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Recommended Citation

Burgess, Stephen and Bingley, Scott, "One size does not fit all: Website Content of Australian Community Based Organisations" (2007). *PACIS 2007 Proceedings*. 102.

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58. One size does not fit all: Website Content of Australian Community Based Organisations

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Abstract

Community based organisations (CBOs) are non-profit, non-government organization which serve a local community's needs. CBOs resemble non-profit small businesses in many ways. However, their special service characteristics and looser support structures make them a group to categorise separately for the purposes of this study. The issues facing CBOs and their development of web sites can differ from those of typical small businesses. There is little research available on the use of websites by CBOs and even less in relation to the content of their websites. This project reports on the analysis of the content of websites of three categories of CBOs. It is known that a similar set of barriers to the successful use of information technologies (and the Internet) as those facing small businesses can be identified for CBOs. Reporting on a study of the websites of 45 CBOs, this paper reflects on the differences between the website content of CBOs and small businesses and classifies the content of their websites according to four areas: identification and image; promotion and contract; relationship enhancement and transactional interactivity. Whilst a number of differences were discovered between the types of website features adopted by different categories of CBOs, the differences are not as stark when CBOs of the same category are compared.

Keywords:

Community based organisations; websites; content; classification; study

Introduction

Small businesses and community based organisations (CBOs) face similar barriers in relation to the effective use of information and communications technologies. At the moment there is a lack of research into the use of websites by CBOs and even less into the specific content they have on those websites. This paper uses a recently developed website content classification scheme (Alonso Mendo and Fitzgerald 2005) to examine the content of the websites of 45 community based organisations in Australia for the purposes of analysing their similarities and differences in content from each other.

Background

A community based organisation is a non-profit, non-government organization which serves a local community's needs. CBOs can take many forms: such as a school, a sporting body, a community centre or a charity. CBOs resemble non-profit small businesses in many ways, but their special service characteristics and looser support structures make them a group to

categorise separately for the purposes of this study. For instance their revenue sources are often government grants or donations, as opposed to the sales revenue of small businesses. The issues facing CBOs and their development of websites can differ from those of typical small businesses. One major consideration is that they need to consider who the target of their website actually is. Whilst there are a number of differences between them, there is little doubt that CBOs are quite similar to small businesses when it comes to the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs).

The level of skill within the organisation will limit the options that a CBO has to set up and maintain the website. A CBO containing no expertise in website development is limited in how it may choose to set up the website (Hooper and Stobart 2003). They may even lack the staff needed to effectively employ Internet technologies (Schneider 2003). A CBO will need to consider how it balances resources and staff time to set up and maintain the website when such an activity is not viewed as being a high priority (Olsen et al 2001). It is important to realise that, as with small businesses, 'smaller' CBOs are probably going to have less resources to devote to the use of Internet technologies than their larger counterparts (Schneider, 2003). This means they face similar difficulties to small businesses in employing these technologies effectively.

The primary use of websites by CBOs (and also small businesses) is usually the provision of information. In the case of charities, this is to provide current and potential donors and those who are interested in the organisation with the information they are looking for (Hooper and Stobart 2003; Olsen et al, 2001; Lee, Chen and Zhang 2001). Such information could include a CBO's objectives and local contact information (Olsen et al, 2001), their mission, their privacy policies (Hart 2002) and information about programs, activities, special events, financial information and so forth (Oehler and Morris, 2000). One important website feature that can be offered by CBOs is information on what is required of a volunteer and how to become one. The website can offer simple online application forms for potential volunteers (Hooper and Stobart 2003) or detailed information about the organisation's needs and opportunities (Oehler and Morris 2000). One advantage that the website offers is that it offers the chance for a CBO to cast a 'wider net' when attempting to recruit volunteers (Lee, Chen and Zhang 2001; Hart 2002) or members.

