



Trolling for tenders

by Catherine Morrison

“Eyewitness In Car Video Systems” – now there’s an attention grabber found in a desultory ramble through the Government of Canada’s Internet-based electronic tendering service. “Along with related accessories,” the notice adds seductively.

Trolling MERX may not be everyone’s idea of a good time. However, as a writer and strategic communications consultant, to stay in business regular dips in the MERX tendering database are *de rigueur*. But for some reason, the fun I have on these outings is not something readily shared at neighbourhood dinner parties. If they only knew!

Plus the added incentive of this column taking me off the beaten path of my usual key-word, opportunity-matching sojourn through what the public sector is buying. I am amused and bemused at what my search turns up.

“Strategic communications,” “public relations,” “media relations,” “writing and editing services” – these key-words are in my personal MERX profile. Confidently I click on “Opportunity Search.” A brief, breathless pause, and then, through the drill-down miracle of modern technology, I’m presented with 300 customized, personalized opportunities for me, including several in – aerial photography? Or perhaps I’d like to bid on “Weather Observing in Baker Lake,” or examine the market for bingo in the City of Montreal?

In an “on” day, my search may turn up five or six opportunities that are topical for me among the hundreds offered for my contemplation. Do I care? Not when I stop and marvel at the rest of the potential public-sector purchases unfolding before my eyes with each click to the “Next” screen.

Ontario, for example, is looking for someone to evaluate 15 Strict Discipline demonstration projects “in various locations and settings across the province.” Whoa! My mind is about to race in unsavoury directions, but I rein it in, realizing that this is serious business being addressed by the Ministry of Education in an era of escalating school-yard violence and zero-tolerance police dogs.

The purpose of the demonstration projects, which were launched in the fall of 2001, was to test means of “helping to create safe environments for students to learn and for teachers to teach,” according to the Ministry.

Under Ontario’s *Safe Schools Act, 2000*, students expelled for violent and disruptive behaviour are required to successfully complete a strict discipline program before returning to school. During the program, they are expected to comply with Ontario’s new *Code of Conduct*, which “sets clear provincial standards of behaviour” and “specifies the mandatory consequences for student actions that do not comply with these standards,” according to the Ministry.

No doubt sensitive to the possibility that this initiative might be perceived by some to flirt with the draconian, the Ministry carefully points out that it is meant to produce a win-win-win outcome for all parties concerned, even the so-called “bad” kids at the centre of it all. “We will be providing them with an education, but equally important is the fact that we will be providing these young people with the guid-

ance they need to get their lives back on track,” says Jim Gollert, chief executive officer for the Ministry’s Centre for Education and Training.

The Government of Canada also has something up its sleeve for the country’s schoolchildren. Veterans Affairs Canada recently purchased the services of Vancouver-based Live Learning Network to produce a Virtual Field Tour to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge. The company used video-conferencing equipment to link Canadian students, Kindergarten to Grade 12, with the Vimy Ridge site in France for a guided field tour, “live and in real time,” tracing the historic significance of the WW1 battleground.

Living Learning already has a record in this rather futuristic-sounding area of endeavour. For schools across Canada, they have done virtual tours from 17 of Canada’s National Historic Sites, and, according to Public Works and Government Services Canada, have developed an educational model around the virtual field tour that includes pre- and post-broadcast activities related to school curricula.

Remarkable the range of applications for video recording these days, which brings me back to the arresting idea of the “Eyewitness In Car Video Systems.” The systems, supplied by R. Nicholls Distributors Inc. of Longueuil, Quebec – exclusive distributors, in Canada, of Kustom Signals’ traffic products – were recently ordered by Canadian Forces Base Bagotville in Alouette, Quebec.

My mind hovers on the naïve image of military patrol personnel watching re-runs of America’s Funniest Home Videos on coffee break. But wait, the “Eyewitness” descriptor suggests something a little more purposeful – the video systems are standard equipment in police cars pretty well everywhere, and military police cars are no exception.

According to Captain Sylvie Beaudry, of CFB Bagotville, the video systems, which are always on and recording, provide corroborating evidence when police intervene in a traffic accident, for example. The “related accessories” – a phrase that tends to conjure, for me, fashionable items like colour-coordinated pumps – in a police car setting include cables, camera cases and the “Eagle Radar” component, for – guess what – catching speeders. ~~~

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