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## **Innovation in Service Delivery: The case of Audio Briefs from the Australian Parliament's Information and Research Services**

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**Innovation: people creating value by implementing new ideas**  
*Innovation Network*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Innovation is about people and ideas. It is about an organisation's ability to provide the creative space and the resources to explore those ideas knowing that new does not always mean successful. When we try something new we take a risk that the result might not be well received by our clients. Fresh and original can just as easily be perceived as trendy or a gimmick. Taking risks is an integral part of innovation and we learn as much from what did not work as what turns out to be successful.

In our parliamentary environments we provide a core of information and research services that are the backbone of our operations. Many of these services have been honed and refined over time in response to client demand and feedback. Members of Parliament expect consistency of service and do not necessarily want us to be at the bleeding edge of innovation. On the other hand, we are all part of a changing service sector where our clients needs and abilities are changing, as are the skills and tools we use to do our work. Creativity and innovation inject excitement into the workplace as well as sending the message to Members of Parliament that we are forward thinking and responsive to their changing needs.

In what circumstances do you decide to experiment with a new type of service:

- where do the ideas come from?

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<sup>1</sup> Innovation Network <http://www.thinksmart.com>

- how do you go about planning and establishing a new service?
- what about resource allocation, taking into account existing service commitments?
- how do you assess your success, and your need for improvement?

I will outline how we addressed these questions in the Australian context when we decided to experiment with audio briefs for Senators and Members of the Australian Parliament in the early months of 2002. This was a period of detailed planning to brief new Senators and Members who would enter the Australian Parliament as a result of the November 2001 elections. As we focussed on better communication and marketing strategies it was an opportune time to develop and introduce a new service.

### **Identifying a new client service need**

How do you identify a service gap and where do the ideas come from? Ideas might emerge from staff or clients or from opportunities to share experiences with like organisations. Time out from the work pressures of busy sitting weeks with strategic planning days or staff retreats are a valuable opportunity to consolidate and share the ‘intelligence gathering’ we all do on a daily basis, or to work through the recommendations of a major client survey and what the recommendations might mean for service delivery. However the ideas emerge, we have to test their relevance to our own environment and the way in which our clients go about their parliamentary business.

In the Australian Parliament we conduct a major triennial evaluation of our services but we also encourage informal feedback through an extensive outreach program. The idea of audio briefs emerged from client visits to several country-based members of parliament who wanted to listen to something interesting in their cars during long driving sessions. Australia is a big continent. Some of our electorates are extremely large and take days to drive across. Members can spend considerable time travelling with limited radio coverage. Even city-based members can spend an hour or two commuting and some drive to Canberra for the parliamentary sittings.

At one of our management retreats we discussed this feedback in the light of two other concerns about service delivery. One was alternative ways to meet the needs of clients who have told us they are too busy to read our written products, however brief. The other concern was the increasing amount of positive feedback we had received from members about personalised oral briefings as we encouraged staff to create more opportunities for face to face discussions with members in their offices.

Although we needed to examine further how this idea for a new service would mesh with our existing mix, it was possible that aural briefs would have wider appeal than the niche market of the country car travellers who had originally sparked the idea. The objective and the challenge was to deliver a high quality product that had the credibility of our written briefs but with the refreshing ease of listening to a well planned and presented radio program on a topical issue.

### **Planning to prove the concept**

At the early stages of planning, administrative structures need to be flexible and not overly bureaucratic. A small working group or ad hoc task force usually provides the best opportunity to assemble a mix of staff who can creatively explore the possibilities of the

concept in an open and non-threatening way. There is also the need to set milestones and some guidelines to keep the planning focussed.

An important piece of preparatory work was a background paper that, informed by discussions with group directors, attempted to put flesh on the concept. From the background paper draft guidelines were developed to help direct the working group's approach and experiments with this new medium. Two early decisions were crucial for the development approach taken. Firstly, we wanted to showcase the expertise of our staff so we decided that audio briefs would be recorded by our information and research specialists rather than using professional presenters. Secondly, in order to maintain the high quality control standards that apply to all general distribution products, audio briefs would be developed, in the main, from the content of our written or electronic publications. This meant that there would always be a written product for those who wanted to go over the detail. In our early experiments we issued an audio brief that was created just for that medium. The detail of the presentation led one member to request the paper for reference and we had to hastily create a pseudo paper that had in fact been the author's speaking notes.

As with other general distribution products, audio briefs would require the same procedures of tracking sheet, endorsement by group director and final clearance by the Head. The difference was the recording process and a heightened awareness of the voice to communicate meaning.

### **Resource requirements**

In most cases, resources to explore new ideas and initiatives have to be found by reallocating existing resources and priorities and by 'reinventing' ourselves. Most of us do not have the luxury of being handed a supplementary budget for innovation. While priorities have to be adjusted and time allocated for new projects, innovation brings with it a sense of excitement and a determination to succeed. Suddenly it is possible to fit that bit extra into the working day.

For the audio brief project seven staff, one from each subject group, volunteered to represent their groups and to provide ongoing feedback. They were also expected to 'perform'. Several had a teaching or lecturing background so their oral communication skills had already been well honed. Another had experience adapting written text for radio presentation. Yet another had worked for a radio station and was also blessed with a voice that recorded well for easy listening. She recorded the standard opening and closing lines and became the sought after 'interviewer' for the briefs recorded in interview style.

