

Prime Mover: the Role of Online Channel Manager

Far too many government agencies in 2013 are still managing their online channels with just one position or even a fraction of an FTE. Given the potential contribution of this channel to more-for-less government and strategic heavy-lifting this minimal management needs revisiting. These roles are often named something diminutive like Web Administrator or Web Specialist or Web Master. These people are often spending most of their time in the engine room grinding out content pages with very little, if any, time to spend on the bridge looking at where the online ship is heading. Often, they have little time or organizational kudos or skills to be an internal consultant advocating online attributes to middle managers and helping them solve their problems. The result is repositories of information and services with marginal usability that do not inspire widespread user satisfaction let alone wholesale choice of this lowest-cost channel.

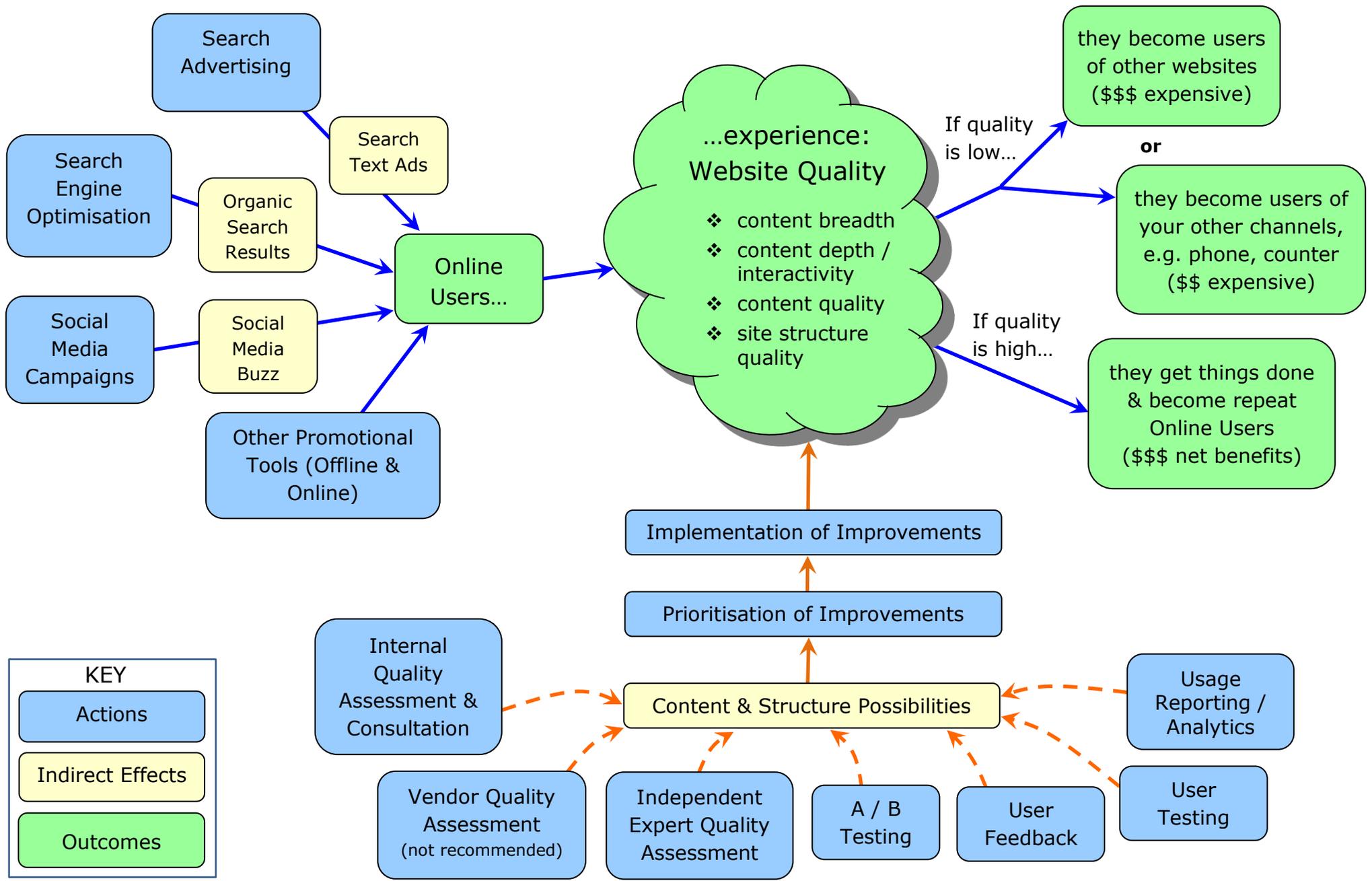
An empowered professional champion is required with time available to focus on the strategic aspects of online delivery: managing the user experience as a whole and advocacy of online capabilities across the organization. Several higher level titles describe this role: Website, Site or Online Manager (or Paetukutuku Kaiwhakahaere), User Experience (UX) Director or Online Channel Manager. “Manager” is certainly a useful part to both help remind everyone it is not an operational role and to have some title status when interacting with other managers of the organisation. The channel aspect is useful to signal dynamism and ongoing content changes to represent the organization as it is now and not just a dead repository of content. So Online Channel Manager (OCM) is preferred.

This role has primary responsibility for managing the collective online channel which would usually include the main organization website, most if not all sub-sites, any cross-organisation clusters’ sites the organization leads, and mobile apps. Discretionary aspects are the corporate social media profile(s) and the staff intranet. As Online Channel Manager, a primary responsibility is to encourage stakeholders to choose the online option as the best, fastest and cheapest delivery channel. This voluntary choice on the part of stakeholders means online must be a better experience than alternatives. This goes to another primary responsibility of the role for online quality, comprising content breadth, content depth (or interactivity), content quality and site structure quality.

