

# **CITIZEN SERVICES IN PORTO CITY COUNCIL: A PORTUGUESE CASE STUDY OF E-GOVERNMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper shows the role that Internet may play in the Public Administration through the analysis of Office of Citizen Services in Porto, Portugal. The city council has recently created the office that has served in a very satisfactory and interesting way as an interface between the citizen and the city council, making use of the Internet. The paper discusses and analyses the case study bringing together three different marketing areas: services marketing, public services marketing and e-marketing. The study clearly shows that the Office considers the citizen as a “customer”, and that the services are organized for the citizen, namely the online services.

## **KEYWORDS**

e-government; public services marketing; public administration; e-marketing

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper shows the role that Internet may play in the Public Administration through the analysis of Office of Citizen Services in Porto, Portugal. The city council has recently created the office that has served in a very satisfactory and interesting way as an interface between the citizen and the city council, making use of the Internet. The paper discusses and analyses the case study bringing together three different marketing areas: services marketing, public services marketing and e-marketing. The study clearly shows that the Office considers the citizen as a “customer”, and that the services are organized for the citizen, namely the online services.

First, the paper provides the framework of the case by approaching the peculiar characteristics of Public Services Marketing and some issues related to e-commerce and Marketing on the Internet. Following on, the recent evolution of the information society is analysed and emphasis is given to the Internet influence on public services (e-government). At last, we present and discuss the case of the Office of Citizen Services (OCS) of Porto according to services marketing literature and we analyse the presence of the OCS in Porto City Council website through the discussion of its general functionalities and its performance, namely at the informative, relational and transactional levels.

## **2. THE E-GOVERNMENT IN PORTUGAL**

### **2.1 Public Services and Marketing**

The e-government is a process of delivery of public good services focused on the service and the quality of the service delivered to the citizen, based on the new technologies, specially the Internet<sup>1</sup>. Before we present the recent evolution of e-government in Portugal, we specify the unique character of the services delivered to

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the e-government allows increasing public service efficiency. We discuss this issue in the following section.

the citizens within the public services marketing, which presents unique features that must be highlighted. In the first place, it is important to mention that in the public sector, competition is usually isolated and almost irrelevant. Consequently, no effective alternatives are offered to citizens, at least they are not alternatives presenting the normal conditions and features typical of the private sector, where the organisations compete to conquer and keep clients (Burguete, 2004; Walsh, 1994). On the other hand, all citizens are usually the target of the Public Administration, especially in what concerns exclusive services. We should also mention that in many cases the needs of citizens for basic services are well known or even imposed by the Public Administration<sup>2</sup>. This happens despite the fact that the presentation, access, communication and information forms consolidating the offer and differentiating the services are generally defined without any effective consultation to the needs or expectations of the citizens (i.e. its market). Therefore, and generally speaking, the State offers the (possible) services to supply the needs of the citizen or the society, having as its goal the distribution of benefits and social well-being. (Andreasen, 2002; Kotler et al, 2002; Taulet, 2004)

In the private sector, the prices and quality are defined by the market and by the competition whereas in the public sector, most of the times, the services are free of any charge and taxation is the revenue. Sometimes, the payments of (social) services are compulsory or there is a specific payment per use whereas in others, politicians define the level of each citizen and social agent contribution and this definition does not obey to any market rules. At last, if we think about the conditions of the western policies we conclude that the survival of the Public Administration is something taken for granted within society. Despite these differences, the public sector has increasingly adopted the working method and the techniques of the private sector. (Andersen et al, 1994; Walsh, 1994)

Finally, it is important to discuss the unique character of the public service in what concerns its distribution<sup>3</sup>. The citizens market is distributed throughout the national territory, which means that the Public Administration and its services must fully cover it when the new technologies that are discussed in the following section are not involved. In those conditions, the implementation of the public services means the direct contact with the citizens and, in many cases, takes the form of a pyramidal network. Some places have more recently appeared where the public services are concentrated with the goal of improving the access and the quality of the service. (Araújo, 2001) In Portugal, the National Office of Citizen Services (*Loja do Cidadão*) is a fine example of that effort (Patrício and Brito, 2005), not to mention the Office of Citizen Services (OCS) of Porto City Council analysed in this paper as a case study. As far as the OCS is concerned, the municipal services are concentrated in only one place where a modern physical open space is managed and explored in order to serve and answer the citizen in person. The management of this space is conjugated with the use of the new technologies, particularly the Internet, through the e-government (see [www.cm-porto.pt](http://www.cm-porto.pt)). When the service was conceived, all was planned and structured to serve the citizen efficiently. Before analysing and discussing this case in detail, it is relevant to present the development of the e-government in Portugal.

