Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. It's an understatement to say that the Internet has changed the world. As individuals we have instant access to information around the world and businesses use the Internet to connect with more customers and extend their reach to new markets. Nationally or even globally. Some Vermont businesses have an entire division dedicated to managing their online presence. While others are just starting out on line. During the past year Across the Fence has featured programs on the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project. One aspect of e-Vermont has involved working with small businesses in rural communities in partnership with the Vermont Small Business Development Center. Together they've created some new tools for businesses taking their first online steps. Patrick Ripley is the Vermont Small Business Development Center adviser who has worked directly with businesses in a rural towns and Pat is with us this afternoon to highlight some of the work that has been done. Thanks for being with us.

Pat.: Thanks for having me Judy.

Judy.: Pat maybe you can give us a stretch of what you do for e-Vermont and the Vermont Small Business Development Center?

Pat.: There is sort of a two pronged approach of how we go towards business advising in Vermont. I generally have a set of workshops that I’ll offer to the business owners throughout the state. Will do them in various locations around the state. Those can range from social media marketing to global tools for small business to general web site development and design. That is half of what I do the second half of what I do is individual one on one time with business owners where we diagnose a problem or areas where the business owners can grow and we attack those directly. The Small Business Development Center has been around for a long time and we have regional advisers that I called more traditional business advisers around state. They’ll help folks with margining or loan processes or financial productions and various other more traditional business advising things. Through the e-Vermont grant they're able to bring me on board and I can now offer broadband business advising and were happy to be able to get that to business owners of Vermont.

Judy.: How important is it to a business to be online. Even some of the smaller businesses are starting to think if you're not on line with your product or your business people are not going to see you.
Pat.: I really can't stress how important it really is and it's only becoming more and more important for small business owners. Regardless of your industry really. I think of a web site now and I think a lot of folks look at a website or some sort of online presence as your front door sign. That you wouldn't open a restaurant with no sign on the front door and it's very similar to that sort of thinking. It also reflects on your business if you're not online. There's a certain expectation from consumers these days for your business to be online and it doesn't bode well for folks who are still resisting and trying to hold back despite the obvious challenge that they can approach.

Judy.: Is resisting or is it just the fact that they say I'm running a business I'm busy as it is I just don't have time to learn something new.

Pat.: It can be that sometimes and that's a very valid concern. While there are very few situations where I feel you should at least take some initiative to get online there in the case where the business owners are so swamped and so full of business and cash flow is going so well that this is not a concern then clearly I would probably refer them to some of our more traditional advisers to say let's get this time and effort squared away before we move on to newer marketing and attracting more business. It's certainly a fair argument.

Judy.: So obviously you think the Internet should be part of a business plan long-term.

Pat.: Absolutely really in any industry or service. It's difficult to argue against not having some sort of online presence these days.

Judy.: Even for local business who says I've been in the neighborhood where this community forever and these are my clients.

Pat.: I would say yes even if you are very hyper local business. We had a business down in Poultney I was actually a startup accounting firm GW accounting. She went to one of our face book workshops in learned how to use some social media to market her business better. The started talking about what she was doing online and picked up a lot of accounting jobs during accounting season. I think she said 18 to 20 accounting jobs from her local community. It can be very hyper local even if your market is right in the small community the can be helpful. I do a lot of traveling around the state so I’ll be staying in a hotel room overnight or those sorts of things and how to order a pizza I open up my computer and I open up Google and search for pizza depending on which town I am in. What comes up if there's more than one I’ll look at the web sites and which one I feel a most comfortable with is where I pick up the phone and call. There is a hyper local aspect to some of these efforts.

Judy.: So the very least to update on the phone book and then take it from there?

Pat.: Absolutely I can't remember the last time I picked up a phone book. I know a lot of folks still do but it can also be a more affordable option then say a Yellow Pages ad or those sorts of things. Really Google is the new phone book so to speak.

Judy.: Can you mention some tools to help a company save money? Can you give me some examples of that?

Pat.: Yes we can. At a company in Saint Johnsbury I was doing a workshop on Google tools and some of their apps, g-mail and calendar and office tools that are out there. A lot of folks are still paying for shared e-mail and that sort of thing. A couple companies came to me and said gosh you saved me about $3000 in a year for using free tools that are online that Google may offer. Also some of the social media
marketing tools are much cheaper than traditional advertising. There's also things like mail chimp an e-mail marketing tool that's out there that is free to use as well.

Judy.: What's it called?

Pat.: It's called mail chimp. It's a good way to start marketing your products and services to existing customers or folks who may sign up to get your e-mail newsletter. There's really a long list of many times free tools that can help small businesses accomplish their goals.

Judy.: If the business is just getting started down this road what advice would you give them?

Pat.: In general we start establishing goals and what your expectations are out of your online presence. For some people it just means a marketing presence, that ad in the phone book when someone researches you, you will exist when they're looking for pizza in Ludlow or wherever they may be. For some people it's more than that for some people it's an expansion of an already established retail business and they want to go into new markets and all sorts of things. It starts with accomplishing goals and then we decide what sort of online presence are we going to establish for these people. Are we going to look at a small web site with relatively affordable production costs? Is their budget for a website that's available? If not we can look into some free tools that are available online.

