

Using online mapping to increase citizen satisfaction

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The threat of savage public sector cuts combined with a demand for improved levels of citizen service means that local government has to make the most effective use of its data resources. Online web mapping interfaces, which promote citizen self-service and reduce avoidable contact with local authorities, can help local government to deliver the efficiency gains required to achieve better services at a lower cost. Mark Bishop, Pitney Bowes Business Insight (PBBI), looks into this area.

As local government enters an era of financial austerity, doing more with less is a recurring mantra. This in turn is driving moves to increase the sophistication of online interaction between local government and citizens, particularly in terms of using mapping as a simple, easy-to-use visual interface. The EU's INSPIRE regulations are also focusing minds on the amount and potential value of the location-based data that public sector organisations hold, with the spatial aspect of information ready to be harnessed in new and exciting ways.

The popularity of consumer mapping applications such as Bing and Google Maps has also created a consumer demand for, and familiarity with, the ability to manipulate spatial data to answer routine queries, in a way that simply didn't exist a few years ago. Furthermore, the prospect of reduced budgets is forcing local authorities to focus existing investments and IT resources on projects that can be implemented relatively quickly and deliver the greatest value to citizens.

One of the main reasons for citizens to contact their local authority is to answer relatively simple "Where's my nearest?" enquiries. Consequently, it is no great surprise that local authorities are revamping their websites to include interactive mapping capabilities as a means to provide location-based citizen information services. Self-service initiatives such as these are enabling local authorities to realise cost benefits in the area of citizen response management, while giving people access to valuable information in an easy to access and intuitive manner. In a nutshell, better service, greater citizen satisfaction, lower cost.

Revamping a website to utilise existing data and provide a range of information in an online mapping format can be achieved relatively quickly and on a modest budget, yet can generate immediate returns. It therefore represents an excellent way of promoting online interaction between local government and citizens for the mutual benefit of both sides.

Southwark Council is an excellent example of a local authority that is embracing this approach, having already invested in enhancing the mapping services provided to citizens via the Council's website.

Using PBBI's web mapping technology Stratus Connect™, Southwark Council is overhauling its online mapping features, firstly by launching Southwark Interactive Mapping, a dedicated area of its website that enables citizens to activate overlays on top of a detailed map of the borough –

for example, clicking on 'Controlled parking zones' instantly highlights the relevant areas on the map. Other overlay options include 'schools', 'recycling sites', 'planning applications' and 'conservation areas'. Clicking on the relevant areas also brings up a wealth of additional and related information that can intuitively guide people to find exactly what they want with a minimum of fuss.

The second stage for Southwark is making location and mapping functionality more available throughout the website. For instance, enabling citizens to launch spatial searches and address look-ups from whichever page they're on. Speaking recently on this topic, Stuart Carter, GIS Manager at Southwark Council, comments, "We really want to put mapping at the heart of the Southwark Council website, as it's a key indicator that we understand how citizens interact in online environments. Stratus Connect enables us to simplify and streamline the way we present location-based information to users, providing an intuitive interface that enables people to find what they want without having to go through unnecessary steps."

However, while the likes of Bing and Google Maps have been phenomenal in communicating the virtues of mapping to the masses, and in familiarising users with the type of uncluttered interface and simple zoom and pan functionality that makes them easy to use, there are important reasons why Southwark did not use these for their own site. Stuart continues, "Services such as Google Maps are fantastic for consumers, but not so good for local government organisations that have a responsibility to build and maintain a spatial data infrastructure (SDI). For instance, you can't use Ordnance Survey (OS) MasterMap with the Google Maps API as this would breach Crown copyright, thus denying Southwark's citizens access to the level of detail provided by OS MasterMap. Moreover, if we deployed an external mapping API such as Google Maps, we'd have little control over developments within it – for example, the style of the mapping or administrative functions could change without us being consulted."

Spatial data is an abundant commodity within local government, yet one which has historically not been made widely available to people in an easy to access format. Initiatives such as Southwark Council's show that this is now changing, heralding a new dawn of location-aware government/citizen relationships.