Table 5 shows a comparison between two recently published lists of barriers to the successful use of ICTs by small business and CBOs. It highlights that both small business and CBOs face similar challenges in relation to the limited availability of finances, time and expertise when it comes to the use of ICTs. A survey of 923 Australian CBOs in 2003 (which will be referred to later in this paper) revealed a number of similar barriers in relation to publishing a website, although the most popular listed barrier was that a website was 'not suited to the organisation' (CCNR 2003).

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Table 5: A Comparison of Barriers to the Successful Use of ICTs in Small Businesses (Burgess 2002) and CBOs (Denison 2005)

Category	Small Business Barrier (Burgess 2002)	CBO Barrier (Denison 2006)
Resources	The cost of ICTs	Lack of resources
	Lack of time to devote to the implementation and maintenance of ICTs	
Employee skills	A lack of ICT knowledge combined with difficulty in finding useful, impartial advice	Limited internal technology skills and knowledge Insufficient project management skills Limited availability of technical staff
External support	Lack of use of external consultants and vendors	Lack of support and training
Management	Short-range, conservative management perspectives A lack of formal planning or control procedures.	Negative attitudes to ICTs Limited access to unbiased professional knowledge to assist with strategic and technical planning Lack of understanding of technology needs
Benefits of ICTs	A lack of understanding of the benefits that ICTs can provide, and how to measure those benefits	Limited appreciation of ICT benefits

Many CBOs, looking to their website to help them supplement their revenue stream (such as charities), will be hoping to use their website to supplement their fundraising - through donations ('e-philanthropy') or online sales (Hooper and Stobart 2003; Olsen et al 2001; Oehler and Morris 2000). This can be done by introducing a feature for website users to be able to make donations or purchase goods (such as donated goods) online via a credit card (Hooper and Stobart 2003). This can take some effort to set up and may often incur extra charges (for instance, 'per transaction' fees).

Kellogg (1999) suggests that the Internet can facilitate the creation of community networks, and CBOs could benefit from this. A study of CBOs in Boston, USA indicated that information technologies could be used to improve efficiencies and facilitate the working of group processes (again, Internet technologies can help to facilitate communications and sharing of information) (King and Ramasubramanian 1999). Erwin and Taylor (2004) suggest that the “enabling of communities with Internet technologies can boost local economic and social development, as well as enhance personal empowerment.” Examples of such features that might be offered by CBOs are message boards, chat facilities or online polls. It should be noted that some of these features (such as message boards) may take some time to set up and will need to be maintained. For instance, a message board may need to be moderated (Hooper and Stobart 2003).

All of these particular website features can be grouped into four categories (amongst others) that have been by Alonso Mendo and Fitzgerald (2005). These categories are:

- Content for *identification and image* (includes profile, mission, contact details and so forth).
- Content for *promotion and contract* (catalogues, details of services, and so forth).
- Content for *relationship enhancement* with customers.
- *Transactional interactivity* (ordering, sales and payments conducted online).

A Study of CBOs in Australia

In 2003, the Centre for Community Networking Research at Monash University, Australia conducted a nationwide survey of 923 CBOs (CCNR 2003). The survey showed that the vast majority (97%) of them had computers and over 60% of respondents actually published a website, which was a significantly higher rate than other similar studies in the late 1990s. Adoption rates ranged between 50-75% for most categories of CBOs that responded, with the business/professional/union and emergency services categories being over 80%. A greater proportion of metropolitan based CBOs (59.7%) had websites than rural CBOs (48.6%). Not surprisingly, just under half of the smaller CBOs published websites, compared with over three quarters of larger CBOs (CCNR 2003). The primary uses for the websites were:

- Disseminating information (99%)
- Online products and services (provision of matching services and counselling) (40%)
- Administration (minutes and forms) (31%)
- Collecting data from users (28%)
- Two way interactions (such as email, forums and discussion groups) (26%)
- Financial transactions (any example of money changing hands – such as sales of goods and donations) (17%)