Judy.: You have some examples you can show us.

Pat.: I do. There are free production tools like a really cool website that I just pulled up called on the monitor called Weebly. It's a very easy to use open source website building tool that anybody can access. I've had clients who have never used a computer and they want to do a website. They don't have a budget to make it happen it's not a cheap venture usually to market starting around $2500 usually and that's a lower end web site. So this can be an option for them. They can get a free site there's a content management system, you can add or remove their images or verbiage and it's reasonably easy to use it's not that hard for most folks to figure out. It's a good option and to give you an example of a site that was built with this content management system. Here's a small website, a carriage company in Johnson. Sterling Mountain Carriage was built with one of these, actually with the Weebly software. Other times it to go to something more like a Google places page which is essentially a phone book listing. Oftentimes a Google places page will already exist. Google will pull the information from the Yellow Pages or various other online sources.

Judy.: That example you gave earlier say you want to pizza and you're a different town that you've never been in before.

Pat.: Absolutely sometimes the Google places page will come up.

Judy.: What does that look like?

Pat.: A Google places page, I unfortunately do not have it on the monitor right now but it has a map that tells you where your location is. It will have images of the business typically. Sometimes the business owner will put up a coupon on the page and that really prompts the customer to actually go the extra mile and pick up the phone and make the purchase. A places is page can be a simple more affordable solution as well. Sometimes it goes into social media sometimes businesses already have a web site and they want to expand or redesign to make it a little more spruced up and effective.

Judy.: Or just update it with the seasons or whatever.
Pat.: Absolutely. A lot of folks all run into someone and they'll have their winter skiing picture of their inn website and they did know how to change it so will help them turn that into a summer one.

Judy.: Are their success stories from your work so far that you can share with us?

Pat.: Yes, actually we've had a lot of success. One of my favorites is Gallup Brook Fencing in Jeffersonville Vermont. They were a good client of ours if a typical Vermont business owner. They own multiple businesses they have a farm on their property as well as a fencing business and people don't think of services like fencing or paving as something that gosh what I need to be online to do that for. It's really again when people search you want to be found and in a lot of these more traditional or service oriented industries people seem to have this impression that people are not looking for that online that they just ask their neighbor and sure they do but there also going to do the search. And these guys are going to be able to hire some customers and the fellow who owns it was telling me now he uses it as a tool to introduce himself to his customers and he feels they are more connected with him when he arrives. They feel like they know him already and it builds a better relationship.

Judy.: It really seems to be the trend obviously there's a family picture here in a lot of personal information and that seems to really be appealing to customers who are looking for a service who do want that personal approach.

Pat.: Yes, Vermont is still Vermont, and people still want to have that connection with others and the closeness that we have in the state for our size and just our nature for how we do business. I think this only helps that along.

Judy.: I understand you've worked with e-Vermont to make some of this information available online?

Pat.: Yes we have. Actually our web site is e the number four vt.org it looks like this here. e4vt.org We have a toolkit section which you can get to by mousing over here under toolkits. There are actually a slew of tools for lack of a better word in this section not just on business actually. There some on Internet safety for parents those sorts of things the Vermont State Colleges have put up some really great stuff. We have an art school in our business tools section we have some basic tools that we use for starting your own business. Budget projections and that sort of thing. Web site design we have a social media marketing section which is pretty popular and we have a list of do's and don'ts in that section as well. We like to when I work with a client I can often reinforce what we've talked about or it's a good place to start if they're wondering should we give the small business center a call what sort of resources are out there. It's a really good place to get an idea of how you're going to move forward before we actually make direct contact with you.

Judy.: Or perhaps maybe what you like on a website or what you don't like or what you need to include or not include.

Pat.: Absolutely one of the quick exercises I give folks is to research your competition. Start on a global level and bring it down to a local level lookup the web sites make notes of what you like what you don't like and what is similar between all the sites. If one is to look at JC Penney's dot com or Macy's dot com without knowing the companies are different it's basically the same upside so typically within industries there's a very specific look and feel among their web sites.

Judy.: Can you look into the future little bit? What do you see for resources that can help Vermont businesses?
Pat.: The toolkit is not going away that we have online so we’re happy to have most of that completed. We do have our e-Vermont conference coming up on May 8 at Champlain College. That’s based on Vermont’s digital future it’s called Vermont’s digital future conference. We’re going to be focusing on that question at the conference how are we going to move forward? How are business owners in Vermont going to be able to continue to receive these resources? We’ve also been working with the Department of Labor and secured some funding to continue our workshops and a portion of our one on one advising into the future. They’re on board and understand the need for this. We haven’t found the funding to be at the capacity that we’re at right now so we’re continuing to try to look towards that. And we have some options out there as soon as we know we’re going to get them out on the table. You can also go to VTSBDC.org and we have a lot of resources and information there about where things are going.

Judy.: Let’s remind people that the May 8 conference at Champlain college on Vermont’s digital future. For more information on the conference or to learn more about e-Vermont Community Broadband Project you can go to e4vt.org or you can call the number on your screen (802)-225-6091. That’s 225-6091. Thanks so much for joining us today Pat.

Pat.: Thanks so much for having me Judy.

Judy.: That’s our program for today I’m Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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