## 2.2 The Use of New Technologies in Portuguese Public Services

As previously mentioned, the e-government is a process based on the development of the information technologies that tries to place citizens and companies in a central position and to improve the quality and the convenience of the public services. Simultaneously, it seems to increase efficiency through the rationalisation of costs and thus contributing to modernize the State. (UMIC, 2003) The Portuguese public administration seems to try to follow the business models of the private sector, namely the Internet portals. Therefore, virtual departments are available that satisfy quickly and at any time, the citizens' (G2C) and companies' needs (G2B). Initially, these departments had an essentially informative character, consequently evolving towards a transactional model where it is possible to deliver online public services such as for example tax payment via internet or the renovation of the Vehicle Registration Document/Certificate. The importance of this topic also relates to the possibility of online operations being essential for the necessary cost reduction of the public services. Some studies estimate, for example, that within 6 years (until 2007), whenever a taxpayer

<sup>2</sup> For example, to obtain the identity card or the driving license to drive a car.

<sup>3</sup> In the present analysis, we still have to discuss another marketing element and its unique character in the public services: communication. As far as this issue is concerned, we should mention that communication in public services might involve a political dimension. However, if the latter is excessive, it may have a negative effect on the objectives of an effective communication policy because the public service is too politicised and it may endanger the communication process and its objectives.

completes his online statement, that may reduce the transaction cost of that service by around 53% (PWC Consulting, 2001). At last, e-government relates to e-business. PWC Consulting (2001) maintains the idea that the public sector faces the challenges presented by a network global economy such as it is the case of several sectors of the economy. That is the reason why in the public administration some initiatives are developed in order to cover the relationship between citizens, companies, suppliers and workers, thus revolutionising all the processes and working models.

It is relevant to understand the recent evolution of the e-government in the Portuguese public administration and the profile of its users. The visitors' profile of the Portuguese public administration sites is mainly young (55% of the visitors are between 20 and 40 years old and 82% are less than 40 years old), urban<sup>4</sup> and holds a higher education degree<sup>5</sup>. Students who master the use of the Internet (43%) are also the ones who visit the public administration websites (38%) the most. However, the average education level of the people who visit the public administration websites is higher than the one presented by Internet users (PWC Consulting, 2001). UMIC (2004) has published a study dedicated to the local e-government in Portugal, which discusses the presence of Portuguese City Councils on the Internet and concludes that between 2000 and 2002 the number of city councils present on the Internet grew by 22%. At the end of 2002, the percentage of city councils with internet website was 72%. This study analyses the quality of the websites and concludes that not even one gathers the necessary conditions that classify it as having the ideal maturity level. Therefore, according to the authors of this study, there is still a long way ahead so that the city councils may benefit from the advantages offered by e-government services in such a way that they offer services with benefit to citizens and companies. The UMIC's study (2003) also reveals that almost all city councils have Internet access, even though the percentage which are online is lower, around 84%. As the main reason for having their city councils on the web, local authorities point out the need for making forms available, accessing documents or subscribing informative newsletters. Another study about e-government in several countries between 2001 and 2003 concluded that Portuguese e-government has registered little development (Accenture, 2003). Even though the Portuguese governments recognize that, the new information technologies contribute decisively to the reduction of time and to the elimination of the shallow character of some official procedures (Governo da República Portuguesa, 2004). Finally, we may also refer that the study done by Unicre-vector 21 (2001) about the e-government in Portugal presented several recommendations concerning the construction of public websites. Some of the recommendations are as follows: to consolidate the informative performance, to improve the relational performance and to invest on the development of the transactional dimension, to reflect the needs of the citizen rather than the organic structure of the services, to make the internal communication of the State itself flexible and finally the launching of the Portuguese Citizen Portal. Nowadays, a short time past, we register an important evolution in most of the Portuguese public websites. The informative performance has evolved, the access is easier, some mechanisms increase the relational performance and the citizens' needs are taken into consideration. On the other hand, the electronic internal communication and cross reference of data between the State institutions seems to start to be effective.

