

Getting the government to Flash

Matthew Magain uncovers a scientific rarity – a government web project implemented in Flash.

There are certain types of web projects that arouse interest and excitement in a web designer: a fan site for a high-profile sporting team, a promotional site for a new soft drink, an edgy clothing catalogue – these are all briefs that allow the designer's creativity to run free. Government websites, however, generally don't fall into that category. Most sites in the public sector exist to communicate information to the masses and, for this reason, most comply with strict guidelines on web accessibility, usability and style consistency, known as the Whole of Victorian Government (WOVG) website guidelines.

These guidelines are great for ensuring that information is available to all Australian people, including blind, vision-impaired and disabled citizens. Yet they also mean that, more often than not, a government brief is not terribly creative. In order to comply with government-mandated guidelines, most government sites are implemented using html; rich media is practically non-existent. The closest a user may come to an 'interactive experience' is the 20 pages of online forms that are necessary to apply for an ABN.

MY BUSINESS, MY PEOPLE

The 'My Business, My People' team at Business Victoria was tasked with making available to small business owners a collection of information about the costs associated with staff planning, including statistics such as the impact of staff turnover, productivity, overtime and sick leave. Originally, this information existed in the form of large amounts of text, written in a very academic style. While comprehensive, this wasn't a format that was appropriate for the web – or the site's audience of small business owners and operators. Project manager, Lisa Garnsworthy, explains. "Our target audience is time-poor and they don't have time to read through a huge amount of material, and they are low-end computer users," she advises. "We looked at options for a standard html form, or even just making these statistics available as an Excel spreadsheet, but we decided we wanted to make something more interactive for users. In the end we went with Flash. Then these people who are time-poor could see the worst case and best case scenarios."

Inspired by the online superannuation calculators commonly used by investment

companies, Business Victoria engaged Tundra Interactive to create four 'estimators' – simple sliding scales that allow users to see estimates, in dollars, of the costs based on reasonably complex formulae associated with employing staff. The project was a first for successfully placing Flash media on a Victorian government site.

MAKING FLASH ACCESSIBLE

In order to meet the WOVG accessibility requirements, the project team utilised a number of techniques (see *Desktop* issue 235 for a more detailed discussion of web accessibility).

Key to achieving compliance with the guidelines was the implementation of a non-Flash equivalent of the estimators – a standard html form that accepts individual values and outputs the estimated cost. The process of obtaining the estimate using this html form is not particularly quick or easy to use compared to the immediacy of the Flash-powered version, nor is it as pretty or rewarding. The important thing, however, is that the information that the estimates provide is still available to users who do

not (or cannot) install the Flash player. The Flash-based estimators provide several accessibility features to users, including an intelligent tab order, the ability for the sliding scale to be manoeuvred using the keyboard and the ability to resize text (so that users with low vision can view the estimators in a larger font size). The site also performs some 'browser sniffing', making an educated guess as to whether the user's machine has the Flash player installed. The user is also able to override this default in order to view the html version of the site if necessary.

BRINGING IN THE EXPERTS

The project team commissioned Vision Australia to perform additional accessibility testing at the end of the project, which included testing by blind and vision-impaired users of their estimators with the popular screen reader software, JAWS. "We sat next to the guy from Vision Australia, and he ran it through JAWS and explained the inner workings of a screen reader – what it reads and some of the problems with Flash sites," explains Garnsworthy. "It was the first time I'd seen a screen reader in action, and it was a real eye-opener."

Garnsworthy also offers this tip for web designers keen to test their own sites in JAWS without forking out the US\$895 licence fee: "You can actually download a trial version of JAWS for free, and use it for 45 minutes. It's a little inconvenient, but you can reinstall it after that time period is up if you need to – for testing our estimators, 45 minutes was fine."

MORE PUBLIC FLASH-ING

Now that this precedent has been set, Garnsworthy suggests that other sites within the Victorian Government umbrella could also be deploying projects using Flash media – among them, additional projects that use similar sliding scale controls. "The floodgates have opened," she laughs.

So if you're a Flash designer looking for your next project, you may want to consider keeping an eye on the public sector. As the My Business, My People project shows, it is entirely possible to implement a site using Flash in a way that ensures the site is accessible to vision-impaired and disabled users – it just takes a little extra effort.

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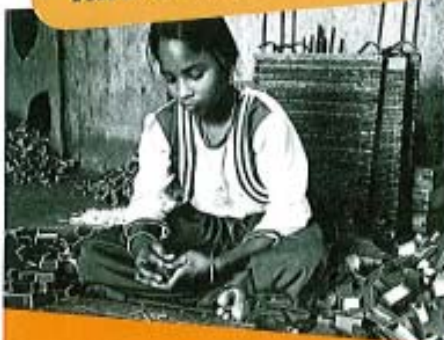
USEFUL LINKS

Staff Planning Estimators
www.business.vic.gov.au/BUSVIC/STANDARD/1541121668/PC_62143.html
Tundra Interactive www.tundra.com.au/
Best Practices For Accessible Flash Design
www.adobe.com/resources/accessibility/best_practices/top_fp.html DT

Matthew Magain is the managing editor of sitepoint.com, a Melbourne-based publisher of books, kits, articles and training videos for web professionals. He posts occasionally to his personal site, [m-dash](http://m-dash.com/blog/) (<http://m-dash.com/blog/>).

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