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Name of Local Government: City of Victoria

Project/Program Title: Website Redesign

Project Summary Paragraph
Please provide a summary of your project/program in 150 words or less.

Improving access to the information and city services is a high priority and the website is our main customer service portal. The new site is the launching pad for continuing public dialogue and understanding on key issues facing Victoria in coming years.

A streamlined overhaul of the website was completed with a new design and content prepared with the customer in mind.

Recognizing our role as a Capital City, tourist destination, and a diverse community, a Google translation feature can translate the site to one of over 40 languages with a click of a button. Accessibility options include text re-sizing and high contrast accessibility options, especially useful for low vision users.

The www.victoria.ca website is a customer service centre for nearly 70,000 unique visitors each month and had not been updated since it's launch over a decade ago.

Project Analysis

Please answer the question in 300 words or less in 11 pt Arial font (our judges value directness and brevity). If you experience difficulty answering a particular question, consider the aspects of your program that may relate to the question and show us how they are linked.

1. SERVICES
   How has the implementation of this program/project improved services in your community?

The previous website had limited online services, and what services were offered were outdated and complicated. The site has vastly improved online services to include: claiming Home Owner Grants; paying parking tickets; paying utility bills; RFP & tenders; job applications; paying for business licences.

These new and improved services tailor to the ranging needs of the varying web users. Whether it be accessing information faster, saving the customer a trip, or minimizing confusion through quality information that's easy to find, we recognize that life is busier than it ever has been and organizations, including government, must be accessible 24/7 and in a meaningful way.

Allowing website visitors a simplified but powerful online experience can save money, and time for the customer. By providing improved information, written in plain language, the benefit is vast as it minimizes confusion and enables customers to proceed with applications and payments with more certainty, and understanding.

Some of the specific examples of results include:

- Accessibility features that enable those with limited vision to increase text size or contrast, and remember the setting for future
- A vendor registration system that enables businesses and contractors to submit and receive information from a computer or mobile device on a construction site
- Full mobile integration, so all services available on the website are available on a mobile device, anywhere the customer is saving a trip and time. Over 10,000 customers per month are accessing the site through a mobile device.
- Full translation of the site is available in over 40 languages, making the site fully accessible to anyone speaking everything from Japanese to German. (try it, you'll see…)

2. EFFECTIVENESS
   How is the program/project more efficient and/or effective than it was before?

On top of the increase to the number of online services offered, the site went through a major series of overhauls in order to have it become a more effective communication tool.

The previous website had over 4000 HTML pages and 12,000 documents. The site had become difficult to navigate, with duplicated or outdated information prevalent throughout. It had become insular-looking and somewhat of a document library.

We recognized from analytics and feedback that most customers come for one purpose, yet there was a value-added opportunity that wasn't being explored. The site was adjusted to

ensure customers can access what they came for, and hopefully leave with a little bit more than they hoped.

It was important that the site worked for customers first, and staff second, and that customers can get what they need without having to work for it. We moved away from a departmental focused structure, to a service focused structure.

Less is more effective, was our motto. A "lean" site architecture was integral, as it removed unnecessary or duplicate pages and documents, as well as placed information in a much more logical place on the site. This makes browsing the site much more intuitive for the user. An improved search engine, combined with the drastically reduced number of pages and documents, means web visitors will find the information they are seeking much more quickly and efficiently.

In the end, the website was brought down to 700 pages and 2,100 documents. That was over an 80% reduction in the number of files but with an actual *increase* in the amount of relevant content. This means a much more efficient, effective web experience that receives consistent and overwhelmingly positive feedback from users.

3. ECONOMIC IMPACT
   How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?

The redevelopment will result in a cost savings of tens of thousands reducing content management fees that were paid to a contractor due to the introduction of a content management system within the new site that enables staff to update the site themselves, also saving time.