### 3. THE INTERNET AND THE E-COMMERCE IN PORTUGAL

To put into context the recent evolution of the e-government in the Portuguese case, it is important to present some data on the recent evolution of internet use and electronic commerce in Portugal. Several recent studies show clearly the changes of social, cultural or technological nature related with the information and knowledge society as a consequence of the generalised use of the internet in the several sectors of the society (UMIC, 2003). In Portugal, the evolution of the electronic commerce in the past six years is remarkable (Unicre-vector 21, 2005). Between 1999 and 2000, the number of Portuguese with Internet access increased and reached one million (Unicre-vector 21, 2001). By that time, some researchers did a study that measured the online Portuguese consumer market and concluded that this market dimension was equivalent to the third Portuguese city. Afterwards, there was a period, during which the initial expectations were controlled. During

<sup>4</sup> The distribution of the public administration websites visitors per regions and/or great cities highlights Porto (16%), Lisbon, Minho and Douro Litoral (14% each) (PWC Consulting, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> The public administration websites visitors are generally concerned with problem solving related to the great areas of their citizens lives and therefore they access Ministry sites (PWC Consulting).

this period, the investments on the “digital economy” decreased almost all over the world and many “dotcoms” went bankrupt. In spite of this scenery, in Portugal, the supply and demand kept on growing. In 2001, for example, the number of electronic shops increased from 102 to 519 and the consumption rose from 10 to 32.5 million Euros. More recently, between 2002 and 2004, a consolidation phase seems to have started. In 2002, the online consumption in Portugal grew more than six times and reached about 195 million Euros. In 2003, the number of electronic shops reached 748 and the preliminary data for 2004 indicate a higher growth. (Unicre-vector 21, 2005 and 2001)

It is also relevant to point out some data related to the evolution of the e-commerce in Portugal obtained in Unicre-vector 21 (2001 and 2005) and Anacom (2004). Around 50% of the Internet users in Portugal do not hold a General Certificate of Secondary Education. Teenagers represent 11% of the online consumers and show a high potential of growth because they are *earlyadopters*, they have a great technological maturity and great influence on their parents’ consumption decisions. The main reasons associated to the online shopping are: the convenience, the greatest possibilities of choice or the variety and lower prices. Finally, the “exclusively” online commerce may present important disadvantages since the buyers enjoy searching the Internet for a product that they saw and liked in the physical shop and they enjoy going to the physical shop after they saw the product on the internet. On the other hand, the consumers claim safer payment forms and the websites ergonomics may be improved since few websites have maps and search engines. It is also advisable to improve client service to increase clients trust (only 11% of the online shops have a support line and not all of them show their contacts), to increase the information confidentiality and to improve the information given to the consumers, namely information concerning delivery dates, distribution channels, shipping rates or devolution delays. (Unicre-vector 21, 2005 and 2001)

## **4. THE CASE STUDY: THE OFFICE OF CITIZEN SERVICES (OCS) OF PORTO CITY COUNCIL (PCC)**

### **4.1 Introduction**

We present a Case Study<sup>6</sup> that is very illustrative of the e-government use in Portugal. This case presents the Office of Citizen Services of Porto City Council. Throughout the analysis, we advance some literature that we consider relevant, namely some concepts of services marketing. We analyse the OCS service through the e-commerce and e-government concepts.

The OCS was opened to the public on July 9 2004 and has registered a very significant number of users. During the first two months, the OCS received 21 thousand people (Câmara Municipal do Porto, 2004). According to the PCC’s President, “The OCS is the most emblematic work done by the City Council and it is inserted in an enormous effort to improve the City Council’s functioning. It is a service that, as the time goes by, tends not only to improve but also to force the other municipal services to answer the citizens in a more effective way.” (Rio, 2005)

### **4.2 The Marketing Perspective and the *Servuction* of the OCS**

PCC seems to have adopted an entrepreneurial style when it conceived the structure of the OCS. This office considers citizens as “customers” and therefore they are seen as being the final objective for the existence of the city council. This philosophy is present in the creation of the OCS, which intends to be a decisive landmark in the relationship between the city council and “its customers”, preventing the citizen who goes to the city council from being left without an answer or from strolling about the services to obtain what he wants. The OCS concentrates all the relationships between the services and the citizen. It also works as a kind of purveyor that has the obligation to put pressure on all the other services, there is to say, the mission of the OCS is to make sure the citizen sees the problem that brought him to the City council solved. In order to analyse the objectives, the architecture and the working method of the OCS of PCC it is important to discuss some basic concepts of services marketing. Firstly, services are immaterial by nature and therefore the beneficiary’s experience is determinant for the evaluation of the quality of the service delivered. Secondly,