The Study

The long term aim of this study is to assess the suitability of small business website planning models for assisting CBOs in planning for their websites. This study reports on an interim measure, to examine the websites of different categories of CBOs to assess how similar they are to small business websites and, indeed, how similar they are with one another. It was decided to review the content of the websites of metropolitan and rural CBOs in Victoria, a southern State of Australia. This area was selected for convenience, as it is the home state of the authors and the intention is to conduct interviews in a future stage of the project. Also, Victoria provides an interesting mix of areas, with the second largest city in Australia (Melbourne), as well as rural and (some) remote regions in a relatively small state. The three

largest responding groups of the CCNR (2003) survey were selected to have their websites reviewed:

- Community welfare (from which two subcategories, neighbourhood houses and charities were selected)
- Sport/ recreation (sporting clubs were selected)
- Education/ training/ youth development (youth services were selected).

In addition to these groupings, public libraries were also selected as they represent a grouping of CBOs that receive significant funding. For most categories, peak bodies in Australia were identified on the Internet by the use of the search engine, Google. The term 'Peak body' in Australia is used to represent an association that represents a group of similar organisations – they take the role of overall organisation of the group or even serve as a lobbying force. These peak bodies were the Association of Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres [www.anhlc.asn.au/], La Trobe University's list of State and National Sporting Bodies [www.latrobe.edu.au/ncpo/projects/dis_sport/bodies.html], Youth Central [www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au] and Australian Charities [www.auscharity.org]. The websites of public libraries were accessed from the Victoria Government website [www.dvc.vic.gov.au]. All of these lead to listings of the relevant CBOs in the State of Victoria, where metropolitan and rural listings of potential CBOs with websites could be accessed. Individual CBOs were then selected by systemic sampling until the desired number of websites [8-10 CBOs; 50% rural and 50% metropolitan where possible] was achieved for each category. The 'desired number' of businesses [50] was selected based on the time available to conduct the analysis.

Table 6 shows the breakdown of the eventual number of CBO websites that were examined.

Table 6: Breakdown of Community Based Organisations Websites that were examined

Type of CBO	Metro	Regional	Total	Specific type of CBO targetted
Community/Welfare	6	4	10	Neighbourhood Houses
Sporting/recreation*	5	5	10	Sporting clubs
Education/training/youth development	4	4	8	Youth Services
Public Libraries	5	4	9	
Community/Welfare	5	3	8	Charities
Total	25	20	45	

*Note that there was some variance in the types of sporting clubs examined, across archery, cycling, orienteering, triathlon and golf (a metropolitan and rural example of each was selected).

The analysis of each website was carried out in August-November 2006 by one of the authors. The Website content was classified using a classification technique suggested by Alonso Mendo and Fitzgerald (2005) and modified by the authors for the analysis of micro business websites in Burgess et al (2006). Alonso Mendo and Fitzgerald, as part of a technique they use to evaluate website changes, classify website content as:

- Identification and Image
- Promotion and Contract
- Relationship Enhancement
- Transactional Interactivity.

They also have other categories such as the means of navigation through the website, security and so forth – that are not investigated as part of this study. The authors have allocated

particular website features to each of Alonso Mendo and Fitzgerald's categories where appropriate.

Results

Identification and Image

The first category of features that were examined related to 'identification and image'. These features provide the web surfer with information about how to contact or find the organisations and some basic information about the organisations. We know from our own study of micro business websites (Burgess et al 2005) that most small businesses include a number of contact features. The results of this part of the analysis are shown in Figure 20. Each of the columns represents the percentage of websites that had a particular feature. Note that most of the CBOs have an email address and telephone number on their website. Fewer sporting clubs and youth services websites have a single physical address – this could be indicative that the activities associated with these CBOs are spread over different locations. Note that hardly any sporting clubs saw a need to put a fax number of their website. Neighbourhood houses were more likely to have a location map (perhaps indicating their single location) and a policy statement. However, only *metropolitan* neighbourhood houses had a location map. It was interesting that none of the youth services websites had policy statements. Typically, these websites were 'flashier' and were obviously attempting to grab the attention of their target group. However, the majority of the two types of CBOs that we identified as being community/welfare (neighbourhood houses and charities) did see a need to present their policies and/or mission statements on their websites.

