



Victorian Local Councils

Usability Compliance Audit

July 2009

WEBSITE
OPTIMIZER
.....
AUTHORIZED
CONSULTANT
.....
Google™



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1 Introduction

In July 2009 UsabilityOne undertook a report on Victorian Local Councils to evaluate their adherence to usability best practice and follow-up on our January 2006 report. The original report found that in general council websites performed poorly with an average compliance of 64%, with the range of scores falling between 50% and 81%. The latest report reveals a similar result with an overall average compliance of 63% and scores ranging from 48% - 80%. With 20% of the usability principles not being met by the top performing Council, this suggests that there is a clear opportunity for all Councils to further improve this avenue of communication with local constituents.

Website usability is of the utmost importance for council websites, it is imperative that residents and local businesses are able to easily locate information and undertake other key activities such as paying rates. Whilst providing a positive user experience is important, providing a usable website also reduces usage of other costly channels such as call centres.

2 Executive Summary

UsabilityOne undertook a usability review of 16 Victorian local Council websites - 8 metropolitan and 8 rural Councils. The review is based on council's adherence to best practice usability principles.

The average council compliance was 63% across all 16 sites reviewed. Further, the council average is below the average for all websites UsabilityOne has audited, which is at 70%. The council website usability elements relating to search, navigation and news and press releases represent areas of greatest opportunity for improvement.

The metropolitan Councils performed marginally better than their rural counterparts, who were predominantly let down by their poorly designed search functions.

Many of the design flaws observed in the websites are easy to overcome. In order to improve overall site usability and provide the best web experience for local constituents the following should be taken into account:

- Review web analytics on a regular basis to determine potential opportunities for improvement and identify areas where the website currently falls down.
- Understand your target audience along with their needs and goals and ensure your site effectively and efficiently meets these goals.
- Conduct regular user testing to assess the performance of your website and to understand what key actions are required to optimise your sites' effectiveness.

3 Methodology

UsabilityOne benchmarked the customer experience of 16 Victorian local Council websites; 8 metropolitan and 8 rural Councils. These Councils were randomly chosen to eliminate any selection bias, and also differ from the original Council audit conducted in 2006.

A Usability Compliance Audit was conducted on each website which involved a systematic inspection of the sites to check their conformance with 160 known and tested usability principles. These principles have regularly been shown to impede customer experience when testing both government as well as corporate websites.

The main areas covered in the audit included navigation, design and graphics, content and writing, search, error prevention and recovery and branding and company information.

Two analysts independently reviewed each website against the criteria, arriving at an overall compliance score.

The 16 Council websites audited were:

Metropolitan:

Boroondara City Council
www.boroondara.vic.gov.au

Banyule City Council
www.banyule.vic.gov.au

Bayside City Council
www.bayside.vic.gov.au

Cardinia Shire Council
www.cardinia.vic.gov.au

Casey City Council
www.casey.vic.gov.au

City of Greater Dandenong
www.greaterdandenong.com

City of Port Phillip
www.portphillip.vic.gov.au

Stonnington City Council
www.Stonnington.vic.gov.au

Rural:

Alpine Shire Council
www.alpineshire.vic.gov.au

Ballarat City Council
www.ballarat.vic.gov.au

Bass Coast Shire Council
www.BassCoast.vic.gov.au

Greater Bendigo City Council
www.Bendigo.vic.gov.au

City of Greater Geelong Council
www.geelongcity.vic.gov.au

South Gippsland Shire Council
www.sgsc.vic.gov.au

Warrnambool City Council
www.Warrnambool.vic.gov.au

Whittlesea City Council
www.Whittlesea.vic.gov.au



4 Results Summary

The overall user experience of each of the 16 Victorian Council websites reviewed is shown below in Figure 1. The average result of 63% indicates that the websites complied with 63% of the 160 usability principles. This is considered a poor- average result compared to other benchmarking studies conducted. In comparison to the Council audit conducted in 2006 there appears to be no difference in overall compliance (previous average of 64%).

As the below table shows, the compliance results varied considerably across the 16 Councils, with the range of scores falling between 48% (Warrnambool) and 80% (Bayside).

