



Yes, Minister: Revamped site full of Finley

September 01, 2007

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The immigration department recently did a major redesign of its website, the government's primary vehicle for providing information about Canada's immigration and citizenship policies.

After checking out the website's home page, my first question is: What possible justification could there be for three virtually identical pictures of the minister of citizenship and immigration gobbling up so much space? This is a vitally important communications platform, and many of its users are clambering for useful information. How are they served by wallpapering the home page with photos of Diane Finley?

The official explanation is that in the run up to launching the new design, it was a coincidence that the main display on immigration news and the new feature of an immigration-related video clip both included the minister. And including a photo-bio of the minister has long been a staple of the website. But in future, the site is not likely to feature three photos of the boss, officials say.

As for the revamped site and its contents there are some positive developments. But before the review, a bit of background.

In 2005, the immigration department hired Ekos Research Associates to conduct a survey of website users and to make recommendations for improvement.

At the time, I wrote a column lamenting that despite the wealth of information stashed away on the website, it was very difficult to navigate and that it often took multiple clicks of the mouse to find basic information. My main criticism was that the site did not contain a prominent icon directing readers to a list of frequently asked questions (often called FAQ) on immigration and citizenship policy, nor a direct link to information on processing times.

Ekos said its surveys of more than 3,000 people confirmed that a growing number of website visitors were not finding what they were looking for and

a third said they felt lost when visiting the site.

The consultants' recommendations included:

Improved navigation tools to make the site easier to use.

A better online system for checking on the status of applications.

More detailed information on common procedures.

Information in languages other than English and French.

A more detailed questions and answers section.

At a glance, the redesigned website is crisper and simpler to use. The designers did add a new FAQ section on the home page. This is an improvement but, given the hundreds of detailed questions dealt with daily by immigration officials, surely there could be hundreds of entries in this section, indexed for easy navigation.

The new home page also includes an icon labelled "check how long it may take to process my case" that leads directly to a chart detailing recent processing times. It used to take half a dozen clicks and a bit of Internet savvy to get to that information on the old site.

For now, the site is only available in French and English, but the immigration department is looking into the possibility of posting material in multiple languages, perhaps as early as next year. The site also provides more comprehensive and direct information on common procedures.

All in all, the new look is an improvement, but for the coincidental fact that the minister's face appears so many times, it would make Andy Warhol blush.

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