

Effective Content Initiative Workshop - 16.11.2006

A comment by Angela Law, Workshop Chair and Director of Every Sense

The Effective Content Workshops, joint events organized by the International Visual Communication Association (IVCA) and the Communications and Content Industries Unit of the DTI are intended to help the public sector make the most of the latest developments in rich digital media to deliver engaging services to citizens and businesses as well as help achieve best value for money. They are intended to bring public sector and private sector representatives together to draw on their experiences and share best practice in delivering content, and to produce recommendations to carry forward.

The transcript of the event, available on this site ([link](#)) provides a useful description of the workshop. What follows is a more informal and personal reflection of key ideas.

Introduction

This was a useful and unusual forum - it is rare to see a dozen potential suppliers and potential clients in one room have a frank, exploratory conversation that focussed as much on what they did not know as what they did. It was a genuine exchange of thoughts, concerns and impressions, rather than an occasion to sell, buy or demonstrate recent projects or achievements. In my own work in Every Sense, advising creative SME's how to improve business performance, we ask creative companies how often they talk with clients when they are not in pitch or delivery mode, and the answer is invariably very rarely. This first workshop was a prime example of how much can be gained and learned when everyone is in listening mode.

Skills, knowledge & judgement

An overwhelming impression is of exactly how much skill, knowledge and judgement is required by public sector commissioners of broadband content and services. I believe their role requires more skills knowledge & judgement than that of the creative service providers whose effectiveness or otherwise will very swiftly be determined by market forces!

The documents published by the DTI "Effective Content: Government Content and Services for a Connected World" and "Delivering a Successful Project using Broadband Content : A Practical Guide", are an extremely useful starting point and should be compulsory reading for public sector communications professionals and creative services companies alike. However, this is not a case of 'one size fits all.' Every government department and agency has its own priorities, strategic imperatives, structures, hierarchies, procurement processes, and, crucially culture. I suggest it would be counter-productive to attempt to impose or develop some sort of identical, rigid, rich digital media procurement process on them all. What is needed is for public sector

communications professionals to have access to as much good practice as possible, to inform their delivery strategies and project specifications, and develop their skills, knowledge and judgement. It may be particularly valuable to share knowledge and expertise on public sector projects because of similar issues and constraints. The value of the Heads of e-Communications meetings, run bi-monthly by GCN was mentioned.

Recommendations

- Regular sharing of public and private sector studies which focus as much on the specification, the procurement decision, and the development and delivery process as they do on effective outcomes.

Purchasing & procurement

The danger of any event of this kind is that those who are not present around the table run the risk of become the scapegoats....procurement and IT departments step forward. Yet they both contribute essential elements to the development and delivery of broadband content & services. Purchasing departments and procurement policies came in for as much, if not more criticism by the public sector representatives around the table than the creative service provider representatives. However, purchasing departments cannot be left out of the loop. If public sector commissioners talk to creative services companies to get their strategic input before drawing up a specification this may well lead to a more effective specification and eventual solution and delivery. One workshop participant characterised this as HMG specifying apples when what was needed was pears. However, with relationships of this kind it is hard to provide the so-called 'level playing field' that is essential to support SME's and avoid the larger companies with the louder voices, better brands and greater resources reaping all the rewards, and to ensure that the government department - and you and I the tax payer - receive best value. There have long been cries that procurement policies and systems are set up to enable the purchase of widgets rather than creative services. A purchasing ethos for rich digital media that better recognises the needs of the client - the government department - and appreciates how to get best value from creative service companies would be a huge step forward.

Recommendations

- Invite purchasing and procurement representatives from Government departments to a similarly structured workshop, designed to explore transparently the issues that procurement of rich digital media presents.

User needs

There were well informed and thought provoking contributions on the current availability of broadband services. If you are elderly, socially excluded, have a disability, or are less well of off you are less likely to have access to broadband. And which groups are most likely to be most in need of, and

currently have least access to, government support and services? You guessed it. In the short term, government departments cannot simply replace existing services with broadband delivery. They need to run parallel services that deliver effectively via broadband and traditional delivery methods - print, phone, face-to-face, etc. In the short term, providing broadband content and services is not a cost cutting option. Nor is it cheap to develop and deliver effective broadband content and services in the first place. They demand appropriate resources for research, development and testing. Even more important, for sustainability, these services require a long-term commitment of resources required to keep developing and adapting them to fit more closely user needs in the same way that commercial sites such as E-bay and Amazon are constantly adapting to meet - and indeed fuel - user needs.

Delivering effective broadband content and services demands long term strategy, long term investment, creative risks and a desire to genuinely meet the needs of users. In the real world of government - and therefore of politics - these concepts are not always top of the agenda.

There are currently 14,000 public sector generated web sites, and counting. At the workshop there were requests for some sort of 'Google-gov' to help people find their way through this to access the right information and services. On the other hand, for many services, the closer to local needs they are then the more likely they are to meet local requirements. This constant pull between centralised services and core content and local suitability and delivery is, ironically, one that in the future can be satisfied by the superb niche-targeting and personalisation capabilities of broadband - but we are a long way off that yet.

Recommendations

- Invite key private sector players in broadband content & services to share expertise with central and local government for mutual benefit.
- Create a forum or event that specifically focuses on measuring ROI on investment in rich media.
- Create/support links between central and local government areas of expertise in broadband content & delivery.

And finally

All these recommendations involve sharing expertise, hearing many and varied views, participation and understanding different perspectives. This does not just have to be face to face...

- Create a community of interest on the Digital Content section of the DTI website to share comments and expertise!