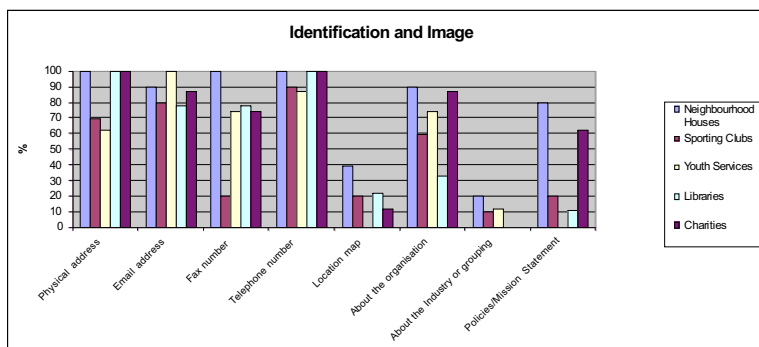


Figure 20: Identification and Image features

Promotion and Contract

In our study of micro businesses (Burgess et al 2005), all but one of the websites had information about products and/or services, but only a small number (around 10%) had news or press releases about the business. When examining Figure 21, it is useful to examine the first two columns together. Neighbourhood houses and youth services have information for potential enrollees about courses and programs that they offer on their websites, whilst sporting clubs tend to have information for potential members about how to participate at the club. Whilst most public libraries had information about the services that they offer on their websites, *none* of them had information about *how* use the library's services (perhaps this is seen as being common knowledge). Libraries, charities and sporting clubs were also more likely to have news features (the latter usually highlighting the recent achievements of an individual or team). Libraries were the only websites to offer their websites in multiple

languages. Not surprisingly, sporting clubs were the only CBOs to have a calendar of events or a fixture on the website (a feature we added into the study after examining the websites)!

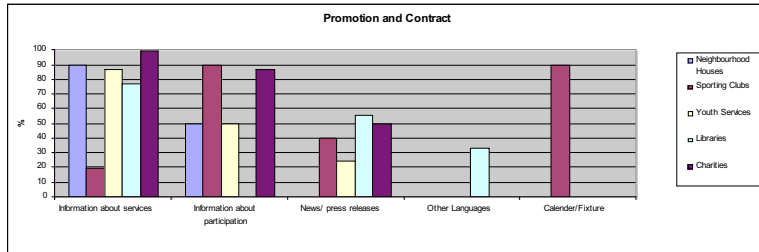


Figure 21: Promotion and Contract features

Relationship Enhancement

We did not examine relationship enhancement features in our micro business study, but we do know that micro businesses are more likely to have ‘frequently asked questions’ for their products and services than on the websites of CBOs (refer Figure 22). Most of the CBOs, not surprisingly, had links to other useful websites. Only libraries had comments from their users as to the standard of their service (perhaps they were trying to attract new users?). Note that only sporting clubs had results or statistics on their website (again we added this category later in the study). Libraries, sporting clubs and a small proportion of charities had a membership login facility. For the sporting clubs this was usually to access or record results or statistics. Many libraries also had a feature where clients could join online as well. A login facility is used by small businesses sometimes to provide special customers with access to privileged parts of the website. Note that one quarter of the youth services websites had a discussion group or forum. This could again reflect the nature of the group that they are targeting – more likely to be comfortable with operating in this medium. An interesting point is that only *rural* youth services websites had this feature and this may reflect the physical distance between forum participants. None of the CBOs examined had features where the website would be customised differently for separate users (a feature sometimes used for differentiation purposes by larger businesses).