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<sup>6</sup> About case study research methodology, see Yin (2003).

services are consumed at the same time as they are produced, through an interactive process between the customer and the service provider. Thirdly, because of the numerous factors that may interfere in the production of a service, particularly the interactivity between the service provider and its beneficiary or customer, the quality of the process result may vary in time or according to the place where the service is delivered. Finally, services cannot be produced and stored, which makes them perishable and creates countless difficulties to adjust the supply and demand of services (Lovelock, 2003; Gronroos, 2000; Swartz and Iacobucci, 2000; Proença, 2005). All these features are present in the services delivered by the OCS and therefore they must be taken into consideration in the conception of the architecture of the service and its working method. Moreover, the process and the action of the services delivered in the OCS may be conceptualised through the concept of *servuction* (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987). These authors established a relationship between the process, the action and the result of the services and developed a concept which characterises the production process of the services and structures the main elements and the relationships involved: (1) the visible part of the organisation, i.e., the material context or the physical format where the contacts are made, the relationships and the interaction between the service provider and its customers; (2) the invisible part of the organisation, i.e., the back-office necessary for the production of the service; (3) the relationships between the customers, which, in a certain way, are determined by the characteristics of the physical format. All these elements are well structured in the *Servuction* of the OCS.

The office or the OCS *servuction* is located in the city centre, in a physical space with an area of 1.400 square metres and it is open from Monday to Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (except on Wednesdays when it is open until 8 p.m.). The service is divided into four sectors; reception and general service, technical reception, back-office and Internet space. There are several reception points, namely the general reception with ten working stations, urbanism with seven and fiscal execution, treasurer's office, topographical maps and Municipal Water Supply and Sanitation Services. The facilities are decorated with colourful furniture and materials such as glass, metal and synthetic fibres. At the reception, it is possible to collect the ticket for the waiting lines, which allows the user to know how much time he will have to wait. Next to the reception, there are the reception counters and in a nearby room the Internet Space. In this room, it is possible to access the Internet without paying or to attend training programs. To fight the info exclusion, handicapped people were not forgotten: there are eight computers equipped with blind software programs and some of the 42 workers are learning sign language so that they can serve the deaf mute<sup>7</sup> efficiently.

### 4.3 The e-Government in Porto City Council – OCS's Website Analysis

The OCS's website gathers all the vital information for the relationship between the citizen and the city council. It allows accessing requests and downloading them, accessing the information on ongoing processes, general information about the PCC services and accessing the newsletters. Following on, we discuss the OCS's website by analysing the items suggested by Chaffey et al (2003) and Laudon and Traver (2002): the basic functionalities and user-friendly characteristics of the site and its informative, relational and transactional performance (see Table 1). In the first place, we conclude that the website satisfies the most basic functionalities since it has a search engine, a map showing the site structure, a help page and another page with the most frequently asked questions and at last, it guarantees confidentiality and the personal data of the visitor. In the second place, the website shows a good informative performance. The amount of available information on the website is vast and useful and includes information on the several competences of the city council. It does not merely show descriptive information: some of the PCC's organograms are available, several publications by its departments, varied legislation, which may interest the citizen and other useful information for solving specific problems. Besides all this, the contents are constantly updated. At last, we should mention that it was impossible to simulate operations. We analysed the website's relational performance and concluded that there are mechanisms that allow the interaction between the OCS and the citizen. The website presents some mechanisms that allow the relation and interactivity like, for example: the citizen has the possibility of sending comments and suggestions to the office and the office can ask for information. However, we think it is necessary to develop components that make transactions easier and that allow a more direct relationship with each citizen, namely a mailing list.

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<sup>7</sup> Besides this training program, all the workers received 167 hours of in-house training and spent five months working in similar conditions. On the other side, to speed up the services, the officials studied the procedures and the average time to solve municipal problems. This was done to inform the user on how to make the request, the documents that are necessary and the status of the process.

