Chapter XVIII

Community and Regional Portals in Australia: A Role to Play for Small Businesses?

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Abstract

The importance of Web portals to small business has increased considerably in recent years. There are many different types of portals, but this chapter examines the use of community and regional portals by small businesses in Australia. In the chapter, two Australian regional portals are contrasted with the more generic e-malls, and the advantages of each are discussed. We show how portals can be used to advantage by small businesses in several different settings. Benefits to small business include: greater customer loyalty, improved business relationships, enhanced e-business trust, lower cost of infrastructure, ease of access to advice, and expanded business opportunities.
Introduction

There are many differences in the ways in which small businesses adopt and use information technology (IT) in comparison with medium to large-sized businesses. Small businesses are constrained by a lack of resources (time, money, and expertise) and the strategic, longer-term focus necessary to plan effective use of IT. These differences extend to the adoption and use of the Internet and electronic commerce (e-commerce). This chapter examines the evolving concept of portals and speculates on the potential use of community and regional portals by small businesses as part of their online strategy. A potential list of benefits that portals can provide to small businesses is provided, and two existing regional portals are contrasted against the more generic e-mall to determine the benefits that portals are currently providing for small businesses.

Background

A portal is a special website designed to act as a gateway to give access to other related sites (Phillips, 1998). It is intended as a base-site that users will keep returning to after accessing these other sites, and is often seen as a starting point for specific groups of users when they access the Web. The Oxford Dictionary defines a portal as:

“A door, gate, doorway, or gateway of stately or elaborate construction; the entrance, especially of a large or magnificent building. Hence often poetic for door or gate. A space within the door of a room, partitioned off, and containing an inner door; also such a partition itself.” (Oxford, 1973)

What is new about Web portals is the way that these special sites are now being used to facilitate access to other sites that may be closely related, in the case of special purpose portals, or quite diverse in the case of general portals. Portals now offer a range of services including trading facilities, as banks look to partner them (Internet.com, 1999). In this chapter, “Internet business use” is defined as being all of those modern uses of Internet technologies by a business, including communications technologies (such as e-mail) and using the Internet for business research and electronic commerce (use of the Internet to conduct business with external partners, such as suppliers, customers, and government). The definition of e-commerce can be expanded to include other technologies (such as Electronic Data Interchange), but our definition is suitable for this chapter.

Web managers are discovering that increased sales and advertising income result from attracting more people and retaining them longer. Websites with successful portals that attract large numbers of browsers who linger can charge more for Web advertising (Schneider & Perry, 2001). Portal sites have been projected to be the conduit for more than 40% of all commerce revenue and to gain 67% of advertising dollars (Kleindl, 2001). As such, portals can play an important part in the e-commerce strategy of a business.

One of the attractions of portals is the amount of traffic that travels through them. The portal is viewed as a means of advertising to a large audience via banner advertisements.
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