

# American Embassy Research Center: a world away – in Canberra

When you step through the door of the United States Information Research Center (IRC), you may feel as if you are walking into another country. The IRC is part of the Embassy of the United States of America, and is governed by United States legislation, including United States copyright law, although we do have to know about the Australian legislation too.

The Research Center — and notice the spelling of Center — specialises in current United States federal government legislation and policy. The Australian public, academics, media, government, think tanks and non-government organisations are among our primary clientele. Dealing with general public inquiries and information assistance are services we also provide.

Many may know of the IRC by our previous name, the United States Information Service, or USIS. In 1999, we were officially merged with the United States Department of State, and became the Office of Public Affairs.

## Corporate structure

The IRC has an interesting structure, as it comes under the Cultural Section of the Office of Public Affairs.

This section is responsible for various programs including:

- United States Speaker Program, where speakers from the United States address issues such as regional security, economics, trade and biotechnology.
- Digital Video Conferences (DVCs), Worldnets and Telepress Conferences (TPCs) — a useful forum for linking Australian audiences with United States policymakers, congressional leaders, or experts in particular industries.

## Corporate objective

Our corporate objective is to support the Embassy in promoting United States diplomacy objectives by actively maintaining and expanding contact with key groups, institutions and individuals in the public and private sectors through outreach and ref-

erence services.

But like all library and information organisations the services of the IRC have to be marketed to ensure value is understood and survival is ensured. Although the IRC has a small physical collection — approximately 1120 books and 113 serials, and a comprehensive collection of Congressional Information Service (CIS) microfiche from 1975 — today, we try to use new and innovative ways to market ourselves.

Some of the ways we do this are:

## Products

- A regular *Article Alert* publication with recently released articles or web products on a number of topics, relating to United States government policy and legislation.
- A series of ad hoc bulletins called Electronic Bulletins (or *e-Bulletins*) providing details on current reports, testimony or pages that have been produced. For examples of these visit: <http://usembassy-australia.state.gov/bulletins>;
- The *Washington File*, which is a compilation of testimonies, fact sheets and articles on current federal government policy or legislation for the East Asia Pacific Region. This comes in two formats, the index page with hyperlinks to the text on the internet; or as a complete document via e-mail.

The IRC in Canberra is a part of a large network of IRCs around the world, including offices at the Department of State in Washington DC. Many ideas, products and databases are discussed and debated in a global forum.

We have the advantage that much of the regulated information is available through United States government websites. These websites are usually well maintained and updated on a regular basis.

An excellent search tool for these is the First Gov website. This allows you to search all Federal government websites using one search engine. The website is located at: <http://firstgov.gov>

## Marketing

Some of the other strategies that we have used include a 'Stump the experts' booth at the last presidential election function held in Canberra.

Examples of some of the questions that we were asked are:

- Who are the two independents in the House?
- When was the first negative advertisement run in the United States, and what was it? Who created it and what did he say about it?
- How many presidents' have been assassinated and how many have had assassination attempts made against them?
- Is Senator Joe Lieberman running for Senate in Connecticut and if so, what happens if he wins both the Senate seat and the vice-presidency?
- Who was the first president to serve from the South after the Civil War?
- What was Bush's occupation before he became Governor of Texas?
- Does Guam have a representative in Federal Government?
- Which political party in the White House would be the best for Australian interests?
- How many presidents were born with a different name?
- What time will we know who the next president will be? (This one in light of the final result really did stump the experts).

The IRC is also asked to provide visual displays including useful internet sites, where appropriate for other functions of the Cultural Section.

## Internet sites

The IRC acts as secondary webmaster and as such helps to support the Embassy webpage.

So, although in many ways the IRC differs from other organisations; in many more ways we are like special libraries the world over.

The United States Diplomatic Mission's website can be found by visiting: <http://usembassy-australia.state.gov> ■