

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES: CONNECTIVITY IS NOT ENOUGH

Ian Knox

Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications

School of Business

University of Ballarat

Australia

i.knox@ballarat.edu.au

Helen Thompson

Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications

School of Business

University of Ballarat

Australia

h.thompson@ballarat.edu.au

Abstract

Initiatives to expand the uptake of ICT and electronic commerce in regional and rural regions have been a matter of considerable profile. This paper explores how some businesses and groups are making effective use of a web-based presence and/or online services. Several factors appear to underlie success. These include a high degree of ownership; the ability for multiple users to contribute, to publish and maintain the web-based information and finally the degree to which web-based applications have been tailored to meet the particular business or community purpose.

Background

Regional and rural success has been linked to the degree to which businesses and communities gain access to information communication technology (ICT) (Black, Duff et al. 2000; Garlick 2000; Keller 2000; Papandrea and Wade 2000). Initiatives to expand the uptake of ICT and electronic commerce have therefore been a matter of considerable profile with governments providing millions of grant dollars through initiatives such as the Victorian e-Commerce Early Movers program, the e-Commerce Exhibition Projects and the Commonwealth funded Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund, Networking the Nation.

The often-stated aim, is to strengthen regional businesses and communities by providing new market opportunities, productivity improvements and efficiencies, that can maintain and enhance competitiveness (Earl 2000; Vigo and Arnold 2000). In practical terms this can be achieved by getting regional businesses and communities "...connected, building online skills, and providing better infrastructure and access" (Brumby 1999, p. 8).

One area of focus has been the provision of funding to support the establishment of online communities, websites and regional web portals. Many projects however have failed or stalled once the initial funding has been expended. In terms of ongoing sustainability, it is rare to find examples of 'life' after funding as most initiatives fail to develop sufficient revenue streams or systems that can support the project staff, content maintenance, and/or infrastructure beyond the seed-funded period.

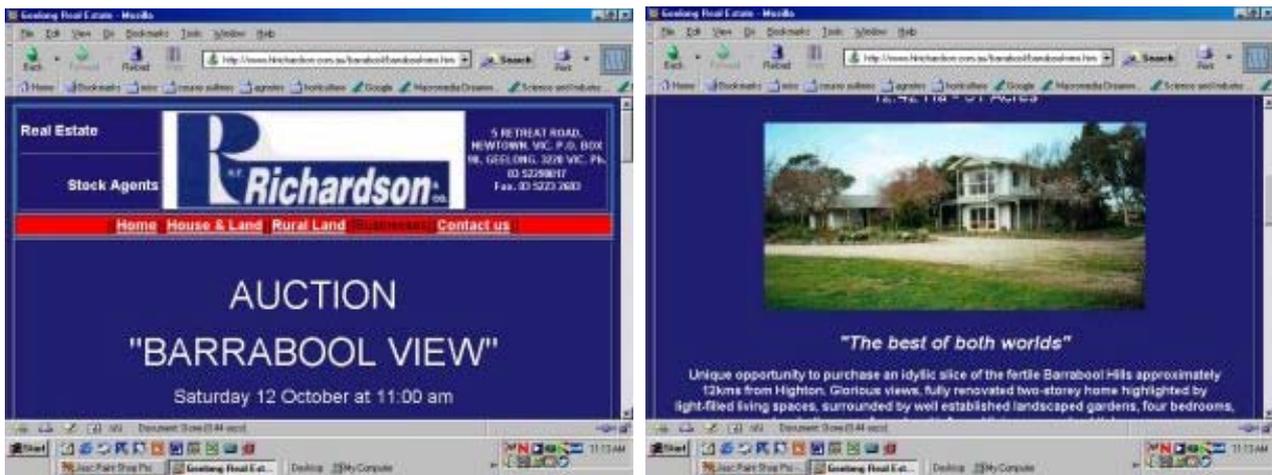
This paper explores how some regional and rural groups are making effective use of a web-based presence and/or online service. Several factors appear to underlie success. These include a high degree of ownership; the ability for multiple users to contribute, to publish and maintain the web-based information and finally the degree to which web-based applications have been tailored to meet the particular purposes or needs of the business or community.

Web-based Developments

There is a common expectation amongst users of web pages that the information provided is current. Far from being the case, the reality is often that pages are months and even years out of date. Email is widely regarded as a 'killer application' of the Internet, and it can be argued, that this is because of its immediacy and currency. Equally, email is at minimum a two-way communication. Web pages on the other hand often provide only static 'brochure' type content with a common limitation being the lack of technical control owners of sites can exercise on their own pages.

