Global Reach for Community: Experiences of a University-Community Collaboration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community-initiated information dissemination types of activities over the Internet are showing a growing trend in recent years. Local communities realized the potential of enormous benefits in promoting their locality in the Internet. This case focuses on an Internet-based community development project that promotes e-commerce concepts among customers, local businesses, and local government bodies. A volunteer organization, St. Albans Renaissance Group in the State of West Virginia, and a regional university, Marshall University at Huntington, West Virginia, spearheaded the project. The experiences gained in the process of developing a large Web site are discussed here. This case suggests an approach that could be used to develop Web sites for e-commerce in cash strapped local communities, and to increase the likelihood that the initiatives would be successful.

Keywords: community Web site; community-university collaboration; e-commerce; voluntary project

BACKGROUND

National and global competition for business investment, along with the recent slow-down in the economy, has forced local communities to increase their promotional activities, both traditional and Internet-based (Finucan, 2001), to hold on to the businesses currently located in their community, and to attract new businesses to the community. Government agencies and volunteer organizations have recently been assisting in the development of community-based Web sites for the purpose of information dissemination (http://www.mainst. org, http://gsa.gov/intergov, http://icma.org). There are also a significant number of for-profit companies that assist local governments and communities with developing Web sites (http://www.e paradise.com/community, http://Planet Today.com, http://americancityand county. com/ar/government_ convenience_click/...
index.htm). Though there is a huge presence of community-based Web sites on the Internet, only a small percentage of these Web sites really provide well-organized and well-coordinated information relating to local businesses, community and government. Very few of these Web sites provide a means to do transactions electronically with local businesses; that is, e-commerce enabled community initiated Web sites are rare.

Local governments have begun using Internet to enhance their ability to serve their constituents. The term electronic government or “e-government” has recently grown in importance. “Electronic government (e-gov) is the case of technology, particularly Web-based applications, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and services to citizens, business partners, employees, agencies, and other entities” (http://www.gsa.gov/intergov/, 2003, p. 5).

Ho (2002) surveyed 56 most populated United States cities and 46 responded to his survey. His results suggest a new government model that is emerging. The new model “emphasizes coordinated network building, external collaboration, and one-stop customer services.” The old model stressed standardization, departmentalization, and division of labor. A study by Larsen and Rainee (2002) indicated 88% of local officials use the Internet or e-mail in the course of their official duties. Another study by the Washington, D.C.-based Council for Excellence in Government (O’Connell, 2003) showed more than 60% of Internet users are interested in using e-government services for activities such as responding to a jury summons, renewing a driver’s license, and obtaining a birth certificate.

E-commerce (and the Internet) is very powerful new technology, which both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations are embracing at an increasing rate. The Internet has helped even small and medium-sized enterprises to reach customers and suppliers worldwide in a timely and cost-effective manner (Kshetri, 2001). Competition is a major factor that is forcing businesses to adopt e-commerce (Ghosh, 1998). Even the local communities and local governments are feeling the pressure of competition; there is a pressure to retain the businesses in their locality, and to attract more businesses to ensure continued economic growth. Governments as well as local agencies are using the Internet and e-commerce technologies to stay ahead of the competition.

The City of St. Albans, West Virginia, experienced a sharp decline in economic activities in recent years. The population of St. Albans is shrinking: population in retirement age group is high (Table 1). Though the median household income in St. Albans is higher compared to West Virginia median (but lower than the national median income), it is mainly due to retirement income accumulation of the residents living in this locality. St. Albans is known to have a very high concentration of retirees. Refer to Appendix B for major statistics related to St. Albans.

In 1999, a few concerned citizens of the City of St. Albans met voluntarily and decided to promote the city locally and globally for social and economic development. Accordingly, a volunteer organization called the “St. Albans Renaissance Group, Inc.” (SARG, for future references) was created to work with private businesses, the community and local government in promoting an environment conducive to investment and community building. SARG was incorporated as a 501-C3 corporation (a federal code for nonprofit organization) whose purpose was to revitalize St. Albans’ failing economy.