

Web 2.0 – Just Hype or a Real Opportunity for the Public Sector?

Mike Ellis, Solutions Architect at Eduserv, asks whether Web 2.0 is just another buzzword, or whether blogs, social networks and online forums provide real opportunities for public sector organisations to improve their web-based services.

Web 2.0 has been defined as an online trend that aims to facilitate creativity, information sharing and collaboration among web users. Until recently, the majority of us used the web primarily to gather information and to communicate with our colleagues, friends and family. Yet, the advent of Web 2.0 has transformed the way in which we interact with our friends (some might even argue that social networking sites such as Facebook have broadened substantially the definition of a “friend”). These second generation web-based services and hosted communities such as YouTube have provided us with platforms where we can share our views on anything and anyone, with not only our friends but with hundreds of millions of other web users and organisations globally. Web 2.0 has revolutionised the way in which we use the web by converting us from passive spectators to active, empowered creators and distributors of content.

Some private sector organisations have already realised the impact – both positive and negative – that Web 2.0 can have on their business. Acknowledging that they sometimes have little control over what is being said about them in online forums, some companies have embraced opportunities around Web 2.0 by actively taking part in these conversations. Some have even created their own online communities where their customers can interact with one another and the company itself. Having seen how Web 2.0 features can be incorporated into web-based services in the private sector, the public sector is now waking up to the opportunities around these technologies as well.

An integral part of Web 2.0 is inviting the public to contribute actively to discussions that they deem relevant and increase information sharing; and these principles form a natural fit with public sector organisations. Moreover, despite being a relatively new phenomenon, the principles behind Web 2.0 are the same as those found in most public sector organisations' mission statements. By embracing opportunities around Web 2.0, public sector organisations can turn into true communities of interest and align their voice with that of the public. Monitoring and taking part in online dialogues enables

organisations to build a better picture of how they are perceived by their customers, correct misconceptions and ultimately to improve customer satisfaction through enhanced communications and service provision. The public sector should therefore make use of the technologies available to them to encourage effective citizen engagement and to be able to meet the varying needs of the different communities they serve.

Admittedly, there have been occasions where private sector organisations have attempted – and failed terribly – when trying to lure themselves into the hearts of potential customers by blatantly promoting a particular product or service on an online forum. Yet, public sector organisations can learn from these mistakes when incorporating Web 2.0 features to their own web-based services.

Individual politicians have realised the potential of social networks, blogs and online forums. David Cameron has his own page on Facebook with 1,819 supporters. Gordon Brown has not yet joined Facebook, but his predecessor Tony Blair has, gathering 543 supporters. On the other side of the pond, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both have blogs where their supporters can take part in debates at the centre of the US presidential election. It seems that Web 2.0 technologies have become more widely adopted as campaigning tools or means for opposition to voice its views, rather than communications tools by public sector organisations as a whole.

Yet, there are opportunities for local authorities, the NHS and other public sector organisations to embrace Web 2.0 technologies and incorporate blogs, social networks and communities in their web-based services. Web 2.0 has already infiltrated our private lives and transformed the way in which we communicate with individuals and organisations online. By looking beyond the hype surrounding Web 2.0 and inviting the public to participate in discussions on government policies and on the quality of services, public sector organisations can build closer relationships with the communities they serve, improve service provision and position themselves as open, approachable and in touch with the needs of the public.

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