It also has reduced time spent serving customers in-person and by phone who previously could not find information. It holds great potential for increasing online transactions as the new features of the site are marketed and enhancements implemented.

The improved online services and creating a powerful website whereby users can do more by themselves – e.g. paying bills, inquire about properties, etc. – means that less resources are required by the City to assist in this regard and can be shifted.

Economic development has also been encouraged by the new website. The combination of easy-to-use services for business licences and new, interactive forms take away the barriers that historically slowed down development for businesses. Combined with a stronger website focus on economic development, and an improved vendor system that enables businesses to do business with the city online, demands on Supply Management have been reduced, as has the time requirement for contractors and businesses, where time is money. A construction firm can now receive RFPs and addendums on a phone at a construction site instantly, whereas before it was necessary to be at a PC and submit in person. This could save days for a contractor and provides more time to prepare for bidding work.

The visual band of the site was also done with economic development in mind. It was critical that the site capture the spirit and character of our city and present its quality of life assets

instantly and positively. Whether it be the architecture, the climate or the diversity, it was critical the community be captured visually to drive tourism and economic investment.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY
   How has this program/project improved upon accountability to the community's citizens?

Two years ago City Council identified the need to increase broad citizen participation in City decision-making and included "enhancing communications and development of a civic engagement strategy" as one of seven strategic priorities for the municipality. Building upon one the first municipal engagement strategies in British Columbia, we have applied this renewed citizen engagement focus to our redevelopment of the website to increase understanding and engagement opportunities.

Engagement audits have noted that customers often don't know where to start when navigating the municipality, and so our website aims to address that.

Contact information in the new website is much easier to find and better organized than in the previous site. This means that citizens and businesses are able to easily contact the services areas quickly. This rapid, direct access means greater accountability and more satisfied citizens.

The new website also has enhanced custom forms which ensure direct delivery to the correct employee or department. As well, citizens now get custom receipts for contact made to the City, ensuring that they have a record of all their individual requests or questions. This improved "paper trail" further ensures accountability to the citizens as they are able to accurately track and follow up with their requests.

The new website facilitates the addition of other planned customer service and engagement initiatives under development. The next stage of enhancements includes web casting of council meetings; an online consultation portal; and other initiatives aimed at increasing transparency.

The full integration and success with social media tools has been essential to also fostering increased, public conversations and reporting on them as well. With 70,000 unique visitors each month and 8,000 facebook followers, and 4,000 on twitter, the feedback and public queries are open to anyone participating, or wanting to.

5. AWARENESS
   How has this program/project created more awareness in the community about local government actions?

With 70,000 unique visitors each month, the website is an essential and foundational service and information portal. It is the go-to resource for information from the City and in combination with other communications and customer service efforts; it is where customers will go first for City information on what is happening in their community.

When beginning this project a number of other municipal websites from throughout Canada were reviewed and the same problem was highlighted: information overload. Often users can't find what they are looking for, or find it quickly. Locating information was an arduous process

and the language was often bureaucratic and jargon, to the point that even if the structure was solid, the visitor was lost by the language used.

By re-organizing the website into a more logical architecture and honing it down solely to necessary information, we have made all content on the site easier to locate.

We have brought the most pressing community issues and topics to the forefront. The new website has enhanced *What's New* and *Media Release* functionality, which gives these items greater visual impact and better visibility for website visitors. If the City implements a new program or initiative, visitors to the website have quick and easy access to learn more. And this is cross-pollinated with our use of social media tools.

We are very strategic in our use of the website to ensure that it is current and positioned to support the City's strategic objectives and priorities.   With pressing issues and high participation targets for the City's most important issues, we utilize the website to be the consistent and reliable source of information to support the understanding and engagement on those strategic goals. Whether it is consultation on the budget, a change to a bylaw, or the next council meeting, the website is perhaps the most important tool for raising awareness of the City's activities and decisions.