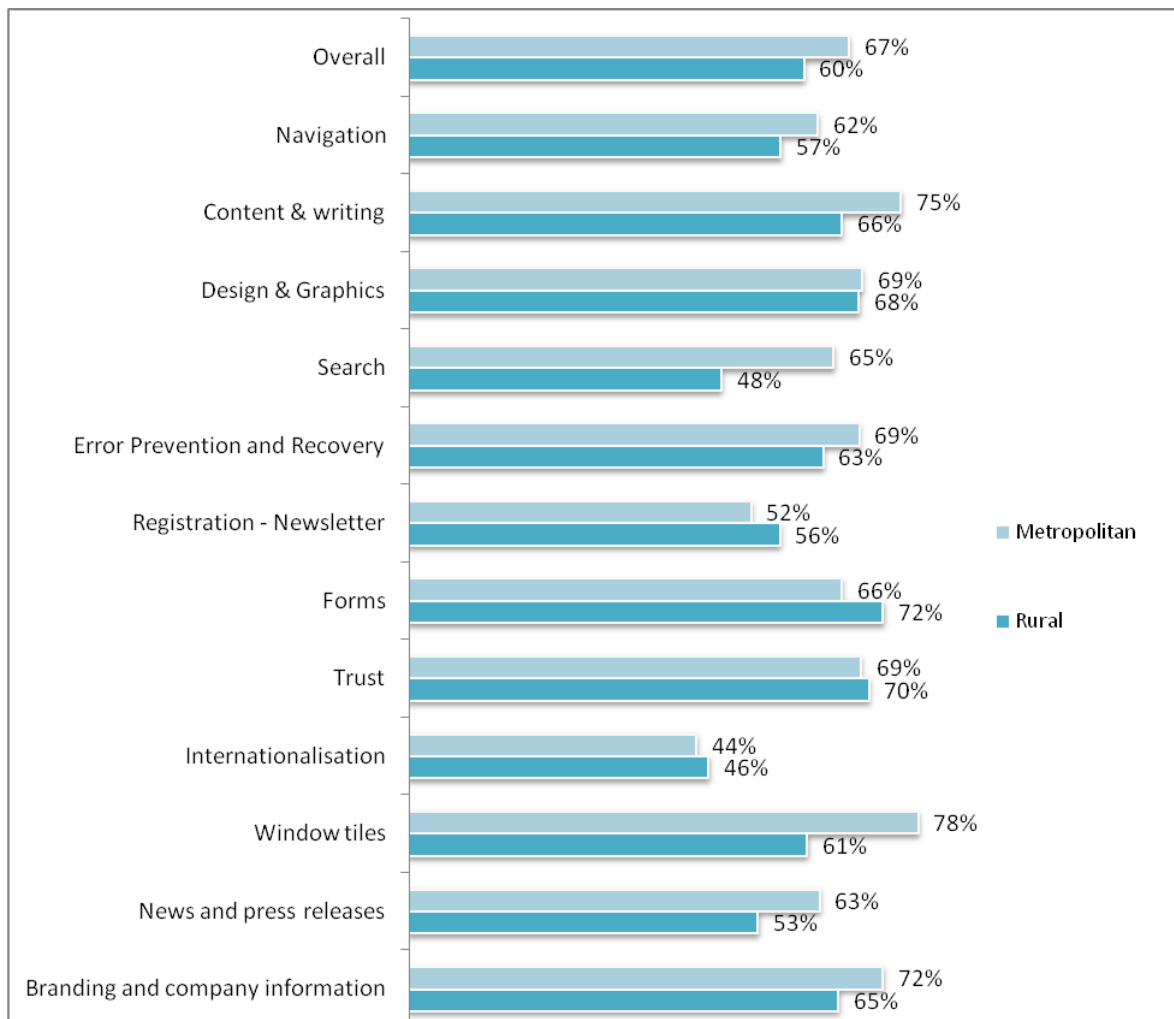
Figure 1 – Usability Compliance Audit results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Overall Score</u>
Alpine Shire Council	53%
Ballarat City Council	60%
Banyule City Council	72%
Bass Coast Shire Council	54%
Bayside City Council	80%
Greater Bendigo City Council	61%
Boroondara City Council	68%
Cardinia Shire Council	60%
Casey City Council	71%
City of Greater Dandenong	60%
City of Greater Geelong Council	69%
City of Port Phillip	64%
South Gippsland Shire Council	72%
Stonnington City Council	59%
Warrnambool City Council	48%
Whittlesea City Council	63%
AVERAGE	63%

In Figure 2 below, the results show that Metropolitan Councils performed better than their rural counterparts, with an overall score of 67% compared to 60%, respectively.

Metropolitan Councils perform better across most key measures, with the exceptions of Forms and Newsletter Registration, where Rural Councils score higher. Both groups of councils are evenly matched for Design & Graphics and Trust. As seen previously, usability of the Search function is an area that Rural Councils should look to improve.

