanted to have. It made a huge difference to the end result and helped us synthesise content that would otherwise have remained fragmented.

Like the rest of the site, the Grants Central page [works](#).

Techno-Talk

Mark Scholmann and Aaron Williams were the front-line of the Information Services directorate for this project. For them it represented a real turning point in how the two directorates understood each other.

"A huge part of our role was helping the grants team realise what they really wanted – what was most important and realising what was involved in not just creating it, but maintaining it," says Mark.

"Clients without a web development background almost always skip thinking about how they will keep the site current and 'alive'. This misses out on much of the potential value of websites as a publishing media. Instead of a set-and-forget mentality, the grants team really got their heads around the concept of a website being a dynamic communications hub for them and their customers. This created more development work for those of us in 'IS'; it meant we had to not only modify our tool set and create a tailored content management system – we had to transfer capacity to actively manage the site to the grants directorate."

This is part of the reason that the new site ended up a much bigger project than expected (they had originally anticipated being live by December 2004 but it took until March 2005).

Importantly, though, more upfront work meant less of a burden from ongoing maintenance later. This was not only because the Grants and Community Development Team now have a much better website with fewer things needing work – but also because they are now much better able to manage any difficulties themselves.

Some of the technical features you might not notice on the site include:

- The new grants site is designed to exceed the minimum standard now expected of government agency websites through the Web Accessibility Initiative for disabled internet access, in particular through audio options for anyone with visual difficulties.
- Most pages have been designed to print easily on various hardware systems.



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- Image sizes have been kept to a minimum and text alternatives have been provided as much as possible to avoid slow download times, especially in remote access areas.
- Standardised blocks of colour were used as a design feature to balance 'look' with speed of download.
- The site structure is designed to balance the open access that is traditional for the internet with 'decoy links' to address Lotterywest's hope that this site will actively guide visitors to other information and resources that can help them. For example, 'grant stories' are case studies about a variety of recipient organisations. Access to these is provided in the main menus but traffic is encouraged to these pages by featuring an excerpt from a given story on the side banner of other pages, with a corresponding link.

The Hardest Things

Everyone involved in developing this new site is proud of both the process and the product, but it is important to be honest that achieving it was not a cake-walk.

“That helped us realise we wanted an attractive, positive style to the site – very much like a magazine, something that people would want to come back to.”

For Maggie Plumb, the hardest thing was what she calls the 'mental gymnastics' involved in conceiving and considering all the options for a website structure. "It's tough to get your head around the fact that there is no such thing as 'page 70'," she says. "Websites are not like books, you are working with a 'virtual' project. You have to move in between thinking macro and thinking micro all the time."

For Mark, the hardest thing was the sheer hard slog, as putting together a really great site is no mean feat. He delayed starting a new career outside Lotterywest to see this project through to the end because the dynamic between the two directorates was so good. "Even though we worked together so well, we still had to negotiate all the way through. Every step of the way you have to communicate and constantly balance different needs and priorities."

Pauline Logan echoes the importance of communication and thinks that the hardest thing is maintaining the momentum when everyone is busy and a project is dragging on longer

than you had reckoned for – "And no, it's not just the momentum inside the project team that counts but also the momentum of support outside the team when others don't understand why it's taking so long. They realised when they saw the final product but along the way we had to deal with some people being disgruntled. This is especially the case if, like us, you are using internal resources. But it was worth it to involve people and make sure it was our own voices being heard."

GrantEd

In developing the website, the team found themselves creating new communications opportunities which would not have been practical before.

The *GrantEd* newsletter is the best example of this – an electronic bi-monthly publication available by direct subscription from the Grants Central page. It reflects the style of the site itself and generates traffic flow by arriving in subscribers' mailboxes as a sort of temporary 'front page' for the rest of the website. Subscribers click on stories they are interested in and find themselves in the website where typically they view other related content as well.

This is clearly an effective and efficient use of the technology but what makes *GrantEd* different from other electronic newsletters is the content – what's in there, and why and how it is used.

Pamela Peelen is responsible for the Grants and Community Development team's communications and says *GrantEd* evolved from their desire to be as engaged with their customer base as possible. "We wanted to create 'ways in', to make it feel very personal and real," she says. "We realise the value of building connectivity within the community sector so *GrantEd* is driven more by helping them share ideas and stories, not just by us wanting to get a scripted message out there."

The other key innovation in *GrantEd* is how the concept is built into the website structure and function. "We are very committed to making our website dynamic and vibrant but realised how hard this would be to maintain over the long term as other priorities present themselves. Having a bi-monthly commitment to *GrantEd* gives it an urgency which keeps it high on the priority list and the fact that all the *GrantEd* content is actually incorporated into the site, not just stored as an archive of PDFs, means the site is given a genuine boost of new content every few weeks, as well as more traffic."

Website Wisdom

As with many websites, the development of Lotterywest's new site was a collective achievement. All the team players have



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different perspectives on the project, remembering different details, valuing different parts. But they echo each other strongly on why they think it worked and what they learnt from the process. We've tried to bottle this for you:

- Allow the resources (and the energy) to do it well. (Of course, in the long run this will actually save both resources and energy.)
- Know your customers, or your clients, or your community or your constituents. Whichever word you use for the people you are serving ... know who they are, what they're like, how they work – everything.
- Don't expect to set-and-forget. Websites are only as good as their last update. Prepare, plan and even design for ongoing changes to keep your site current.
- Realise the value of the internal wisdom already at your fingertips (and perhaps already whispering in your ear).

- Respect and learn from the expertise of others (i.e. web people and non-web people).
- Really know your project purpose so you can know your real objectives and have faith in these.
- Expect delays and detours. Help others to expect and understand them too.
- Open up to the possibility that everything you expect, even the language you think you'll use, may be changed by the process.
- Be prepared for the path to go somewhere unexpected and be ready to respond along the way. Invest energy in getting your site development process right then trust where the journey takes you.

Sally Edwards is a Perth-based communications consultant and writer. To view Lotterywest's website, go to www.lotterywest.gov.au/grants ♦

Proof is in the Pudding

The new website is only a few months old but the results achieved already are a source of much satisfaction for those involved in its creation. Web analyst, Glenn Williams, reports that the data on visitation for this website compared to the previous one show clearly both a significant increase in the number of people using the site and the degree to which they explore the pages available. The clearest example of these results is that home page traffic per day has increased by nearly 300% (only 4% of visitors exit the site after viewing the home page).

Customer surveys conducted just a few months after the site went live indicated that more than 90% are happy with the new site. The respondents identified the currency of information, reliability of the site, overall usefulness, relevance of information, appearance and design, ease of navigation and effectiveness of the links as all having improved markedly on the previous site.

Interestingly, although only 13% of visitors considered "general information" the most important reason for visiting, an impressive 82% of them said they used it once they were already there. This is happy news for Maggie, Pauline, Mark and the rest of the team involved as it shows clearly that, as well as more traffic and better feedback, the new site has made progress along one of the bumpiest of roads for grantmakers – how to add value to the grantmaking process – how to contribute more than dollars.