6. TEAMWORK
    Tell us about the teamwork involved in making this program/project possible.

Re-creating a website of this size and complexity was no small feat; close-knit teamwork was absolutely essential to its going live. A cross-departmental web redevelopment committee was established.

In order to make this website more useful, we knew that we needed to effectively create brand new information for all pages of the website. Simply re-purposing information from the old site would lead us down the same road and we would end up with an overly-complex website.

What this decision meant was that each department needed to review and update all relevant information for their area of the City. A great deal of organization and writing work by staff across various departments ensured that only the most up-to-date information made it onto the live site.

For example, the Planning and Development, and Engineering departments needed to be in close contact with each other throughout the content writing stage in order to make sure they were not providing conflicting or repetitive information.

While the Communications department spearheaded the project, all other departments of the City were involved. They worked with Communications to meet the website content deadlines, as well as working with each other to make the site the best and most current that it could be. It then all had to be reworked for plain language and a consistent City voice.

Communications staff also worked hand-in-hand with the web development company, Atomic Crayon, to ensure that we provided them with everything they needed to keep the project on schedule.   As experts in web design, we worked closely with them to be certain we were following best practice and learning from the success and pitfalls made by others.
The strong teamwork involved by every party was essential to the website being the success it has become.

7. INNOVATION
    What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

After completing a comprehensive review of other municipal websites, we truly believe that this site is a leading municipal site. We set out to push the limits on what a customer-focused municipal site could achieve, and we met or exceeded what we felt could be done.

Understandably, municipal websites need to display large amounts of formal information to satisfy the community's many legislative and regulatory requirements. However, our previous website focused too greatly on statutory information at the expense of plain language, creativity and intuitive design. Victoria is a truly beautiful city, one that its citizens are proud of, that millions of tourists visit annually, and one that encourages development for new businesses. We needed to offer the wealth of information that is important to our community without compromising on capturing the spirit and character of Victoria.

We wanted to not only inform, but engage in a two way communication. An innovative *'Have Your Say'* section located on the homepage provides a listing of all of City's public input opportunities in one location. This compliments an *'I Want to'* section that enables users to instantly jump directly to important customer service areas.

Knowing that this website would be used for a number of years, we built it with the future in mind. Online services and functionality were built both robustly and with full scalability. This means that inevitable changes in the way people use the web can be easily adjusted on our website.

This level of innovation and flexibility means that the website can adapt and shift to suit users' needs. Therefore, users will be more satisfied with their web experience. Also, the website will stay current longer, meaning future reductions in web budgets. This is another boon for taxpayers.

8. SUSTAINABILITY
    What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative? *(e.g. staff time, resources, financial)*

The best part of the new website from a sustainability perspective is the site's Content Management System which has resulted in time and money savings. The CMS allows access to all approved users, and these users can be from any department at the City. Approved users can make website updates themselves, which reduces work bottlenecks while simultaneously ensuring the content is current.

Departmental web editors are now empowered to make content changes themselves without going through a multi-step process involving other departments and the web development company. If the department has staff turnover, only one small part of the system needs to be re-trained. This is in sharp contrast to the previous system,

Updates can also now be completed from any internet-ready device. This means that staff members have widespread access, which reduces the need for additional resources or finances, such as additional fees to the web development company for completing urgent work outside of regular hours.

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There is significant future potential for more online services, reducing the need for in-person transactions. This holds great potential for shifting resources based on reduced demands as a result of the web technology.

9. BEST PRACTICES
What sets this program/project apart as a winning idea? Why should it be considered a best practice, in comparison to other similar programs?

What sets this site apart is that most municipal sites are government-focused. Municipalities have tended to use websites as an information repository and not a two way communications tool that is designed to serve the customer first, and government second.

We approached our new website in a more customer-centric manner. We wanted to inform and engage the community through the site. Rather than figuring out what made the most sense to us in disseminating the information, we looked hard into how website visitors would want to find the information.