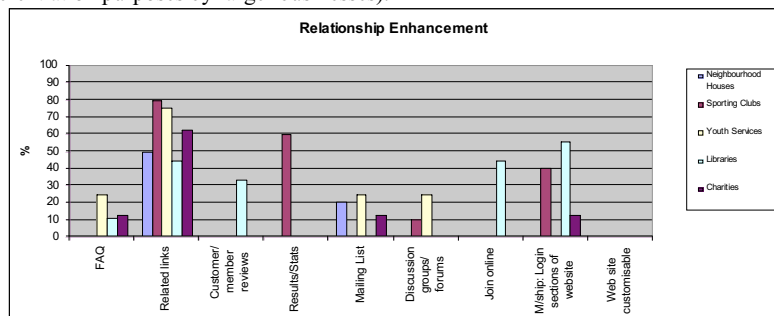


Figure 22: Relationship Enhancement features

Transactional Interactivity

Our study of micro businesses (Burgess et al 2005) indicated that certain types of businesses are more likely to encourage ordering/booking and sometimes payments online. For instance, art galleries are not likely to have any of these features. Bed and breakfast establishments will

typically have a facility to book by a web form that sends an email to the business or have the option to print out a booking form which can then be faxed to the business. Small manufacturing businesses are more likely to have interactive order/payment facilities on their website. Figure 23 shows the results for the CBO websites. Not surprisingly, there was little evidence of these features in the CBO websites, apart from libraries, who allowed clients to reserve books online and access their online catalogue (again, two features we added after examining the websites in this study). Charities had facilities for the printing and faxing in donation forms, or donating directly via their websites. Of the others, sporting clubs were more likely to have a transactional interactivity feature – a rural golf club had a facility to book accommodation packages and a rural triathlon club had an interactive order/payment facility to order sports clothing and to book into events! The youth services websites had an interactive facility for fundraising donations and a separate site had a downloadable form (for faxing in) to order a referral guide. The one neighbourhood house with such a feature had online forms for enrolment in services or as a volunteer. These results are consistent with website uses we identified from the literature, if not prevalent in *many* of the CBO websites.

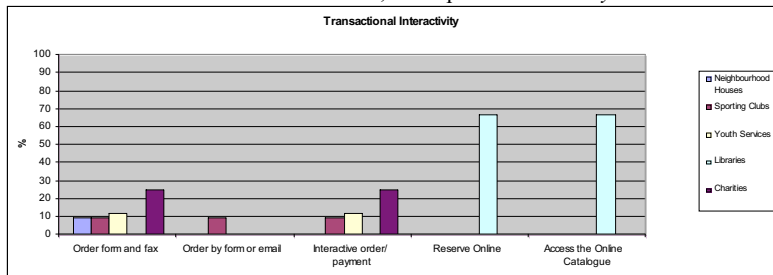


Figure 23: Transactional Interactivity features

Discussion and Conclusion

Although we have examined a small number (45) of CBO websites, it is obvious that, as with our micro business study, there are differences in the website features that different types of CBOs will adopt. There are certainly similarities with micro businesses in relation to the popularity of basic identification and image features – although considerations in relation to who the websites are targeted to obviously influence what goes on them (for instance, take the case of the sporting results being posted on sporting websites as a very specific example of this).

If we compare results to the CCNR (2003) study, we see similar levels in relation to the use of websites for information dissemination. We seemed to observe a higher level of information about services and participation – but perhaps the CCNR study was targeting more traditional products and services than our study. There were similar lower proportions of websites that adopted two-way interactions and certainly only a few that offered financial transactions. A possible explanation for this could be fact that we did not at all examine peak bodies or larger CBOs that would be more likely to have these features.

A significant outcome of the study is that we found a number of unique website features that we had to add to the study that were common for a *particular type* of CBO (for instance, access to online statistics for sporting clubs and catalogues for libraries). This indicates to us

that whilst there are differences between types of CBOs, the differences are not as stark between CBOs that fall *within* the same category.

The next stage of the study is to interview the micro businesses that have developed these websites to determine the strategies that have lead to these differences.

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