



'AUSTOUCH'

- a Multimedia Case Study

An integrated network offering access to all government services at the local, state and federal levels: pipe dream or an imminent reality?

Such a development is entirely possible with the implementation of 'AUSTOUCH', an interactive touch screen information system to be launched next month in the ACT. Andrew Gregory of the ACT Government presented a case study on AUSTOUCH at the TTC conference.

AUSTOUCH answers questions about Federal Government, ACT Government and community services in response to people touching words or signs on touch video screens. The screens are to be located in ten kiosks in busy public areas around Canberra, mostly large shopping centres, and will provide information about where to go, what to do and who to talk to. People will not need to travel to Government offices or make several phone calls to ask simple questions.

The Intel Digital Video Interactive Technology will deliver full motion audio and video, and units will be networked via ISDN for twice weekly information updates.

An important aspect of AUSTOUCH is that it will put people in touch with the many non-government community groups and clubs which could be of assistance and enjoyment to them but which they might not be aware of.

The concept for AUSTOUCH arose from research into public access applications in the US and into potential ACT participants, culminating in a pilot program.

The core issue identified in the US was the concept of 'single access', described as 'a simple, commonsense vision of how Human Services, and government in general, should conduct its business in the 1990s'. With proliferating government services and growing community demands, either service quality will decline or government must find a way to automate and consolidate its activities.

Results of US pilot schemes have been encouraging, with high levels of participation and no apparent consumer problems with the technology. In California, the pilot was so successful that the kiosk network is being greatly expanded. The kiosks can even cater for situations where ID is required, such as renewal of drivers' licences. They can be used as an ATM to pay fines and other charges.

In research, conducted in the ACT, a very high 87 per cent of the sample (500) recalled having contacted government agencies in the past 12 months (primarily utilities, car registry, transport, libraries). Most of the contacts (65 per cent) involved simple transactions or questions. When AUSTOUCH was described to them, 318 out of 500 said they would use it. Those who would not mentioned as major



reasons impersonality/inflexibility (46 per cent) and too technical/difficult (27 per cent).

There was a positive reaction to the idea that AUSTOUCH could be used to supply information about commercial products and services, particularly theatre/cultural/entertainment. The survey concluded that AUSTOUCH would be effective in influencing purchase decisions requiring immediate access to information and also complex decisions requiring detailed information (eg purchase of cars, whitegoods, holidays).

Among the benefits of AUSTOUCH to government are:

- containment of costs, redirection of resources
- better integration of services
- quality and timeliness of public information
- wider service hours at low cost and in remote locations if necessary
- avoiding duplication of efforts and ensuring that the best sites are used to provide information.

From the public's point of view, major benefits will include:

- dealing only with information relevant to the individual's specific needs
- wider service hours and accessibility
- accuracy of information
- easy identification of the relevant government agency

The AUSTOUCH program will be subjected to a rigorous evaluation strategy to ensure that it is delivering the expected benefits in practice.

One benefit that will not be available to the public will be information in non-English languages. In response to a question, Andrew Gregory said that the 'multicultural lobby' had demanded the use of all 12 'core languages' or nothing, and AUSTOUCH was simply not able to use this many languages. □