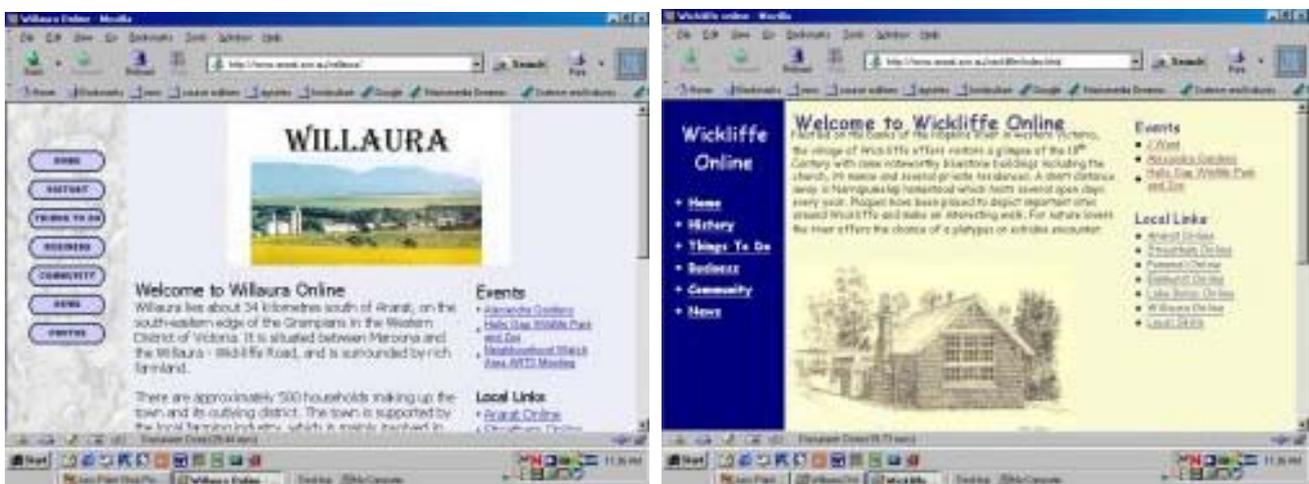
Often when a professional web company constructs a page, all changes and updates also need to be submitted to the consultant. This approach can lead to multiple problems. The bulk of any fee for the page construction is usually expended in the initial construction and it could be argued that there is limited incentive for consultants to constantly make regular small changes, to a page. Even if changes are made it may take days or even weeks for these to be implemented. Is easy for the page owners to loose interest, and over time, requests for changes may taper off. An alternative is that the page owners may be able to make changes themselves, either editing HTML or more commonly by using a web editing program such as Front Page or Dream Weaver. Changes are then updated using a File Transfer program (FTP). There are some advantages to using a straight FTP system, as there is no restriction on the amount of content that can be posted, and the presentation can be varied.

The following page for a real estate and stock agent firm is an example of a simple page which was developed and handed over to a client based on a straight FTP model.



Whilst the website was built with a maximum of consultation, it has taken over two years for the owners of this page to begin to manage it satisfactorily. Training was provided but the 'fear of the unknown' took a lot of overcoming. Staff members were initially reluctant to make changes or author new pages because they were worried about the level of authorship required with a web-editing program. These fears have now largely been worked through and two staff members have become confident in publishing information and managing the site themselves. The clients are now very happy with this system as it is very individual and provides far greater coverage of the properties available for sale than would be possible in most template systems. Some of the disadvantages are that the page can look a little amateurish at times and it is very reliant on two enthusiastic employees to maintain it.

An alternative approach is to provide clients with simple template page based around a few layout options and a web based content publisher. This is very cost effective, but it is also very restrictive at it generally limits users to fairly basic text and a set number of photographs. It is possible to enhance template driven pages by the addition of some interactive features such as event calendars and discussion forums. The following community pages provide examples.



Both pages include a static welcome section. The main incentive to revisit either page would just be to check the events calendar. Total visits to both pages are low, which is not surprising because the level of ownership of the content by the local communities is also low.

The challenge is to combine the flexibility of a FTP page with the simplicity of a web based template site. To achieve this the page needs to be accessible to multiple users, and provide for a high level of interactivity and change. The following two pages are examples of this.



Both pages offer online content provision, discussion, resource and link functions, with one of the sites offering free classified advertisement facilities. Both sites rely on a two-way exchange of information both to the user and from the user. It is suggested that this type of content provision is a superior method of content delivery as it empowers the users of the site to also be the providers of the content. Whilst it is acknowledged that the provision of connectivity to rural and regional areas is of primary importance, it is suggested that how this connectivity is achieved is equally important.

Conclusion

The key to ongoing success of regional and rural sites appears to be directly related to the level of ownership by the site users, the ability for multiple users to contribute, to publish and maintain the web-based information and finally the degree to which web-based applications have been tailored to meet the particular business or community purpose. These findings are consistent with findings in the business-to-business e-commerce context. For example the report titled *B2b e-Commerce Capturing Value Online* identified that "...ultimately, the point of success is where industry can see the broad-based business case...and then takes initiatives forward [National Office for the Information Economy, 2001 #314]. There are opportunities for research to identify initiatives that have acted as a catalyst to demonstrate the ICT business case, but which have also taken the next logical step of facilitating a greater uptake through the provision of e-commerce solutions which enable site owners (whether communities or business) to take their initiatives forward at a very early stage.

References

- Black, A., J. Duff, et al. (2000). Rural Communities and Rural Social Issues: Priorities for Research, A Report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, RIRDC Publication No 00/130. **2001**.
- Brumby, H. J. (1999). Connecting Victoria Ministerial Statement. Melbourne, Department of State and Regional Development.
- Earl, M. J. (2000). "Evolving the E-Business." Business Strategy Review **11**(2): 33-38.
- Garlick, S. (2000). Engaging Universities and Regions: Knowledge Contribution to Regional Economic Development in Australia. Canberra, Evaluations and Investigations Programme Higher Education Division Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- Keller, J. W. (2000). The Importance of Rural Development in the 21st Century - Persistence, Sustainability, and Futures. First National Conference on the Future of Australia's Country Towns, Bendigo, Australia.
- Papandrea, F. and M. Wade (2000). E-commerce in Rural Areas - Case Studies. Canberra, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.
- Vigo, K. and J. Arnold (2000). The Manningham Online Project: Global Tools for Local eBusiness. Melbourne, RMIT.