Chapter IX

Creating and Sustaining Online Communities: Web-Based Services Meeting the Diverse Needs of Regional and Rural Australia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the challenges of establishing and sustaining online communities and regional portals. Theory relevant to online communities, particularly in a regional and rural context, is introduced to provide a background for the MainStreet Regional Portal case study. The author hopes that the dissemination of information on the critical learnings from this project will assist in informing others about the diverse factors which can impact on creating and sustaining online community initiatives, long after initial seed funding has been expended.

BACKGROUND

Electronic commerce has been hailed as the business revolution of the information age with promises of new market opportunities, productivity improvements and efficiencies that can maintain or enhance competitiveness (Earl,
2000; Vigo & Arnold, 2000). However in a regional and rural context the availability of practical assistance is limited, and when combined with little local knowledge and experience, the valuation of electronic commerce benefits is often difficult (Ashford, 1999; Papandrea & Wade, 2000; Pattulock & Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee, 2000).

Adoption has been promoted on the basis that electronic commerce can eliminate the constraints of time and distance, and provide new marketing, buying and selling opportunities for all kinds of products and services (Crawford, 1998; Alliance for Global Business, 1999; National Office for the Information Economy, 1999; Vigo & Arnold, 2000). Adoption has also been linked to enhancing community well-being (Steinfield & Whitten, 1999; Brumby, 2001; Local Government Association of Tasmania and Trinitas Pty Ltd, 2001; McGrath & More, 2002; National Office for the Information Economy, 2002). In this context it has been argued that online capabilities can help to stimulate and reinvigorate both geographic communities and communities of interest. Online technologies provide a tool for individual advancement, whether through greater learning opportunities, greater social interaction or greater access to information and services (Department for Information Technology and the Arts, 1998, #310).

In Australia, there has been a vision for portals to be used to open up regional communities to the rest of the world. Government support has been seen “as enhancing the competence levels of local economies and communities so they become strong enough to deal equitably in an increasingly open marketplace” (McGrath & More, 2002, p. 40).

Two programs managed by the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) provide examples of the support available. The Information Technology Online (ITOL) program aims to accelerate Australian adoption of business-to-business e-commerce and encourage collaborative industry-based projects (McGrath & More, 2002). The complementary, five-year, $250 million program, Networking the Nation, is designed to help bridge gaps in telecommunications services, access, and costs between urban and non-urban Australia. Both programs have provided a funding source for portal initiatives, variously termed as online communities, comprehensive gateways and regional Web sites (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts, 2001).

While no formal evaluation of the NTN program has been published, anecdotal evidence suggests that many portal initiatives have struggled to meet their project aims. Some have produced ‘static’ or ‘fixed’ solutions. Others have attracted funding without a sufficient understanding of Web portals, online aggregation and/or local needs. Some initiatives have stalled when perceived as a competitive threat to the local IT and Web development industry. Others have experienced delays in implementation and lost momentum because of less time and other resources available to promote the actual use of portal services when delivered. Finally, in terms of ongoing sustainability, it is rare to find examples of portals that have ‘life’ after funding. Most fail to develop sufficient revenue

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