Figure 2 – Differences in results between Metropolitan and Rural councils



5 User Experience Design Flaws

5.1 Navigation

There is quite a variation in usability scores across the different Council websites for Navigation. However there are some common issues that need to be addressed across nearly all of the websites. Only one website ensures that the user's current location is greyed and unclickable. Doing this helps to ensure users do not mistakenly click on their current location and then have to wait for the page to reload, which can be frustrating. Equally frustrating for users is clicking on a link only to discover they have already visited that page. Yet only 3 of the 16 websites consistently use a different colour text for already clicked links.

Most sites also fail to inform users when a link will do something other than go to a webpage, e.g. link to a PDF file or launch another application. Again this can be off putting for users as it usually takes time for other applications to load. Often users will abandon websites altogether if they are slowed down in any way.

Figure 3 – Navigation results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Navigation</u>
Alpine Shire Council	63%
Ballarat City Council	54%
Banyule City Council	73%
Bass Coast Shire Council	48%
Bayside City Council	59%
Greater Bendigo City Council	30%
Boroondara City Council	63%
Cardinia Shire Council	60%
Casey City Council	81%
City of Greater Dandenong	52%
City of Greater Geelong Council	74%
City of Port Phillip	50%
South Gippsland Shire Council	68%
Stonnington City Council	59%
Warrnambool City Council	42%
Whittlesea City Council	73%
AVERAGE	59%

5.2 Content & Writing

Content is the most important aspect of a website – without it you have nothing. A combination of user testing experience and results from eyetracking heat maps consistently indicates that most users scan content for keywords, rather than read every word. As a result, content must be optimised for scannability and readability to convey specific information in few words.

Most of the websites used too much text on the page, making it hard for users to scan the information they are presented with. And few websites made enough use of bulleted lists to aid the user further.

Figure 4 – Content and writing results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Content & writing</u>
Alpine Shire Council	70%
Ballarat City Council	68%
Banyule City Council	95%
Bass Coast Shire Council	55%
Bayside City Council	87%
Greater Bendigo City Council	83%
Boroondara City Council	87%
Cardinia Shire Council	68%
Casey City Council	60%
City of Greater Dandenong	83%
City of Greater Geelong Council	64%
City of Port Phillip	68%
South Gippsland Shire Council	72%
Stonnington City Council	50%
Warrnambool City Council	56%
Whittlesea City Council	60%
AVERAGE	69%

5.3 Design & Graphics

Graphic should help lend a sense of priority to the interaction design by drawing the user’s attention to the most important elements on the page. Too often graphics can weigh down the design with visual clutter and slow download speed, so it’s important to use graphics judiciously.

Nearly all of the councils performed above their average score in this category. However there are still a few areas that could be improved. None of the sites that used bullet points alongside links made the bullets themselves clickable.

Most of the councils also failed to use large buttons for important/popular functions. Large buttons are easier for users to locate and click on, making it quicker for them to use.

Figure 5 – Design and graphics results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Design & Graphics</u>
Alpine Shire Council	67%
Ballarat City Council	62%
Banyule City Council	67%
Bass Coast Shire Council	65%
Bayside City Council	94%
Greater Bendigo City Council	78%
Boroondara City Council	71%
Cardinia Shire Council	65%
Casey City Council	76%
City of Greater Dandenong	53%
City of Greater Geelong Council	81%
City of Port Phillip	68%
South Gippsland Shire Council	71%
Stonnington City Council	57%
Warrnambool City Council	52%
Whittlesea City Council	72%
AVERAGE	69%

5.4 Search

Search is one of the most important user interface elements in any large website, with its purpose being to help users easily locate information as well as enable them to master navigation of the website.

Overall, the average result for 'Search' was a poor 56%, one of the worst performing areas. Clearly there is room for improvement. Only 2 of the councils position their search function in the top right hand corner, where users usually look for it. Not positioning it here may result in users not finding it or indeed looking for it at all. Few of the websites had search features that were error tolerant, again making it more difficult for users. Misspelling is a common problem, so a search feature that can deal with this is helpful for users. A search on many of the Council's websites for 'immunisation' yields no results, yet the correct spelling does.