Table 1. Features and performance of the OCS website

<b>Basic Functionalities</b>	
Search engine	✓
Map	✓
Help page	✓
Confidentiality policy and personal data security	✓
Frequently asked questions	✓
<b>Informative Performance</b>	
Institution's organograms	✓
Specific legislation of the sector	✓
Publications	✓
Useful information for problem solving	✓
Permanent updating of contents	✓
Simulation operations	X
<b>Relational Performance</b>	
Comments and suggestions	✓
Mailing list	X
Requesting information from the citizen	✓
Allows citizen contact	✓
<b>Transactional Performance</b>	
Documents downloads	✓
Documents sent electronically	X
Online access to processes	✓
Availability of virtual services	X

At last, we measured the transactional performance through the following analysis: the citizen's possibility of conducting and carrying out processes with the OCS via Internet. We considered the transactional performance of the OCS reasonable for it allows the download of some documents, namely applications of the several available services and the online access to processes (a password is required). However, in a negative sense, there is not any virtual service and the citizen cannot send electronic documents to the OCS. According to the *Plano de Acção para o Governo Electrónico* (UMIC, 2003) there are four development phases of the e-government associated with time and complexity of the implementation: (1) Presence on the Internet/Information, where the website makes basic information available to the public; (2) Interaction, where the website makes critical information and forms available, the public may contact the institution through e-mail; (3) Transaction/bi-directional Interaction, where the websites already have computer applications that the users operate without any help, completing a transaction online. In this case, the Internet complements the traditional channels of service delivery, offering enlarged services and services shared between institutions. Finally, (4) there is the Transformation phase, where the delivery of public services and the State operations are redefined. In this phase, the available services are increasingly integrated; they overlap the frontiers between the public institutions. The organisation's identity that delivers the service becomes irrelevant for the user since the information is organised according to his needs. The analysis done to the OCS allows suggesting that this office is at the beginning of the e-government phase of Transaction/Interaction. On the one hand, this happens due to the technological issues and the functioning of the website. On the other, this happens due to the period of socio-cultural transition, which Portugal is living in at this moment.

Following on, we present an analysis of the website based on a framework from the NESI - *Núcleo Estratégico da Sociedade de Informação* (Strategic Group of the Information Society) and adapted from Oliveira et al (2003). According to this diagnosis, a website is "Excellent" if it obtains Satisfactory in all the criteria, "Good" if it satisfies at least 15 criteria and does not obtain a Deficient, "Acceptable" if there are less than 7 Deficient; and, finally, "To be reviewed" if it has more than 7 Deficient criteria. This discussion confirms the previous analysis since it concludes that the performance of the website is satisfactory, even though it may be improved. Table 2 shows the researcher's viewpoint of the OCS website, which pass on an acceptable performance though presenting weak levels in the question "email reply speed" and, as previously stated, in the transactional dimension.

Table 2. Navigation, content, legislation, security, marketing and transactions on the OCS website (Source: adapted from Oliveira et al, 2003)

<i>Navigation</i>	Satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Deficient	Unknown
Browsers compatibility				1
Download speed of homepage	1			
Html compatibility	1			
Links on home page	1			
Navigation bars	1			
Download speed of pages	1			
Graphic resolution		1		
Facility for citizens with special needs	1			
Search engine	1			
<i>Contents</i>	Satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Deficient	Unknown
Minimum information published on the website		1		
Information updating		1		
Document archives	1			
Additional software		1		
Forms to download	1			
<i>Legislation and Security</i>	Satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Deficient	Unknown
Legal questions and copyright	1			
Privacy policy	1			
Portuguese Administration members' personal data	1			
Authentication	1			
Security		1		
<i>Marketing</i>	Satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Deficient	Unknown
Information presentation	1			
Links to other websites	1			
Website registration in other search engines	1			
Links on other websites				1
Availability of metadata	1			
Promotion of the website in other formats	1			
Interaction with the citizen		1		
Email reply speed			1	
Users satisfaction		1		
<i>Transactions</i>	Satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Deficient	Unknown
Completing online declarations/forms			1	
Online payments			1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>

## 5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the OCS case study brings together marketing concepts, public services, e-commerce and e-government literature. The discussion of the case highlighted that the citizens' needs are better answered and satisfied within the OCS' structure rather than within the traditional organisation of the PCC. We discussed the OCS website, that shows informative and some relational performance. However, we detected some important omissions on the OCS website, namely in what concerns its transactional performance and availability of virtual services. Further research could be interesting in what concerns the citizens' view on e-government services features.

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