The perfect website may be an elusive target but there should always be potential improvements that will better serve stakeholder user needs. What are the sources of potential improvements to online quality? Users, themselves are a rich source of input, from actual behaviour revealed in general usage reporting or analytics and for specific experiments using A / B testing, structured user testing as per standard usability practice and user feedback whether prompted in surveys, invitations to complete feedback forms or unsolicited emails. Users can be fickle and narrow in their expressed wants as well as struggle with putting their ideas into language that is easily enacted. The web team will of course come up with its own preferences and while it should do this, must also be aware of being too close to the trees to see the forest. Outside opinion is useful to overcome this problem, the best being independent expert quality assessment (conflict of interest alert) and the worst being web developers (your own included) with their unavoidable bias.

A view of the dynamics of the online quality to online success relationship looks like this:

Online Quality: Online Success Relationship



With essentially all media available for use at low or no cost and diminishing bandwidths constraints the long-awaited interactive multimedia or hypermedia is now the name of the game. Online experiences are moving from narrow access to information and services up the value chain to creating experiences, supporting behaviour change or even transformation. Through screen and sound, interactive multimedia can affect emotional states like on the theatrical stage. The important layer of rich internet applications and apps can bridge between static information and core transactions as discussed in [previous papers](#).

It's not about creating a grand repository of content with a magical subject tree that everything can be found from but is about creating multiple user-centric navigation themes that allow choice within relevant, comprehensive content options and therefore a resilient, 'many roads' approach. A one-size-fits-all website is a lazy way that in effect fits no one particularly well. Deeper engagement demands more personalization and probably more than just the resources of any one organisation. Another truism of the Net is that there are always more smart people outside your organisation than inside, so why not draw upon some of that talent? Government agencies may be culturally challenged to make their boundaries porous so the OCM is an enabler here also.

In terms of background, an Online Channel Manager combines many disciplines, including excellent communications (wordsmithing, design and presentation), IT (especially online capabilities, interoperability standards, business analysis), project management skills and management skills (business case development, budgeting, supervision). They should be generalists with specialties. Unfortunately training in all the skills in one package is still rare so most people operating effectively in this role have been self-taught or at least directed their own learning path. Relevant experience will be the dominant indicator of potential success but largely the role is about those who 'get it' versus those who don't. This is a 'you know it if you see it' kind of worldview quality that is very difficult to predict in advance. Someone must practice their talents in a webspace to demonstrate their capabilities.

Due to the unique holistic nature of the role some comparisons to other creative professions are warranted;

- Like a **movie director** – contributions from many specialists; huge complexity but an unwavering focus on the story; able to manage input but not get distracted by the detail.
- Like a **director of theatre** – dramatic rise and fall presented through the constraints of a stage or screen, many contributing actors, a satisfying conclusion, special effects to heighten but not dominate
- Like a **gardener** – weeding out the old and replacing with the new that complements the existing. Things take time to mature as a comprehensive place. There should always be something new not noticed before. The feeling of the whole is the main event.
- Like a **philanthropist** – searching for things to give away that support a higher cause, often for a government organisation that is deepening of relationships or improved trust
- Like a **consultant** – looking for opportunities to demonstrate how this powerful medium can save time or make a difference for the organisation and its stakeholder users

There are some critical success factors for an Online Channel Manager – a contemporary content management system, supporting content editor role, discretionary operating budget and strong governance. An enterprise level content management system of which there are numerous options, some open source and 'free', is a requirement since doing broad-scale content publishing allows content contribution distributed across the organisation and all of the housekeeping tasks are automated. Similarly, a content editor role to handle most of the centralized content publishing and training of part-time editors is ideal to allow time for the critical advocacy of the online channel to managers across the organisation and the creation of the flow-on business cases for extended online functionality.

A discretionary budget allows for third party services and the needed flexibility to respond to opportunities as they arise that were not foreseeable at budget time. Depending on internal financial policies, budgets for online initiatives that pertain to specific business areas should be funded by those areas, under a service level agreement. Lastly, knowledgeable governance of the online channel with broad membership from across the organisation is

essential to achieve ongoing buy-in and support for budget bids. This group should be able to set strategic policy and performance measures for guiding the on-going direction and achievement of organisation goals.

Day-to-day, though, the OCM and any staff will report to a line manager somewhere. As a genuinely inter-disciplinary function it is difficult to place with any one discipline, so never finds a perfect fit unless reporting to the Chief Executive or Chief Information Officer. Failing that Marketing, IT IM or Customer Services are logical homes. The line manager needs to treat them differently to other staff to ensure they are not over-specialising or hooked into 'local' issues and missing the bigger picture. A risk to be noted here is ensuring whether by location in the organisation chart or especially by inclination, the OCM feels the pulse what is changing across the organisation so as to be aware of new content needs as early as possible. Sadly, it is still a common complaint for OCMs to find out about a new initiative that has strong online potential and only gets shared too late to do much more than put up a PDF.

In these days of every organization having to prove it is operating efficiently or risk amalgamation (and worse), the OCM is one role that should be issued with a cape and tights since they have the potential to save the organization. This goes back to the radical cost-effectiveness of the online medium when used well. And central to using it well is an in-house guru able to see the long-term picture for the entire organisation, orchestrate user experiences that make a difference, cultivate relationships so s/he is the go-to person for any related issue and able to manage a delivery channel that is making a strategic contribution to the organisation.

Government as an arena of human activity has been largely untouched by the transforming and re-engineering nature of the Net. As the lens of disruptive innovation is applied to government, all government agencies need a safe pair of hands to look at unexamined user-facing processes and transform them via the revolutionary medium of the Net.

Shane Middlemiss
Director, e-Gov Watch Ltd
027 248 9406
shane@e-govwatch.org.nz