Figure 6 – Search results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Search</u>
Alpine Shire Council	38%
Ballarat City Council	45%
Banyule City Council	52%
Bass Coast Shire Council	36%
Bayside City Council	79%
Greater Bendigo City Council	38%
Boroondara City Council	57%
Cardinia Shire Council	50%
Casey City Council	84%
City of Greater Dandenong	50%
City of Greater Geelong Council	71%
City of Port Phillip	83%
South Gippsland Shire Council	68%
Stonnington City Council	62%
Warrnambool City Council	24%
Whittlesea City Council	60%
AVERAGE	56%

5.5 Error Prevention & Recovery

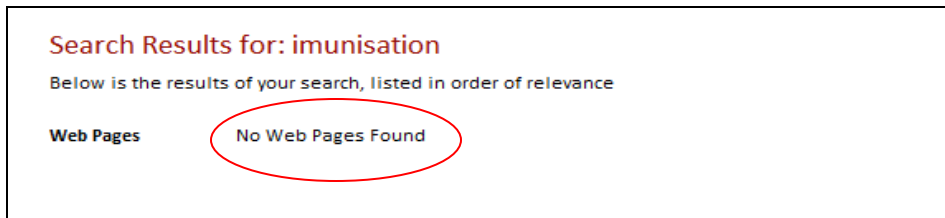
The compliance issues relating to error prevention and recovery were also badly executed. Two thirds of Council websites failed to provide constructive advice on how to fix an error, particularly in regards to the 'No search results' page; leaving users confused and uninformed as to how the problem occurred and how to prevent it in the future.

As already noted a misspelling on many of the websites does not provide any results however the error message gives no indication that this is the problem (see figure 8).

Figure 7 – Error prevention and recovery results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Error Prevention and Recovery</u>
Alpine Shire Council	33%
Ballarat City Council	78%
Banyule City Council	67%
Bass Coast Shire Council	75%
Bayside City Council	88%
Greater Bendigo City Council	50%
Boroondara City Council	89%
Cardinia Shire Council	67%
Casey City Council	56%
City of Greater Dandenong	29%
City of Greater Geelong Council	88%
City of Port Phillip	88%
South Gippsland Shire Council	88%
Stonnington City Council	67%
Warrnambool City Council	38%
Whittlesea City Council	56%
AVERAGE	64%

Figure 8 – Example of an unhelpful error message



The message with the 'no matches' result does not indicate that the user could have misspelt the keyword.

5.6 Registration - Newsletter

Not all websites have a newsletter. For those that do, the scores varied considerably. One basic issue that many of Councils overlook is explaining clearly to users the benefits of signing up for the newsletter. Others fail to clearly display their privacy policy for users or have a privacy policy that is difficult to understand.

Figure 9 – Registration – Newsletter results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Registration - Newsletter</u>
Alpine Shire Council	33%
Ballarat City Council	N/A
Banyule City Council	N/A
Bass Coast Shire Council	N/A
Bayside City Council	100%
Greater Bendigo City Council	67%
Boroondara City Council	N/A
Cardinia Shire Council	25%
Casey City Council	33%
City of Greater Dandenong	N/A
City of Greater Geelong Council	100%
City of Port Phillip	50%
South Gippsland Shire Council	50%
Stonnington City Council	N/A
Warrnambool City Council	56%
Whittlesea City Council	33%
AVERAGE	55%

5.7 Forms

Most users do not like filling out online forms; they can be daunting and require time and effort. If a form is confusing many users will simply choose not to fill it in. So it is important to make them as simple and user friendly as possible.

Overall, scores for forms were about average. A simple improvement many sites could make is to ensure the cursor is automatically placed in the field users need first – over half the sites failed to do this.

Figure 11 – Forms results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Forms</u>
Alpine Shire Council	60%
Ballarat City Council	60%
Banyule City Council	80%
Bass Coast Shire Council	100%
Bayside City Council	100%
Greater Bendigo City Council	75%
Boroondara City Council	67%
Cardinia Shire Council	44%
Casey City Council	56%
City of Greater Dandenong	N/A
City of Greater Geelong Council	90%
City of Port Phillip	43%
South Gippsland Shire Council	70%
Stonnington City Council	71%
Warrnambool City Council	56%
Whittlesea City Council	67%
AVERAGE	69%

5.8 Trust

Trust is an important aspect that all web users consider when using websites. For a site to be trustworthy it must be honest and have good brand reputation. The information used must be correct, current and reliable.

Half of the websites tested, contained outdated content or had information missing from certain sections. This gives users the perception that council is unprofessional and unreliable, and they are likely to be deterred from the site even before they try to use its features.

Figure 12 – Trust results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Trust</u>
Alpine Shire Council	50%
Ballarat City Council	100%
Banyule City Council	67%
Bass Coast Shire Council	33%
Bayside City Council	100%
Greater Bendigo City Council	50%
Boroondara City Council	40%
Cardinia Shire Council	50%
Casey City Council	67%
City of Greater Dandenong	67%
City of Greater Geelong Council	100%
City of Port Phillip	80%
South Gippsland Shire Council	100%
Stonnington City Council	80%
Warrnambool City Council	67%
Whittlesea City Council	60%
AVERAGE	71%

5.9 Internationalisation

There are numerous cultural differences that can make website experiences significantly more difficult to those located overseas. While the majority of the audience for these council websites are local constituents, making the websites as user friendly as possible for those people based overseas should still be considered.

