

Conceptual paper

Omnichannel strategy and the distribution of public services in Spain



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ABSTRACT

There are numerous benefits linked to application of e-Government, both for public organizations (greater efficiency, costs savings, etc.) and for citizens (accessibility, availability, etc.). These have brought about a generalized commitment of most governments to its implementation.

Although the population usually tends to be very satisfied with these new technological products, their adoption rates have stabilized. At the same time, the levels of use of traditional interaction channels have remained the same or, depending on the aim, have even increased. The main reason for this is, perhaps, to be found in citizens seeing these new channels as a supplement to traditional channels and not as an alternative, which can substitute them.

In order to achieve a generalized acceptance and use of e-Government, it is necessary to start out from knowing the citizens' needs. The marketing field has proposed different strategies to respond to this challenge. These range from multichannel management to multichannel marketing and an omnichannel experience.

This work presents the current situation of the development of e-Government in Spain, showing the real applicability and degree of efficacy of the previously mentioned strategies to increase the citizens' rate of use of e-Government, compared to traditional management channels.

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Estrategia multicanal y distribución de servicios públicos en España

RESUMEN

Hay numerosos beneficios ligados a la aplicación del e-gobierno, tanto para organizaciones de carácter público (mejora en la eficiencia, ahorro de costes, etc.) como para la ciudadanía (accesibilidad, disponibilidad, etc.). Ello ha supuesto un generalizado compromiso de la mayoría de los gobiernos en su implantación.

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Palabras clave:

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Aunque la población habitualmente está satisfecha con estos nuevos productos tecnológicos, sus ratios de adopción parecen estabilizarse. Al mismo tiempo, los niveles de uso de los canales de interacción tradicionales han permanecido o, dependiendo del objetivo, incluso han aumentado. La principal razón para esto último es, quizá, que los ciudadanos encuentran los nuevos canales como complementarios de los tradicionales y no como una alternativa que los sustituye.

Para alcanzar una aceptación generalizada y uso del e-gobierno, es necesario comenzar conociendo las necesidades de los ciudadanos. Desde la disciplina del marketing se han propuesto diferentes estrategias para responder a este reto. Las opciones propuestas van desde la gestión de un marketing multicanal para finalizar con una experiencia multicanal.

Este trabajo presenta la actual situación de desarrollo del e-gobierno en España, mostrando la aplicabilidad real y el grado de eficacia de las estrategias previamente mencionadas para incrementar el ratio de uso de la ciudadanía del e-gobierno, en comparación con los canales tradicionales de gestión.

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Introduction

Business literature accepts that there are two basic strategies to improve the services stemming from incorporating Information and Communications Technology (ICT): back-end and front-end. While the former refers to the degree to which the service is submitted to reengineering from an offline conception to an e-service, the latter concerns improvement strategies in the communication and distribution of the service provision (Germanakos, Samaras, & Christodoulou, 2005).

Back-end was developed a few years ago when studying the redesigning and redefining of public services. Currently, most strategies are centered on the channels used; that is to say, front-end. To do so, Public Administrations have a wide variety of channels, which enable interaction with citizens (Germanakos et al., 2005; Teerling & Pieterse, 2010; Van de Wijngaert, Pieterse, & Teerling, 2011).

In the middle of the 1990s, government agencies began to have high hopes about the potential of developing electronic channels, fostering their use both to inform and to provide services (Ebberts, Pieterse, & Noordman, 2008; Teerling & Pieterse, 2010). The consolidation of ICTs at most levels of society, along with the fact that those who use them frequently are more inclined to use e-Government services (Gauld, Goldfinch, & Horsburgh, 2010), brought about a forecast that the initiatives linked to its development would be successful.

Among the reasons put forward to defend digital channels as a formula for improving the provision of public services is the cost-efficiency relation, their speed, storage capacity and selectivity (Ebberts et al., 2008; Van de Wijngaert et al., 2011). According to the Secretary of State of Public Administrations (2013), in the Spanish case, these advantages coalesce in economic benefits by reducing administrative costs (in the period 2006–2012, this meant a saving of 19,099 million €), the transformation resulting from the application of e-Government, as well as a decrease in the environmental footprint (administration bodies account for around 18% of the paper used in Spain).

In 2012, more than 500 million procedures were registered with the General Administration of the State (AGE). Approximately, 365 were registered electronically, with an estimated saving of 28,500 millions € (Fundación Telefónica, 2014). All this has brought about Spain's commitment to developing e-Government. Its aim is to offer 100% of public services online and even reduce the use of classic distribution channels.

It is assumed that benefits linked to e-Government will be automatically generated once the technology has been developed and an appropriate access has been made possible for citizens. The possible reality-linked limitations of this approach are unknown. Although the use of online channels has grown in recent years, on certain occasions, citizens continue opting for traditional distribution channels to satisfy their needs (Van de Wijngaert et al., 2011).

Governments need to provide multiple channels of contact with citizens depending on the task, while ensuring the consistency of the information and service response among the channels (Reddick & Turner, 2012). The existence of multiple channels is a challenge for organizations. They have to integrate them and manage them (Dalla Pozza, 2014).

The difference between how governments wish citizens to use electronic channels and their actual use of them means that there is a gap between the preferences of the two agents related to the management of distribution channels (Ebberts et al., 2008). This gap is produced, to a certain extent, by managers' lack of understanding concerning the citizens' intentions and behaviors when faced with multiple channels.

Citizens simply seem to add digital channels to the service channels instead of substituting the traditional channels by electronic services. This is why it is proposed that the Administration must continue supporting in-person channels while strengthening the electronic channel, as both ways of dealing with Public Administration are supplementary and substitutable (Agencia Estatal de Evaluación de las Políticas Públicas & la Calidad de los Servicios, 2014; Observatorio de la Calidad de los Servicios Públicos, 2012).

Faced with this scenario, the challenge of the governments is to effectively satisfy the needs of citizens, both in costs and

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