The first experiment was a home recording put together by one of the working group while on leave. While the content was excellent, the background crackles and extraneous noises clearly demonstrated the need for professional recording in a controlled studio environment.

Access to the Parliament House Studio and its experienced production team gave us production quality on the technical side that would otherwise have been more complicated if not impossible to achieve. The producer delivered on his promise to "make anyone sound good" and he became an integral part of the team, trusted for his production tips and editing expertise. We also acted on our producer's advice to engage a professional broadcaster to conduct a training session to fast track nascent recording skills.

These external resources were not available in an unlimited way and we had to be mindful of the Studio's other priorities as we tried to get our production line flowing. With first time presenters every minute of recording could involve two minutes or more of the producer's time to remove mistakes, stumbles, hesitations, paper shuffling noises and heavy breathing. Also, recording sessions had to be booked for non-sitting weeks because Senators and Members used the studio in sitting weeks and the producer had other duties during that time.

Although we have now broadened considerably the range of presenters, members of the original working group have remained the local champions of the product and their experience and skills have become a resource others can draw upon. Our own local experts now conduct group or one on one training sessions for new presenters.

### **Expect the unexpected**

The best-laid plans will invariably encounter some unforeseen difficulties. In this case we were so preoccupied with getting the content and presentation right that we did not pay as much attention to reproducing the CDs.

The decision to issue compilations rather than separate CDs for each brief was made for the convenience of clients so that they would not have to receive multiple CDs if they wanted to listen to more than one track. While, with hindsight, this was the right decision, and we have continued with this approach, it presented unexpected problems on the production side. The problems ranged from the logistics of 'burning' multiple tracks onto one CD to the design and compilation of the CD booklet. Watching one of our very talented support staff fix non standard size pages together with adhesive tape convinced us that this hand crafted approach was not sustainable as requests for the briefs flowed in. We have since acquired efficient CD embossing and copying equipment at a modest cost and simplified the amount of detail in the booklet so that it can be reproduced with ease.

### **Feedback**

Feedback to inform and review is a critical part of the development of any new service. While a new product must have a clear identity for promotion and marketing, those involved should not be so fixed in their approach that they are unable to refine and adapt in response to comment and constructive criticism.

Approximately 40 Members of Parliament or their staff requested a copy of one or more audio briefs in the first few weeks of issue. Efforts were made to contact all their offices by phone for some informal feedback using a few key questions. The objective was to draw out the nuances of how the briefs had been received and used. Had the service met expectations? What could be improved? About a third of the offices provided very useful comments. In most instances it was a staffer who had requested the CD and who provided the initial comments. In spite of the fact that audio briefs had been developed specifically for Senators and Members themselves, it was disappointing to discover that, until prompted, many of the staffers had not considered handing it to their Senator or Member. We invited the staffers to do this and then called back for the Senators' and Members' comments too.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. One Member gave them 12/10. The words 'excellent' and 'very useful' were used a number of times. Most considered this a 'very good

way to present information' and a refreshing alternative to reading. Most listened in the car but a number listened in the office and some took notes.

Subject, rather than style of presentation or length, was the main interest trigger. Short or long, one voice or two were generally less important considerations than well structured relevant content. One Member emphasised the importance of clear landmarks within the narrative, much like an aural table of contents, to hold interest and to ensure that the listener did not get lost. Others commented on the usefulness of having the track times on the cover so that they could judge whether they had sufficient time to listen.

There was more that we could do to exploit the medium. The interview style was developed to add interest for the listener. One client suggested using different voices for different points of view rather than using one voice to carry the weight of opposing views. Others offered suggestions for issues they would like to hear presented in this way.

There was criticism too. One Member of Parliament, who remains enthusiastic about the service and listens to the briefs while travelling, has not been impressed with the attempts to 'entertain' and to make them sound like radio programs when this is not, in this Member's view, necessary to convey content and sustain interest. I am not sure how this Member would have responded to the suggestion to inject engine thrust noises into a brief on the future of Australia's airline industry. There was insufficient time to follow through on that idea.

### **Maintaining the momentum**

Twelve months on, audio briefs are part of the established suite of general distribution products issued by the Australian Parliament's Information and Research Services. Further enhancements have included loading the briefs onto our Intranet as digital MP3 files so that clients can listen to the briefs by way of their desktop computers without having to request a copy of the CD. In the coming months Senators and Members will be issued with pocket pcs and we expect they will be able to use these new devices to listen to audio briefs while travelling, even on aeroplanes.

New initiatives have to be nurtured. Audio brief production reached a hiatus several months ago when the business of the parliamentary sittings left little time for the additional tasks of script production and recording in the studio. Maintaining the supply of audio briefs has meant consolidating new procedures and processes and ensuring that everything works smoothly. With encouragement and training more of our specialists are coming to the realisation that, for a small amount of additional work, their intellectual effort can be adapted to reach a wider, appreciative audience.

### **In conclusion**

With any new venture you need to plan well so that new ideas are given every chance to succeed. And if at first you don't ...it is important to keep trying. It is our Members of Parliament who benefit from the value we add to our parliamentary environments when we foster creativity and innovation in service delivery.