Three quarters of the websites tested failed to show the times zone referred to when mentioning opening times etc. 10 of the councils also failed to provide the international dialling codes with phone numbers.

Figure 14 – Internationalisation results for each Council

Council	Internationalisation
Alpine Shire Council	33%
Ballarat City Council	33%
Banyule City Council	100%
Bass Coast Shire Council	75%
Bayside City Council	25%
Greater Bendigo City Council	67%
Boroondara City Council	0%
Cardinia Shire Council	75%
Casey City Council	80%
City of Greater Dandenong	50%
City of Greater Geelong Council	17%
City of Port Phillip	20%
South Gippsland Shire Council	20%
Stonnington City Council	0%
Warrnambool City Council	100%
Whittlesea City Council	20%
AVERAGE	48%

5.10 Window titles

Window titles play an important role in bookmarking, history lists and using search engines. Therefore it is important that the words used are easily associated with the site and distinguishable from other companies.

Over half the council websites tested (including Boroondara) included 'homepage' in the title for the homepage, which is unnecessary.

Figure 15 – Window title results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Window tiles</u>
Alpine Shire Council	40%
Ballarat City Council	60%
Banyule City Council	100%
Bass Coast Shire Council	80%
Bayside City Council	80%
Greater Bendigo City Council	80%
Boroondara City Council	80%
Cardinia Shire Council	80%
Casey City Council	80%
City of Greater Dandenong	80%
City of Greater Geelong Council	0%
City of Port Phillip	60%
South Gippsland Shire Council	75%
Stonnington City Council	60%
Warrnambool City Council	50%
Whittlesea City Council	100%
AVERAGE	68%

5.11 News and press releases

In order for news stories and press releases to be effective, headlines and decks (the summary of the story below the headline) need to be effective. Headlines and decks should provide information, rather than merely trying to entice users into clicking through to the real information. It's just as important to help users know when not to click something, if they're truly not interested.

Scores here were low compared to the average. The element most websites fail to adhere to is writing specific summaries for news and press releases that appear on the homepage.

Figure 16 – News and press releases results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>News and press releases</u>
Alpine Shire Council	50%
Ballarat City Council	50%
Banyule City Council	50%
Bass Coast Shire Council	25%
Bayside City Council	75%
Greater Bendigo City Council	100%
Boroondara City Council	75%
Cardinia Shire Council	100%
Casey City Council	50%
City of Greater Dandenong	50%
City of Greater Geelong Council	50%
City of Port Phillip	33%
South Gippsland Shire Council	100%
Stonnington City Council	67%
Warrnambool City Council	0%
Whittlesea City Council	50%
AVERAGE	57%

5.12 Branding and Company Information

Informative details about the company give credibility to the site. Furthermore, many users visit the site with the sole purpose of seeking company information, such the telephone number or mailing address.

Only 3 of the councils provided information on how feedback information will be used and how it will be processed. Users feel more assured and satisfied with feedback features when they know this information.

Figure 17 – Branding and company information results for each Council

<u>Council</u>	<u>Branding and company information</u>
Alpine Shire Council	33%
Ballarat City Council	63%
Banyule City Council	70%
Bass Coast Shire Council	50%
Bayside City Council	100%
Greater Bendigo City Council	86%
Boroondara City Council	78%
Cardinia Shire Council	56%
Casey City Council	63%
City of Greater Dandenong	78%
City of Greater Geelong Council	50%
City of Port Phillip	67%
South Gippsland Shire Council	89%
Stonnington City Council	67%
Warrnambool City Council	67%
Whittlesea City Council	86%
AVERAGE	68%

6 Best Practices

Although the majority of the 16 websites scored a disappointingly low user experience results; it should be noted that some areas across the sites were consistently good.

- The majority of the websites ensured text is easy to read with the correct font being used, adequate line spacing and left justified
- Most sites used audience appropriate language which is informative and unambiguous
- The homepages of all but one site locate the primary navigation in a prominent position and make all major areas of the site accessible from the homepage
- The majority of sites avoided horizontal scrolling
- All search functions allow users to press enter to conduct the search as well as pushing the 'search' button
- All but 2 sites expressed error messages in plain English avoiding the use of code, with only one using exclamation marks in error messages
- All provide a 'Contact us' which contains all relevant contact information including phone, email, fax and a physical address