www.customs.gov.au
## a new information gateway

By Lisa Sweetapple

Customs has launched a new internet site, using up-to-the-minute database-driven technology, to better service its thousands of daily clients.

Last year, there were more than 24 million hits on the old site - about 60,000 a day - sending a clear message to Customs about how powerful a tool the site is in the dissemination of information around the globe and providing the impetus to upgrade its electronic front door.

Director of Corporate Communication Leon Bedington said that, although the old site had operated effectively for some years, it had begun the struggle to provide modern services at speed.

For example, it had been set up without a search engine and it had not been feasible to 'bolt on' a search facility because many documents lacked the necessary metadata.

A review revealed a need to upgrade to industry standard and to a more manageable format using a server that supported dynamic content. Dynamic content is driven by a database,
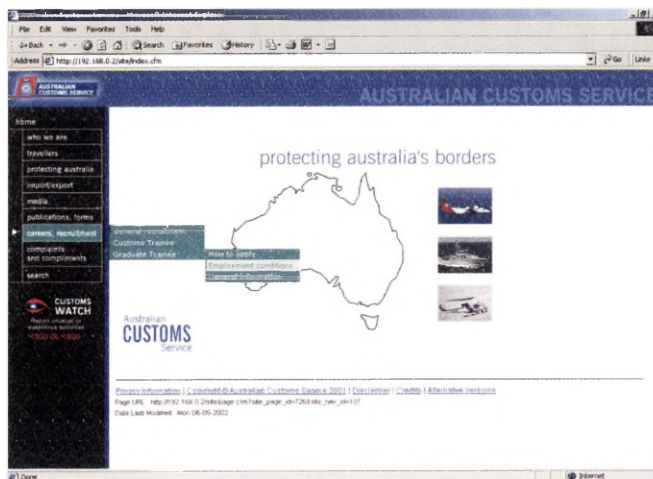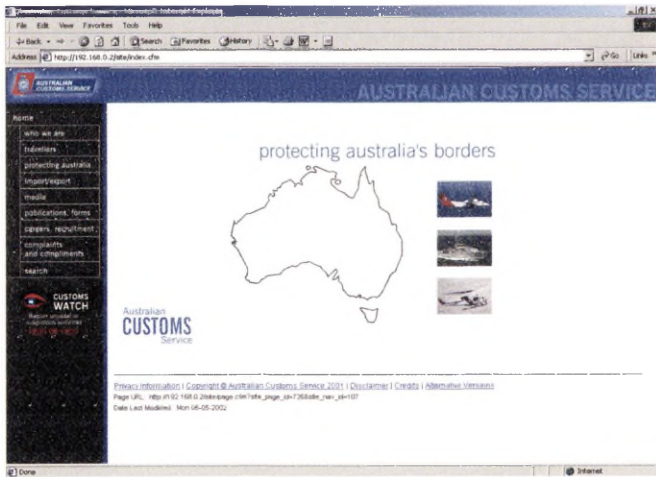
replacing HTML (hypertext markup language) pages. A database website allows for information to be more effective and interactive for the user.

"Customs has invested over a quarter of a million dollars in the upgrade project," Mr Bedington said. "It is a far more interactive and efficient system, with 21st century features.

"The upgrade enables more feedback and interaction as well as a more cost-effective delivery of information to users.

"The amount of content is increasing rapidly and changes had to be made often. It is important that users can search and locate information easily. From an operational point of view, it is also important that it is efficient to manage."

Included in the upgrade is a dual-server setup solely dedicated to Customs website, providing greater security and less chance of a server failure.

A risk-management study of the current site made two key findings. The first was that it could fail due to the age of the system and the high usage rate. The second was potential efficiency and cost savings in the distribution of information that could be gained from an upgrade.

The risk of undertaking the upgrade and the potential problems that might arise were also explored and the worst-case scenario was identified to be a collapse of the site and a serious inconvenience to users. However, this was a risk that it was already present with the old system that Customs shared with other websites.

The contract to develop and host the new Customs website was won by Chimo Pty Ltd, of Adelaide, from more than 40 tenderers.

Customs Corporate Communication in Canberra maintains the database host and master copy of the database. The master database is safeguarded from hackers and viruses by an air gap - it is not connected to any network within Customs and is protected by a firewall while connected in short bursts to the internet for synchronisation with the Adelaide server.

The new database content management infrastructure allows changes to be made to the Customs website from Corporate Communication. The information is then sent to the server in Adelaide via high-speed data transfer.

Chimo converted all the HTML pages from the old site into the database and code filters delivered consistency throughout the site.

The upgraded site allows simpler and faster navigation, with 'fly out' menus replacing image-based menus on the old site. It also provides the foundations for future site growth and development.

With the new search facility, users will be able to nominate a section of the site they wish to search or search the entire site, with the first 100 matches displayed.

"The task of upgrading the Customs internet system has been a lengthy and mammoth one," Mr Bedington said. "The huge amount of content that needed to be transferred to the new system was an extremely time-consuming job.

The upgraded site will allow for simpler and faster navigation.

"The upgraded site is a bright, new and inviting doorway to Australian Customs. The search engine and the easier navigation system provides a more user-friendly site with a professional and consistent image throughout.

"Customs constantly aims to produce quality information that is clear and easy to understand and access."

Customs reengineering of its cargo management system is also a driving force behind the upgrade of Customs web-based services because the demand for electronic transactions for individuals and companies is increasing. When the reengineering is complete - a separate process from the internet upgrade - importers, exporters and brokers will be able to process cargo on-line, allowing for faster and more efficient transactions.