



# Austrade website to help IT firms

**Mark Jones**

The Australian Computer Society has caught the ear of Austrade and cajoled it into establishing a new export-focused communications channel for Australian technology companies.

The government-backed organisation has come under fire in recent months from the likes of Victorian ICT minister Marsha Thomson and ACS president Philip Argy for the commercial agenda it applies to overseas development opportunities for Australian IT start-ups.

Under its government charter, Austrade — a statutory authority within the Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio — must meet certain commercial targets, as do other public sector organisations like CSIRO. As a result, it has devoted more attention to areas of work where it can charge a fee for service, like working directly on the ground overseas with Australian companies seeking export opportunities.

Australian Information Industry Association chief executive Rob Durie said many AIIA members had reported successful outcomes from this work. But he said Austrade had generated friction within the industry when companies sought help in areas that would not produce revenues for Austrade.

“Nobody at Austrade should be berated about that. It’s the government’s decision,” he said.

“I don’t think [Austrade’s] trying to make a profit, but it certainly has external revenue targets.”

Now, in an apparent show of goodwill, Austrade has agreed to the ACS’s suggestion that it establish a subscription-based communications system that will alert Australian IT companies to potential tender opportunities overseas.

Austrade has at least five local staff dedicated to the IT sector, and 55 people located in overseas posts responsible or partly responsible for marketing Australian technology.

Under the new plan sketched out in a meeting between Mr Argy and Austrade managing director Peter O’Byrne, Austrade staff will proactively feed new business opportunities back to Australia.

Mr Argy said that under the proposal, Australian companies would subscribe to an email or web-based notification system through which they could request information on overseas tenders in specific markets.

The move signals a recognition by Austrade that it must also promote Australian technology services capabilities, not only physical goods like software and hardware.

“What they haven’t focused on in the IT sector is a solutions development capability that can be catalogued into a development capability,” Mr Argy said.

Austrade spokesman Gregory Harvey confirmed the initiative was under development but said the organisation would not discuss it in detail till it was closer to being launched. He said it would undergo a trial phase over the next few months.