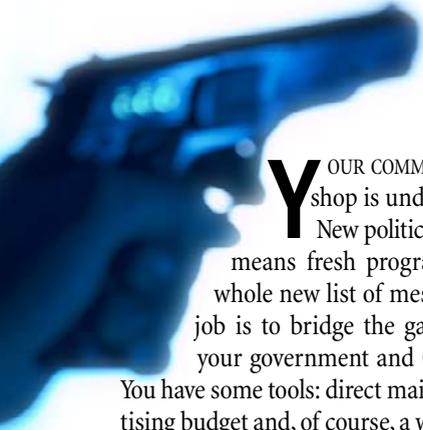# WiFi, wikis and blogs, oh my!

Leveraging wired words for effective communications

by David Eadie

YOUR COMMUNICATIONS shop is under the gun. New political direction means fresh programs and a whole new list of messages. The job is to bridge the gap between your government and Canadians. You have some tools: direct mail, an advertising budget and, of course, a website. But what seems straightforward is no longer what it seems.

Direct mail is expensive and often junked by busy Canadians; straight advertising is expensive and no longer hits big audiences; and the Internet is a lot more complicated these days. The Web is playing host to new technology and new applications of existing technology like blogs, wikis, WiFi, RSS readers and text messaging (see sidebar). In the emerging world of personal, corporate and government communications, a website is only an opener; by itself it is not enough to win the hand, let alone the game.

Jen Evans, president of Sequentia Communications, says governments don't quite get it. "They're using the Internet [like they use] a press release, when the power of the Internet lies in its interactive elements." For example, she says, "I signed up for the Prime Minister's mailing list and got a confirmation message. Here was an opportunity to point people to various government websites on all manner of topics that the government is eager to put forward, but they didn't. There are a ton of opportunities in a welcome message but all I got back was a confirmation that I was on the mailing list." It's her view that government would get more bang for their cyber-buck by concentrating on tech that allow governments to communicate one-on-one with Canadians. "Email, blogging and RSS readers show the most potential," she says, and suggests that they would allow governments to communicate a lot more frequently at considerably less cost than things like direct mail. "Also," she points out, "they can be put together spontaneously around specific issues such as policy changes which may be coming down the road."

John Findlay, president and managing partner of Launchfire Interactive agrees, but feels the main difficulty is a lack of appropriate marketing. "[Governments] expect people to come and get their messaging instead of integrating their messaging into interactive content and putting it on other sites. For example if Health Canada wants to promote proper nutrition they should build an interactive quiz game and put it on Sympatico's Lifestyles website. From our research I can tell you that people would be far more likely to respond to that than they would be to click on a government site and read text."

While Findlay advocates strategies that would 'package' government messaging, he doesn't necessarily think that governments need to move to blogs and text messaging. For a start, he says that, "It's always hard to tell which of these things is just a craze and which isn't." Secondly, the process that government departments have to work through dictates that initiatives that require rapid response to changing situations might be precluded from using much of the new technology. "The need for approvals can really bog things down," he says. "A project that we did for Indian and Northern Affairs took over a year from start to finish; in the private sector it would have taken about three months." Finally, to Findlay, the content has to be looked at as much as the technology. "You can't expect your message to be 100 percent of the content. What governments have to do is wrap their messaging in engaging content. That's what gets people."

There is a lot of dry text on government websites. Government policies and programmes must often be explained in no uncertain terms. And governments are under constant scrutiny for the tell-tale uncrossed 't.' Online levity is not encouraged.

Élise Boisjoly, director general of Government On-Line (GOL) at Industry Canada, stresses functionality. While she doesn't dismiss new tech communications, (GOL is looking at ways to use syndication, blogs and other technologies to promote their online services) for the present their main focus, she says, "is to entice people by providing a complete service. One-stop, full-service shopping," and working with business associations to get the message out. It is getting results.

The Government of Canada already has its 17 key services online and last year over

---

Wikis. The name was based on the Hawaiian term "wiki wiki," meaning "quick" or "super-fast." Wiki software allows users to create Web pages that can be edited by almost anybody who subscribes to the page. Some are tightly moderated with a formal peer review process, but most are self-policing. Go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki for a comprehensive look at the how's and why's of what is a phenomenon – nearly a million wiki sites and counting since the concept was introduced in 1995. The wiki world ranges from university community pages to an online encyclopedia built with the idea of collecting all the world's knowledge in a single site.

Blogs. A blog (from Web log) is a personal online diary. Some blogs, however, go well beyond this and have achieved 'must-read' status for those following the international, political and social scene. Blogs can coalesce around an issue to exert influence over the mainstream media – a blogstorm. It was the blogging community, for example, which seized the Dan Rather/phony Bush military record issue and didn't let go until it got resolved on national television and no doubt influenced the American election.

Phones. What can't you do on a phone these days? Games, specially produced one-minute video dramas, text messages, Web browsing and the list goes on. In Europe, for example, enterprising coffee shops track phone subscribers in the vicinity and send them digital discount 'coupon' when they are near enough. 'Instant' polling like Canadian Idol's may be the tip of the interactive iceberg.

RSS Readers. Rich site summary readers are the ultimate in labour saving devices for information-hungry surfers. Rather than having to fire up your favourite sites or blogs, download a free reader from any number of providers and then tag the sites you want to follow (a tiny orange XML button tells you that an RSS feed is available). The reader will then automatically search your chosen sites for updates and send headlines and story summaries straight to your desktop. Go to http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/tech/rss for the complete story.

45 percent of its clients interacted with it online. That number is expected to be better than 60 percent by the end of the year. Marketing is perhaps less an issue with Industry Canada, or Public Works and Government Services Canada or the Canada Revenue Agency than with other departments – if you're in business where else are you going to go? But even these front-line departments should not be complacent. "I think the [federal] government has been quite good at putting information and services online," says Boisjoly, "but I think overall we've been deficient in marketing." So how do you address that deficiency? How do you connect with Canadians? Boisjoly says that at Industry Canada the key is relatively simple, "Look at your clients, find out what tools they are using and base your communications strategy on that." ⋀⋀⋀

David Eadie is a Toronto-based freelance writer.