

IMPROVING THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE IN THE USE OF MEXICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

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Abstract

Current Mexican government sites lack any common structure, catalogue of services, use of language or information requirements. State sites can be citizen oriented for a term, and an opposing party might completely change the sites objectives and become a platform for political propaganda on the next term. The motivation for websites to improve was a ranking recently abandoned. This ranking was focused mostly on technical functionality (chats, calendar, navigation) instead of the use of these tools. This paper describes the most common problems found on sites and explains the need for a new ranking that focuses on the quality of information, the amount of screen space used for functionality and the interaction of citizens with its government departments.

Keywords: Usability, UX, e-government, Mexican websites, ranking

Introduction

Usability and accessibility are actually a series of factors that combine and define how simple to use is a website. Among the factors affecting this assessment are as varied elements as user education level, age, the speed of network connection, physical disabilities, familiarity with technology and how well or poorly designed is that interface. We must always bear in mind that the interface must be designed to be easy to use, but above all the information must be easy to find.

Mexican government websites are the reflection of Mexico's government structure. Federal, state, and municipal administrations are independent from each other and can be ruled by opposing parties. Thus, we find that the citizens experience very different depending on where you live.

This paper explains the most common problems found and proposes a solution for improving content by creating a new ranking for Mexican government sites.

Main problems in public service websites

One of the more frustrating problems when navigating government websites is the amount of usability mistakes found. More than that, sites that focus on promotion of public servants tend to make services difficult to access. Another of the greatest problems is the use of complex language and thus lack of understanding.

Some of the most common problems found in websites are described in this article. Don Norman and Jakob Nielsen defined five quality components. These are features that make a significant difference for any user, and in our case, the experience of the citizen. Two additional traits were included to cover the scope of usability issues.

I. Use of Language

This means no effort is required to understand the information presented. The complexity and ambiguousness of the language used in government sites has caused the Federal

government to endorse a plan called Citizen Language (similar to plain language) to simplify communication so the average citizen can actually understand the information provided.

One of the most problematic sites regarding language is <http://www.cjf.gob.mx/>, where language used is intended for lawyers and judges, and citizens can find searching for information an overwhelming task.

II. Learnability

Represents the speed at which a user performs a task, accomplished by using a new interface for him. Even if it is the first time a citizen is seeking his identification record in consultas.curp.gob.mx/CurpSP, it's unlikely they have trouble finding it. The message "Printing the CURP in bond paper is valid for all proceedings for the Public Administration" also helps.

On the other hand, security codes to pay taxes are extremely hard to find in www.satgob.mx. Even if the citizen finds instructions to generate it, these are so complicated that most people attend the physical facilities in order to generate them.

Aguascalientes www.aguascalientes.gob.mx has a *social networking* section but the label does not indicate its purpose. Citizens do not know if these are meant for citizens to share information in their own accounts, or to follow the government accounts. Oaxaca www.oaxaca.gob.mx solves this by adding the label "Follow us".

III. Efficiency

It represents the speed at which a user manages to perform a task once he already knows the interface. www.infonavit.org.mx makes it very easy to find the information by using color coding (blue for workers, purple for employers and green for suppliers). Labels aid the navigation: "How much savings do I have?", "How can I get a credit", "How should I use my credit"...

On the other hand, www.zacatecas.gob.mx three days prior to the governor's annual report, redirected the website to another promoting this event. For three days people from Zacatecas could not use online services, pay taxes, or access information.

IV. Memorability.

After visiting the site, will the user remember it enough to efficiently use the site during on future visits? Can the user recognize the features or will he need to learn again?

At www.sat.gob.mx it is not clear where to find information of a requirement or how to pay my taxes for the first time. Terms like "SICOFI", "certisat" or "Solcedi" are only useful to those already familiar with this. The language used in the context help of Tax "Additional information" does not help to find information.

V. Error frequency and their severity.

How often the users make mistakes, how severe are their mistakes and how to recover from them.

In the web portal Ensenada www.ensenada.gob.mx, the most popular services appear first. When a process is not available, it is clearly indicated with a yellow ribbon with the words "In Maintenance". In a very clear way, it prevents errors indicating that the service does not work temporarily.

VI. Satisfaction

It indicates if the citizen likes to use the site. The level of satisfaction of a citizen who seeks services in Monclova's site www.monclova.gob.mx will be unsatisfactory. The two procedures that can be performed are the processing of birth certificate and consulting of CURP (identification register).

The great amount of services offered in Toluca's website http://www.toluca.gob.mx/tramites_servicios?p=a requires a search tool. This should be highly satisfying, but the search can be frustrating. When searching for "license", there are no results for driver's licenses. If "C" or "V" are used to search for "vehicle control" (as used in Nuevo León), the department is not found, because it is named differently. This can be very frustrating for migrating citizens.

Current rankings available in Mexico

Although many international rankings are available, Waseda, Brown and ONU amongst them, in Mexico only one rank has been available until recently. The State eGovernment Index created by Sandoval, Luna and Gil, were the only reference by which websites were compared. This ranking is no longer being kept so the only tools by which websites were improved has disappeared.

Nonetheless, this index was focused mainly on technical aspects. For example, it evaluated whether there was a chat or not, on a true or false scale. But it didn't evaluate if the chat provided a reasonable service to citizens. It evaluated whether they had an events calendar, but not the quality of information provided in it. Thus, it could be plagued with proselytism events and not present any useful information to average people.

One of the crucial aspects to evaluate is the amount of screen space used for functionality versus the amount of information used to promote official activities and consequently the public servant himself.

Conclusion

Most government websites in Mexico lack any common structure, catalogue of services, use of language or information requirements. State sites can be citizen oriented for a term, and an opposing party might completely change the sites objectives and become a platform for political propaganda on the next term. The motivation for websites to improve was a ranking recently abandoned.

Efficient planning and attention to detail will make a significant difference in the experience of the citizen. There is a great need for a new ranking of websites that focuses on the quality of services and interaction rather than just technical aspects.

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