Making it easier to access and offer input was the main focus. An innovative *'Have Your Say'* section located on the homepage provides a listing of all of City's public input opportunities in one location. This compliments an *'I Want to'* section that enables users to instantly jump directly to important customer service areas.

We flipped the site upside down and changed the structure to be service focused on the outside, and department focused on the inside. We moved away from organizing information by who was responsible.

While this organizational shift of the content made for growing pains, the payoff has been enormous. The comments we have received from website users have been virtually unanimous in their positivity. And now that we understand the new content structure ourselves, it is easy to know where to add new content. All this while making website users much happier – which was the point of engaging in the project in the first place.

In terms of branding, we struck the balance between government organization and spectacular Capital City. We set out to capture the spirit and character of the community and achieved it with a bold, fresh design, unlike any other municipality out there.

10. TRANSFERABILITY
How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?

We wanted a site that doesn't just inform, but engages and fosters two way communications. We also wanted a site that captures the character and spirit of the community we serve.

Being thoughtful and strategic in our approach, we were able to design a site that met the needs of the customer. But first we needed to know the customer. Working hard to realize what these stakeholders want to know and, equally importantly, how they want to find it out, made for a very successful project and should be applied elsewhere. It has been enlightening to take a fresh look at our customers and dispel misconceptions even our own staff had.

Another successful part of the project was the benefits to finances and resources gained from using a Content Management System, as noted above. While implementation of the CMS created a higher initial project cost, the system has already paid itself off with the savings it provides. Many local governments may shy away from an initial budget that is higher due to a CMS, but it was the right financial decision for us, and enables the site to be more timely, which benefits all.

Challenging the status quo in terms of look and feel, and new structure, is worth the effort and should be considered by any government considering a redevelopment.

11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING
What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?

The knowledge we would share with other communities is: find out what your customers need and want from your organization and your website, and design it to meet their needs.

It's easy to design a website that works for the staff and government itself, but customers shouldn't have to know who is responsible for the service or initiative to find it, they just want to get in and get out.

When redeveloping a site, avoid simply re-purposing information. Start again, fresh. Changing how you view things, like website structure, isn't always easy.

Stay principled in your approach; it's easy to revert back to what was familiar.

Recognize that municipalities as organizations are complex and have varying needs and roles. In some cases the government is marketing, in other areas we're enforcing, the site must balance the needs of all, without sacrificing the needs of the customer.

Learn from the experts. Do a best practice review of what works and especially what doesn't. When asking staff, remember, there will never be consensus.

Think long-term. The web moves so fast that websites can be out of date in two years. Invest in the project to be powerful, transferrable and flexible and it will last you longer. That means significant future benefits to both finances and resources.

Government sites don't have to be boring. They are also marketing tools for your community. Capture the spirit and character of the community you serve.

12. TELL US MORE
Please share any other information you think may help us better understand your submission.

There are many advanced metrics that can be used to indicate whether a new website is to be considered a success or not: increase in the number of hits and website visitors; a greater

amount of time spent on the website; a larger number of Facebook likes and Twitter followers; and various other numerical data.

Our website has noted these increases – a 14% increase in the number of new visits over the previous year, along with a significant 3% increase in unique visitors. Our Facebook likes and Twitter followers, have gone up literally exponentially to 8,000+ likes and 4,300+ followers.

However, while we're very proud of those stats, and of improvements across the board in that regard, that is not how we wanted to measure the site's value. For that, we are most concerned about what site visitors themselves think of the site.

What we are most pleased about is that feedback for the site has been universally positive. We have received dozens upon dozens of emails with glowing reviews of the website since its release. Reviews noted the improved design, the faster website speed and the ease of use. Visitors appreciated the improved imagery and greater use of social media as well as the improvement in functionality, particularly the enhanced ability to pay bills online

Our new site was aimed at making information easier to access, and City initiatives; the fact that it has done so – and done so overwhelmingly - has made the project a huge success for us.